

## Parenting Styles, Sexual Abuse, and Self-esteem as Predictors of Sexual Orientation among Undergraduates

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### Abstract

**Background:** Sexual orientation has become an emerging issue that affects different populations and cultures in Africa including Nigeria. Studies done on predictors of sexual orientation come with varied results. **Objective:** This study investigates parenting styles, sexual abuse and self-esteem as likely predictors of sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan, Nigeria. **Method:** Cross-sectional method was adopted while purposive sampling technique was used to select the study population. Data were collected from 472 undergraduates using validated questionnaires and analysed using multiple regressions and independent sample t-test. Two hypotheses were tested and accepted at  $p = .001$  level of significance. **Results:** The result revealed that parenting styles, sexual abuse and self-esteem jointly predicted sexual orientation among study participants. Moreover, parenting styles, sexual abuse and self-esteem independently predicted sexual orientation among study participants. **Conclusion:** Parenting styles, sexual abuse and self-esteem are excellent predictors of sexual orientation among study participants. The novelty of this finding is that sexual orientation is less openly discussed among study population.

**Keywords:** Parenting styles; self-esteem; sexual abuse; sexual orientation; undergraduates

### Abstrak

**Latar belakang:** Orientasi seksual telah menjadi masalah yang muncul yang mempengaruhi populasi dan budaya yang berbeda di Afrika termasuk Nigeria. Studi yang dilakukan pada prediktor orientasi seksual memiliki hasil yang bervariasi. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini menyelidiki gaya pengasuhan, pelecehan seksual dan harga diri sebagai prediktor yang mungkin untuk orientasi seksual di kalangan mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi di Ibadan, Nigeria. **Metode:** Metode cross-sectional diadopsi sementara teknik pengambilan sampel purposif digunakan untuk memilih populasi penelitian. Data dikumpulkan dari 472 mahasiswa dengan menggunakan kuesioner yang telah divalidasi dan dianalisis menggunakan regresi berganda dan uji-t sampel independen. Dua hipotesis diuji dan diterima pada tingkat signifikansi  $p = .001$ . **Hasil:** Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa gaya pengasuhan, pelecehan seksual, dan harga diri secara bersama-sama memprediksi orientasi seksual di antara para peserta penelitian. Selain itu, gaya pengasuhan, pelecehan seksual dan harga diri secara independen memprediksi orientasi seksual di antara peserta penelitian. **Simpulan:** Gaya pengasuhan, pelecehan seksual, dan harga diri adalah prediktor yang sangat baik untuk orientasi seksual di antara para peserta penelitian. Hal baru dari temuan ini adalah bahwa orientasi seksual kurang didiskusikan secara terbuka di antara populasi penelitian.

**Kata Kunci:** Gaya pengasuhan; harga diri; mahasiswa; pelecehan seksual; orientasi seksual

## Introduction

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2023) defines sexual orientation as a person's enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to another person. It encompasses all aspects of human sexuality that attract one individual to another of the same or different sex. An individual's sexual orientation can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual (Moser, 2016). On the other hand, sexual identity is an encompassing construct that includes an individual's biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual pressures on sex roles (Chan et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2017). The development of sexual orientation is influenced by several factors, such as genetics, environment, and culture (Wang et al., 2019).

In addition to biological factors, social environments, such as parenting styles, are considered to influence the formation of sexual orientation. Parenting style refers to parents' attitudes and behaviors toward socializing with their children in terms of control, warmth, and support (Ajayi, 2023). Different parenting types have been identified in the literature: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive (indulgent), and neglectful (uninvolved) parenting styles (Masud et al., 2019; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2018). Authoritative (democratic) parenting is characterized by high levels of warmth, support, and communication. It is associated with positive psychological outcomes in children, such as high self-esteem and better mental health (Masud et al., 2019). The second is the authoritarian (disciplinarian) parenting style, which is associated with strict rules and punishment with adverse psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem and depression (Masud et al., 2019; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2018). The third is permissive (indulgent) parenting style which is a non-traditional and lenient parenting style which does not require mature behavior but allows considerable self-regulation, and non-confrontation among parents and children (Masud et al., 2019). Finally, a neglectful (uninvolved) parenting style is characterized by being indifferent to children's needs and uninvolved in their lives (Masud et al., 2019). Studies have found a correlation between the adoption of appropriate parenting styles and the types of sexual orientation individuals engage in later in life (Bankole et al., 2023; D'Amico et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2020; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2018; Shongwe, 2021). Specifically, D'Amico et al. (2015) found parenting styles in terms of control and support to be significantly correlated with sexual orientation.

The second factor considered is sexual abuse, which is any attempted or completed sexual act, sexual contact, or noncontact sexual behavior in which the victim does not consent or is unable to consent or refuse (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2018). In addition, it has been described as the involvement of a child in a sexual activity that he or she does not understand, cannot provide informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or violates society's laws or social taboos/norms (Ajayi, 2023). Childhood sexual abuse includes indecent exposure of genitals to a child, inappropriate touch, and forced sexual intercourse (rape). The exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices is also a form of child sexual abuse (Capaldi et al., 2024; David et al., 2018). Some studies have found that childhood sexual abuse contributes to sexual orientation among different people (Rosario et al., 2018; Xu & Zheng, 2015). Specifically, Rosario et al. (2018) found that childhood sexual abuse increased the prevalence of same-sex sexual behavior among men. Other studies have also found childhood sexual abuse as likely to affect sexual orientation in an individual's adulthood (Alhamad, 2013; Xu & Zheng, 2015).

The third factor is self-esteem, defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of self-worth and value, which plays a crucial role in developing and maintaining an individual's identity (Bridge et al., 2019). In addition, it is a self-evaluation and descriptive conceptualization that individuals make and maintain with regard to themselves (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). Studies have consistently found a strong relationship between self-esteem and sexual orientation among youths. For instance, higher self-esteem has been associated with positive mental health outcomes and greater acceptance of an individual's sexual orientation (Convocar & Pios, 2019). Conversely, lower self-esteem tends to increase vulnerability to stigma, discrimination, and mental health issues among sexually oriented undergraduates (Bridge et al., 2019). Finally, Bridge et al. (2019) found lower self-esteem among individuals in same-sex groups (homosexual) than among those in different-sex groups (heterosexual).

Finally, gender is another factor that describes the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female (APA, 2015). Studies have revealed inconsistent results regarding gender differences and sexual orientation. For example, Bailey et al. (2016) found women to be more likely to report a bisexual orientation than an exclusively same-sex orientation, while men showed the opposite pattern in their sexual orientation. In general, studies have revealed that more females than males are likely to express differences in sexual orientation across different cultures, including Australia (Hill et al., 2020), Great Britain (ONS, 2023), Thailand (Skorska et al., 2021), and the United States (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019; Eisenberg et al., 2019). Several studies have suggested that males who experienced childhood sexual abuse tend to be

homosexuals and have an increased risk of becoming sex abuse perpetrators (Olga et al., 2021; Suen et al., 2020; Strömdahl et al., 2019).

Studies that have investigated different predictors of sexual orientation have produced different results. In addition, studies linking parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem with sexual orientation are scarce, leaving gaps in knowledge to fill. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the predictability of parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem on sexual orientation among undergraduates in selected tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis. The study was guided by the following research questions: Would parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem jointly and independently predict sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis? Would there be gender differences in sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in the Ibadan metropolitan area?

The study would elucidate parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem on sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis. Besides, the results would help to inform policies and programs to support the health and well-being of youths with different sexual orientations. Finally, the study would help to promote greater acceptance and understanding of sexual diversity in Nigerian society.

The study was anchored using Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that individuals learn behaviors from significant others by observing, modelling, and imitating the behavior of interest. When applied to this study, sexual orientation could be learned through observation, modelling, reinforcement, and associations with others. For example, individuals learn about their gender roles, sexual behaviors, and attraction from their social environment (Rosario et al., 2014). In addition, individuals could acquire their sexual orientation by observing and imitating same-sex or opposite-sex behaviors and receive positive reinforcement for conforming to societal norms. The practical applications of this theory have helped to conclude that observing individuals who decide to be homosexual, gay, or lesbian is analogous to the conventional way individuals learn how to read and write.

The study hypotheses were stated: Parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem would jointly and independently predict sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis, and there would be gender differences in sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis.

## Method

The study was a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design, and data were collected using validated questionnaires. The independent variables were parenting style, sexual abuse, and self-esteem, while the dependent variable was sexual orientation.

## Sample or Population

The study was conducted among undergraduates in five tertiary institutions in Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. The higher institutions were Lead City University, the Federal College of Animal Health and Production Technology, the Oyo State School of Nursing and Midwifery, Eleyele, the University of Ibadan, and The Polytechnic, Ibadan, all within the Ibadan metropolis.

Three sampling techniques were used in this study. The first was the purposive sampling technique used to select all five tertiary institutions in Ibadan. The second was a proportionate sampling technique used to select representative samples from each of the higher institutions. Finally, a convenience sampling technique was used to distribute research questionnaires to potential participants.

A total of 481 questionnaires were administered and collected on the spot; however, during screening and coding, nine questionnaires had missing data and were removed, leaving 472 used for the analysis.

## Data Measurement

The authority to conduct the study was obtained from a letter of introduction from the Department of Psychology at the University of Ibadan, which was used to identify the researchers. Potential participants were approached in different locations in the campuses, including lecture theatres, reading rooms, recreational centers, halls of residence, and event centers in the campuses. Potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to participate. They were told that participation was voluntary and that they could stop filling the questionnaires whenever they felt uncomfortable. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Furthermore, no identifying items were included in the questionnaire. In addition, one of the researchers was a clinical psychologist, as they were told to report any ill feeling. Finally, the questionnaire was completed in a private setting to minimize social pressure. Potential participants who consented were given the questionnaire to complete, which took less than 12 minutes to complete. Since there were no complaints from the participants, no debriefing was warranted.

Three validated questionnaires were used for data collection. The Personal Identification toward Components of Sexual Orientation (PITCSO, Tannenbaum, 2006) scale was used to measure sexual orientation among study participants. The PITCSOS is a 21-item scale with seven components: sexual attraction, behavior, fantasy, emotional preference, social preference, and self-identification. The scale is presented in 5-point Likert's format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include "The idea of having sex with someone of the opposite sex from mine is" and "The idea of having sex with someone of the same sex as mine is." The PITCSOS has an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.98, and in this study, the composite Cronbach's alpha obtained was 0.87. Content/face validity of the scale was established by a Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Psychology, while a pilot study was carried out in one of the universities excluded from the study. Cronbach's alpha was reasonably high ( $\alpha=.84$ ).

Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess self-esteem among study participants. It is a 10-item scale rated on a 4-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Sample items include "I am able to do things as well as most other people" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." The author's Cronbach's alpha was 0.92, while in this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 was obtained.

The Perceived Parenting Styles scale (Divya & Mankandan, 2013) was used to evaluate parenting style among study participants. It is a 30-item scale presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Sample items include "Never find time for me to help during difficult situations" and "Congratulate me when I pass the exams." Uye et al. (2023) validated the scale in Nigeria and obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

The Child Sexual Abuse Scale (CSAS; Aalsma et al., 2002) was used to measure sexual abuse among study participants. It is a 4-item self-reported scale presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Sample items include: "Someone/people threatened to tell lies about me or hurt me unless I did something sexual with them" and "Someone/people tried to make me touch them in a sexual way against my will." The authors obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, whereas in this study, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 was obtained.

Due diligence was paid to ethical issues in the course of conducting the research. The principles of informed consent were observed. Prospective participants were informed of the nature of the study, and verbal consent was obtained from those who indicated an interest in participating. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were ensured, while freedom from harmful consequences was also ensured. Meanwhile, the prospective participants were equally told of their right to withdraw from the research at any point they felt inclined to do so.

## Data Analysis

IBM SPSS version 26 was used for data analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Hypothesis 1 was tested using multiple regressions while hypothesis 2 was tested using independent samples t-test. All hypotheses were accepted at the  $p < .001$  level of significance.

## Results

The study first presents the participants' socio-demographic data

Table 1. Participants' Socio-demographics

Variables	Frequency	%
Age		
16-20	242	51
21-24	140	30
25-29	62	13
30-34	15	3
35-45	13	3
Name of institutions		
The polytechnic Ibadan	116	25
The University of Ibadan	167	35.
Lead City University	96	20
Federal College of Animal Health	54	11
Oyo State College of Nursing	39	8
Marital status		
Single	442	94

Married	30	6
Gender		
Male	215	46
Female	257	54
Ethnicity		
Yoruba	378	80
Igbo	55	12
Hausa	11	2
Others	28	6
Religion		
Christianity	366	78
Islam	96	20
Traditional	10	2
Family system		
Monogamous	393	83
Polygamous	79	17

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the study participants. As revealed in Table 1, 54% of the participants were females, with more than half (51%) of the participants between the age bracket of 16 and 20 years old, having 94 % of them as unmarried(singles), and with a majority (80%) being of Yoruba extraction. In terms of their religious faiths, 78% professed to be Christians. Next are the zero-order correlation statistics of the study variables.

Table 2. Zero-order Correlation Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem	-			
2. Parenting styles	.125*	-		
3. Sexual abuse	-.148*	.028	-	
4. Sexual orientation	.282*	.218*	.084	-

Significance at  $p < .001$ ,  $N = 472$

Table 2 shows the zero-order correlation statistics of the study variables. The results showed that self-esteem ( $r = .282$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and parenting style ( $r = .218$ ,  $p < .001$ ) correlated with sexual orientation. This means that self-esteem and parenting style positively influence sexual orientation. However, sexual abuse was not correlated with sexual orientation ( $r = .084$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This connotes that sexual abuse did not influence sexual orientation among the study participants. Self-esteem was positively correlated with parenting style ( $r = .125$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negatively correlated with sexual abuse ( $r = -.148$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Testing the hypotheses

**H1:** Parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem would jointly and independently predict sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Joint And Independent Predictors of Sexual Orientation Among Undergraduates in Tertiary Institutions in Ibadan Metropolis

Predictors	$\beta$	t	P	R	$R^2$	F	p
Parenting styles	.206	4.737	.001	.423	.179	10.066	.001
Sexual abuse	-.087	-2.000	.046				
Self-esteem	.268	6.073	.001				

\*Significance at  $p < .001$ , Dependent variable = Sexual orientation

Table 3 shows the multiple regression analysis of joint and independent predictors of sexual orientation among undergraduates in Ibadan. The results revealed that parenting style, sexual abuse, and self-esteem jointly predicted sexual orientation among study participants [ $R^2 = .179$ ,  $F(3, 469) = 10.066$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. This implies that parenting style, sexual abuse, and self-esteem accounted for 17.9% of the variance in sexual orientation. This means that other factors besides these independent variables influenced sexual orientation



among study participants. Additionally, the results showed that parenting styles ( $\beta = .206$ ,  $t = 4.737$ ,  $p < .001$ ), sexual abuse ( $\beta = -.087$ ,  $t = -2.000$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and self-esteem ( $\beta = .268$ ,  $t = 6.073$ ,  $p < .001$ ) independently predicted sexual orientation among study participants. Therefore, this hypothesis is supported.

**H2:** There are gender differences in sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan. The hypothesis was tested using an independent sample t-test, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent Sample t-Test Showing Means Differences Between Male And Female Undergraduates on Sexual Orientation among Participants

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	p
Female	257	17.24	4.72	4.304	470	.001
Male	215	19.14	4.85			

Dependent variable: Sexual orientation

Table 4 shows an independent sample test of gender differences in sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan. The results indicated that gender significantly influenced sexual orientation among study participants [ $t(470) = 4.304$ ,  $p < .001$ ] such that male undergraduates expressed a higher level of sexual orientation ( $M = 19.14$ ,  $SD = 4.85$ ) than their female counterparts ( $M = 17.24$ ,  $SD = 4.72$ ). Therefore, this hypothesis was accepted.

## Discussion

The hypothesis that parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem would jointly predict sexual orientation was supported. The types of parenting styles received in childhood, whether authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful, and whether the child was sexually abused or not coupled with the positive or negative evaluation of self (self-esteem) would have effects on the type of sexual orientation such an individual would display in later life.

Social learning theory implies that individuals who practice authoritative parenting style of openness and acceptance, developing high self-esteem free of sexual abuse, would likely grow open to express their sexual orientation without any hindrance compared to individuals with authoritarian parenting style, expressing sexual abuse, and having low self-esteem. Individuals with different sexual orientations (e.g., LGBTQ+) received negative experiences where there was high religious involvement (Martina, 2022; Nwaubani, 2017). In Nigeria, individuals with different sexual orientations are not well accepted in many communities (Ukah, 2018; Okanlawon, 2020), leaving scars of stigmatization.

As rightly pointed out by Mills-Koonce et al. (2016), sexual orientation is informed by cultural variation due to an individual's race and ethnicity, religiosity, and socioeconomic class among other social forces. Similarly, the nature of the parent-child relationship in terms of parenting styles contributes significantly to the formation of their sexual orientation. The findings of this study suggest that parents influence the sexual orientation of their children by creating a climate of acceptance or rejection of deviant sexual orientation within the family.

In addition, the results of this study indicated that self-esteem, sexual abuse, and parenting styles independently predicted sexual orientation among study participants. When taken individually, high self-esteem with no sexual abuse among parents with authoritative parenting styles tends to foster environments where children feel safe to explore and develop their identities, including their sexual orientation, in a healthy way. This result corroborated previous findings that parenting style and self-esteem are significant predictors of sexual orientation across populations and samples (Bankole et al., 2023; Bridge et al., 2019; Shongwe et al., 2021).

Furthermore, childhood sexual abuse was found to independently predict sexual orientation in this study. It goes by saying that participants who did not experience childhood sexual abuse had a positive sexual orientation (Ajayi, 2023; David et al., 2018). This means that experiencing childhood sexual abuse increases homosexual tendencies among individuals.

Finally, gender differences in sexual orientation were found between male and female undergraduates. The results revealed that more male undergraduates expressed a higher level of sexual orientation than their female counterparts. This result corroborated Bailey et al.'s (2016) finding that gender differences existed in sexual orientation between male and female participants. Women tend to be more likely to report a bisexual orientation than an exclusively same-sex orientation, while men show the opposite pattern in their sexual orientation.

While the precise reasons for differences in the patterns of sexual orientation between men and women remain complex and not fully understood, studies have suggested that such differences in sexual orientation could be the result of differences in sexual arousal, hormonal influences, and potential genetic factors (Bailey, 2009). For example, men are reported to exhibit a more category-specific sexual arousal pattern, meaning that they tend to be more strongly aroused by members of one sex than the other. On the other hand, women tend to have more bisexual arousal patterns, being aroused by both male and female stimuli. Again, the influence of hormones (e.g., testosterone in males) and individuals' genetic factors tends to contribute to differences in sexual orientation between men and women (Cook, 2020).

## Conclusion

The study investigated parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem as predictors of sexual orientation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Ibadan metropolis. Two hypotheses were tested and accepted at  $p < .001$ . The results confirmed that parenting styles, sexual abuse, and self-esteem positively contributed to the differences in sexual orientation among study participants. In addition, male participants expressed a higher level of sexual orientation than their female counterparts did.

Some recommendations from this study have been provided. First, the university authority should introduce informational programs that forbid bullying, harassment, and discrimination based on individuals' sexual orientation within the tertiary institutions environment. In addition, open communication, education, and awareness initiatives should be put in place to encourage acceptance of sexual orientation within and outside the study environment. Furthermore, sex education should be introduced early in the school curriculum to address sexual orientation issues, dispel stereotypes, and present true situations on sexual diversity between genders. Finally, social support networks especially suited to research on sexual orientation should be established by the government and other stakeholders.

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. First, the use of questionnaires for data collection was not free of social desirability bias; therefore, including focus group interviews and documentary evidence from key informants would improve data integrity in further study. In addition, the study populations were among tertiary institutions in Oyo State with a sample size of 472, which hinders the generalization of the study findings. Further study would benefit by including other tertiary institutions in southwest geopolitical zones to allow for generalization of study findings. Finally, further studies would benefit by exploring learned helplessness, personality traits, and social support.

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