
Examining Socio-Cultural and Religious Perspectives on Youth Delinquency and Immorality in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural and religious influences on youth delinquency and immorality in Nigeria. Increasing youth involvement in crimes like theft, drug abuse, and sexual misconduct highlights a growing moral crisis. Despite existing research on youth delinquency, there remains an academic gap in understanding the role of Nigeria's cultural and religious contexts in shaping youth behaviour. The purpose of this study is to explore how traditional, religious, and modern influences contribute to delinquent behaviours, providing insights into the underlying factors. A mixed-method approach is employed, integrating historical analysis to trace socio-cultural and religious influences over time. Phenomenological methods capture the lived experiences of affected youth, while Social Control Theory is used to analyse how weakening social bonds lead to deviant behaviour. The study reveals that declining family and community structures, reduced religious adherence, and peer pressure are significant factors in youth delinquency. The study concludes with five recommendations: strengthening family and community ties, promoting positive peer influence, integrating moral education in schools, enhancing the role of religious institutions in youth guidance, and addressing socio-economic disparities. These insights aim to inform policymakers and stakeholders in creating effective strategies to curb youth delinquency in Nigeria.

Keywords: youth delinquency, socio-cultural influences, religious influences, moral education, social control theory

Introduction

In Nigeria, youth are typically defined as individuals aged 15 to 35, undergoing significant social and developmental transitions, influenced by traditional values and societal expectations. Moral decadence is observed across different societies and cultures, from industrialised to non-industrialised nations, with immoral behaviours like rape, sexual abuse, drug abuse, school violence, and killings becoming common among youths and children worldwide (Idensi, 2010:58-63). Nigeria is home to over 300 ethnic groups, each showcasing its own distinct cultural heritage (Ogbu, Ukwueze & Mazi, 2000), and in every human society where established norms of behaviour exist, deviance is unavoidable (Abotchie, 2008). Globally, generational differences shape youth attitudes and behaviours, making it essential to address their unique challenges. Youth delinquency and immorality in Africa, especially in Nigeria, are influenced by socio-economic factors such as poverty, family instability, and limited education which are further complicated by conflicting traditional and modern values. Additionally, the inconsistent role of religious institutions in promoting moral development makes it harder to effectively combat delinquency and immorality.

Nigeria is currently facing widespread concern over its moral crisis, with moral decay affecting all aspects of public life, and corruption becoming increasingly apparent. Many youths have adopted immoral behaviours for personal gain, negatively impacting not only the perpetrators and victims but also society as a whole (Yusuf & Omoniwa, 2022:2695-2009). Despite various initiatives to address these problems, many interventions overlook the socio-cultural contexts and religious beliefs that shape youth behaviour, highlighting a critical gap in understanding this challenges. This study aims to bridge this gap by analysing how socio-cultural norms, religious

doctrines, and community structures can exacerbate or mitigate delinquent behaviours, ultimately providing insights for more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The study's relevant theoretical framework is Travis Hirschi's Social Control Theory, which argues that individuals follow societal norms and laws when they maintain strong connections to institutions such as family, school, and religion. Hirschi's concept of social bond consists of four interconnected yet distinct elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Costello & Laub, 2020:21-41). It suggests that weakened social bonds increase the likelihood of delinquent behaviour.

Statement of the Problem

Despite government and religious efforts, youth delinquency in Nigeria continues to rise, threatening societal stability. The challenge is understanding how socio-cultural and religious factors drive delinquency and why current interventions remain ineffective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the socio-cultural and religious factors contributing to youth delinquency and immorality in Nigeria. It aims to examine how these influences shape behaviours and propose interventions that can address these challenges effectively.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach, integrating historical analysis to trace socio-cultural and religious influences on youth behaviour, phenomenological methods to explore delinquent youths' experiences, and theological analysis to examine the impact of religious doctrines on morality.

Socio-Cultural Influences on Youth Delinquency in Nigeria

The Role of Family and Parenting Styles

Family and parenting styles are key factors in shaping youth delinquency in Nigeria, with authoritative parenting promoting positive outcomes, while neglectful or permissive approaches increase delinquency risks. Adolescence is a transitional phase between puberty and adulthood, often marked by physical and psychological challenges. Modern complexities have made this period more significant compared to the ritualised transitions seen in traditional cultures and past generations (Iyiani et al, 2018:312-322). Stable family environments foster resilience, while instability, such as domestic violence, exposes youth to harmful behaviours. Undoubtedly, sibling dynamics and socio-economic challenges also play a role, with financial strain limiting parental support. Often, children learn by observing and imitating adult behaviour. Widespread corruption reflects a deeper ethical decline, highlighting Nigeria's unsuccessful efforts to build a nation on moral principles like justice, transparency, and accountability (Ocholor & Bassey, 2010:466-476). This decline extends to youth delinquency, with many seeking quick gains through illicit trades and gambling. In addition to gambling, many Nigerian youths engage in illicit activities such as drug trafficking, cybercrime, and illegal oil bunkering. Often motivated by economic desperation, these actions pose significant and complex challenges (Adekoya, 2024:93-108). For instance, if parents are well-socialised, law-abiding, and respectful of authority, their children are likely to emulate these traits. Conversely, parents who lead immoral lives are likely to pass those values on to their children (Ituma, Uroko & Eskay, 2013). However, the correlation between parental criminality and the violent or serious delinquency of their children appears to be minimal (Eddy & Reid, 2002). Educating parents on effective practices and enhancing community support through collaboration with schools and local organisations can help create environments that nurture youth development. Addressing these factors in a broader socio-

cultural context is essential for reducing delinquency and immorality among Nigerian youth.

Influence of Peer Groups and Media

Peer groups and media profoundly influence youth delinquency in Nigeria by shaping attitudes, behaviours, and social norms. Adolescents often seek approval from their peers, which can lead them to engage in delinquent behaviours when such actions are normalised. Peer influence is a major contributor to moral decadence, Faustine (2013:123-125), argues that "peers significantly shape an individual's character, especially during youth, while association with peers involved in risky behaviours strongly predicts youth misconduct. Additionally, a lack of discipline and a reluctance to learn in Nigerian schools has further led to immoral acts. Alongside the family, schools play a crucial role in a child's moral development. While schools are meant to be training grounds, some teachers, who should serve as role models, demonstrate morally corrupt behaviours that children tend to emulate (Smith, 2001). Moreover, immoral and illegal actions are often backed not just verbally, but through active support from individuals (Layugan, 2007:54-68).

In the rapidly evolving digital age, media has become an indispensable part of the lives of the youth, wielding a profound influence on their religio-cultural identities and academic experience (Ukachukwu & 2020:13-24). However, the term media refers to communication channels that disseminate news, music, movies, education, promotional messages and other data. Media includes newspapers, magazines, television, radio, billboards, telephone, internet, fax and bulletin boards (Oguguo et al., 2020:1000-1009). Media portrayals of violence and anti-social behaviour further desensitise youth, reinforcing negative conduct and contributing to rising delinquency and immorality, while the desire for social acceptance during adolescence can drive young people to imitate risky behaviours, such as drug use or theft, especially when viewed as a way to gain status. Obong (2019) suggests that "the media's impact on

Nigerian culture is mixed, exhibiting both positive (pro-social) and negative (anti-social) effects". Additionally, media platforms, including television, music, and social media, can glorify violence and deviance, distorting young people's perception of acceptable behaviour, if not well managed. To counter these influences, comprehensive strategies involving parents, educators, and community leaders are essential. Also, encouraging positive peer relationships and promoting critical media literacy can help mitigate the negative effects of peer groups and media on youth behaviour.

Impact of Urbanisation and Poverty

Urbanisation and poverty significantly contribute to youth delinquency in Nigeria, by creating environments with limited opportunities, high unemployment, and poor education, particularly in urban slums. These conditions push many young people toward illegal activities, while weakened family and community structures exacerbate the issue. Immorality is pervasive across all areas of life in Nigeria, affecting schools, homes, workplaces, streets, and even places of worship. This widespread issue has hindered national development and damaged the country's reputation internationally. Adebisi (2018:190-199) notes that "youths, driven by energy and curiosity, are particularly susceptible to being drawn into immoral behaviours". Also, Chubuko (2008:31) states that "watching pornographic films can drive individuals to commit acts of evil beyond their initial intentions, potentially leading to sexual abuse." Additionally, the content of many Nigerian television programs has become increasingly sexualised in recent years. Apparently, a multi-faceted approach, including better economic opportunities, improved education, and community programs, is essential to reduce delinquency and promote positive youth engagement.

Cultural Norms and Traditional Values

Cultural norms and traditional values in Nigeria play a significant role in shaping youth behaviour and influencing

delinquency rates. In some communities, certain cultural practices may unintentionally promote behaviours that clash with broader societal expectations, causing youth to engage in delinquency to fit in. Many youths have abandoned traditional foods in favour of foreign snacks and canned products, leading to unfamiliar diseases like cancer (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003:425-440). Traditional African greetings and courtesies have also diminished, with foreign values influencing fashion, as seen in revealing clothing among females and the "saggy" style among both boys and girls, imitating Hollywood trends (Isokon et al, 2022:35-44). The tension between modern influences and traditional values can create identity struggles, making youth more vulnerable to delinquent behaviour. Additionally, cultural norms that prioritise communal over individual interests may pressurise youth into actions that conflict with their personal values, leading to potential delinquency.

Moreover, in communities where strict adherence to authority is emphasised, deviations from traditional norms can result in punitive reactions, which may drive rebellion. The disconnection between traditional values and modern societal expectations can further alienate youth, increasing their susceptibility to negative influences. To address these cultural factors, it is essential to involve community leaders and families in discussions that promote positive traditions while integrating helpful modern values. By encouraging dialogue that respects cultural heritage and addresses contemporary challenges, communities can steer youth towards positive behaviours and reduce delinquency risks.

The Role of Christianity in Shaping Youth Morality

Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping youth morality in Nigeria by instilling values such as honesty, compassion, and respect. Through teaching and community engagement, young people are motivated to uphold moral standards that discourage delinquency and promote positive relationships.

Shaping students' spiritual lives through Christian values is challenging, as they often already have established beliefs and ideals. For students with a low spiritual level, alternative approaches are needed to encourage reflection, self-awareness, and a reassessment of their views and behaviour (Ushatikova et al, 2018:77-87). The church creates a supportive environment for youth to participate in constructive activities, thereby reinforcing their moral development.

Christian youth programs, such as Sunday schools and youth groups, provide mentorship that helps young individuals navigate moral dilemmas and make informed choices. Furthermore, Christian Ethics examines the connection between an individual's moral character, societal norms, and the outcomes of their actions, rooted in a Judeo-Christian framework (Caron, 2001). Scientific evidence also shows that mutual assistance, as promoted by religion, provides spiritual strength. Psychologists working with prisoners of war and disaster victims highlight compassion and "recovery through mutual aid" as key factors in their healing process (Myers, 2003:179). The emphasis on accountability and community support fosters a sense of belonging, which lowers the risk of engaging in delinquent behaviour. Additionally, religious leaders advocate for youth, promote social responsibility, and encourage participation in community service, further instilling positive moral values.

Islamic Perspectives on Youth Delinquency

Islam profoundly shapes youth behaviour and moral values in Nigeria by emphasising principles such as justice, compassion, and personal responsibility. Its teachings highlight the significance of community and adherence to moral guidelines, which can effectively deter delinquent behaviour. Nigeria has three major religions: African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity, which all emphasise essential moral values like patriotism, honesty, integrity, and social justice. However, many adherents, especially of Islam and Christianity,

frequently partake in corrupt practices that conflict with these foundational principles (Atoi, Sadiku & Kume, 2020:115-122). Nonetheless, , deliberate participation in religious activities like prayers and community service fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, steering youth towards positive engagement.

Islamic guidance is the process of directing individuals to live in accordance with Allah's instructions, aiming for happiness in both this life and the hereafter, rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Rahim, 2001:3). Hence, Islamic education offers in mosques and community centers provides young people with ethical frameworks for making informed choices. However, the focus on accountability encourages reflection on one's actions and the pursuit of forgiveness, helping to diminish tendencies toward delinquency. Furthermore, support from religious leaders and community members bolsters positive behaviours, cultivating a nurturing environment that fosters moral development and resilience against negative influences.

Traditional Religions and Youth Behaviour

Traditional religions in Nigeria play a crucial role in shaping youth behaviour by instilling cultural values, ethical norms, and a focus on community. These belief systems emphasise respect for elders and communal harmony, which can help deter delinquent behaviour. The decline of moral standards in Nigeria has significantly impacted the values and character of its youth. Like other nations, Nigeria faces moral challenges stemming from values introduced during colonisation, often at odds with traditional African beliefs. Many young people view indigenous culture as outdated and exhibit reduced commitment to religious practices, despite the moral principles rooted in religion and tradition (Sofadekan, 2018:76-87). Violent punishments, including corporal punishment, have been linked to increased delinquency and subsequent violent crimes among adolescents. Such harsh treatment from parents poses a threat to a young person's well-being, potentially

leading them to adopt violent behaviors. This confusion and anger may be directed at parents or peers, resulting in troublesome behaviour at home, in school, and even within religious institutions (Dobson, 1984). However, participation in rituals and community events fosters a sense of identity and belonging, while storytelling and oral traditions provide moral guidance. However, conflicts between modern influences and traditional beliefs can lead to confusion and alienation among youth, increasing their vulnerability to delinquency if these cultural ties weaken.

Nigeria currently faces significant moral bankruptcy, characterised by a loss of direction and poor judgment, leading to widespread acceptance of immorality. This situation necessitates urgent value reorientation and moral counseling across all educational levels, particularly among the youth. Meanwhile, family, mosques/churches, schools, and peers serve as the primary agents of socialisation in any community, providing children with examples of acceptable norms and values during their socialisation process (Arewa, 2018:129-136; Ogbodo, 2018:209-219). Moreover, the decline of traditional values due to urbanisation and globalisation creates a gap in moral guidance for youth, making them more vulnerable to negative peer and media influences. Nonetheless, traditional religious leaders are essential in tackling these challenges by engaging with young people and promoting positive values through community initiatives. By strengthening connections to cultural heritage and providing support, traditional religions can help youth navigate modern complexities while encouraging behaviours that deter delinquency.

Intersections between Religion, Morality, and Law

The intersections between religion, morality, and law are vital in shaping societal norms and influencing youth behaviour. Over 80 percent of juveniles in court had peer accomplices (Goldweber et al., 2011:332-346), and studies have highlighted a strong tendency for offenders to engage in delinquent acts in

the presence of others (Kolko & Pardini, 2010:713-725). Religious teachings often offer a moral framework that helps individuals understand their legal responsibilities and ethical conduct, fostering respect for the law. Additionally, collaboration between religious institutions and legal authorities can enhance community awareness and promote accountability, thereby contributing to a decline in youth delinquency. Beyond the gradual moral decline that affects offenders immersed in deviance and crime, a nation grappling with crime also faces significant costs related to incarceration, healthcare, and the economy (Simões, Matos & Batista-Foguet, 2008:389-408). In traditional African societies, religion significantly shapes moral values and character (Olanipekun, 2017:227). Ethical principles like truthfulness, honesty, and justice are viewed as commands from a higher power, with God in Christianity, Allah in Islam, and Obatala in Yoruba Traditional Religion serving as the ultimate moral lawgivers. Consequently, human moral standards are subject to divine enforcement (Ayantayo, 2009:36-37; Ogunleye, 2013:65). When religious values are incorporated into legal systems, they can reinforce positive behaviours and motivate youth to align their actions with both moral and legal standards.

Another consequence of moral decay is the deterioration of family and community life, as youths adopt attitudes marked by a lack of integrity, violence, and various vices. Awoniyi (2003:95-100) notes that "visits to police stations and courtrooms reveal that many crimes are committed by youths, who engage in activities such as arson, cultism, and forgery behaviors that are harmful to societal progress". If these actions go unchecked, society will suffer, and the youths who should contribute positively may instead become social deviants (Alloy, 2000). However, religious leaders play a crucial role in educating young people about the consequences of their actions within moral and legal contexts, empowering them to make informed choices. By ensuring a strong connection between religious teachings and legal principles, communities can nurture a sense of responsibility among youth, thereby

reducing the risk of delinquency and encouraging ethical behaviour.

Overview of Selected Case Studies

Analysis of Regional Variations in Youth Behaviour

The examination of regional variations in youth behaviour in Nigeria highlights distinct patterns influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors. Urban youth often encounter greater peer pressure and a range of diverse influences, contributing to higher rates of delinquency. In contrast, rural youth tend to benefit from stronger family ties and community cohesion, which can discourage misconduct but may also restrict social mobility. Ethnic hooliganism and religious intolerance are distinctive issues in northern Nigeria, while kidnapping, militancy, and sexual immorality are prevalent in the southern regions (Ukwueze, 2013:105).

In northern Nigeria, cultural and religious values emphasise communal responsibility, while southern regions experience a blend of traditional and modern influences that increase vulnerability to societal pressures. Religious intolerance and violence in northern Nigeria, including Boko Haram bombings, arise from ignorance, ethnic divisions, poor leadership, and election rigging. Kidnapping in the South East and South-South, along with gang violence and political unrest in the South West, indicate that youth issues in Nigeria are largely culturally driven (Ukwueze, 2011). Moral education in Nigeria faces major challenges due to widespread moral decay, which hinders its effectiveness, as many Nigerians lack a solid moral foundation, irrespective of their class, religion, or socio-economic status (Onyekwere, Uche & Nwodo, 2018:3). Economic disparities further impact these behaviours, with regions grappling with high unemployment and limited educational opportunities showing elevated delinquency rates. This underscores the necessity for targeted interventions that consider both cultural and economic contexts.

Influence of Community and Family Dynamics

Community and family dynamics significantly influence youth behaviour, serving as the foundational settings for socialisation and moral development. Many youths engage in various activities, regardless of their moral implications, as long as they can sustain themselves through them (Lukman, 2021:161-169) but strong family connections and active community engagement promote positive behaviours and help reduce delinquency, while instability or conflict within families may drive youth towards negative peer influences. Adolescent delinquent activities include disobedience to parental authority, alcohol and drug abuse, theft, property destruction, and serious offenses such as rape (Elliot, Huizinga, and Menard, 2012), while, the family is regarded as the primary institution responsible for socialising children and monitoring their behavior (Okorodudu, 2010:58-86). Unfortunately, moral decay has hindered moral education, preventing society from effectively shaping good character from the outset (Oliver, 2017). Consequently, the implications of moral decadence are significant both nationally and internationally. Nonetheless, supportive community networks bolster resilience by offering mentorship and guidance, which encourages positive decision-making. In contrast, insufficient parental involvement and inconsistent discipline can foster conditions that lead to delinquency, emphasising the need to nurture both family and community relationships for the healthy development of youth.

Conclusion

This paper examines the socio-cultural and religious influences on youth delinquency and immorality in Nigeria, emphasising the interplay between cultural norms, family dynamics, and religious teachings. By analysing how these factors shape moral behaviour and societal expectations, the research enhances understanding of youth delinquency and informs effective prevention and intervention strategies. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary

approaches that integrate sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives, contributing to academic discourse on youth behaviour in various contexts.

Recommendations

I. Develop and implement community-based initiatives that promote positive youth engagement, fostering relationships between young people, families, and community leaders.

II. Promoting positive peer influence through mentorship programs and community engagement.

III. Incorporate moral education and life skills training into school curricula to equip youth with the tools to navigate ethical dilemmas and make informed decisions.

IV. Foster partnerships between religious organisations and government bodies to create comprehensive support systems that address the socio-cultural factors contributing to youth delinquency.

V. Addressing socio-economic disparities to reduce youth vulnerability to delinquency and immorality by providing employment opportunities.

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