



## The Role of Spirituality on Ambivalent Behaviors Among Christian Youth Attending Selected Churches in Kajiado County, Kenya

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**ABSTRACT:** The role of spirituality in mitigating against ambivalent behaviors among Christian youth needs to be studied, with an aim to devising efficacious intervention programs, that can be escalated to other non-Christian youth.

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between ambivalent behaviors (substance use and sexual behaviors) and spirituality (strength of faith and religious coping mechanisms) among the Christian youth attending four selected Churches in Kajiado County, Kenya.

Through a descriptive research design, data was collected from 145 respondents aged 14-35 years (73 male, 72 female) who were regularly attending Sunday services. Data collection instruments were the Santa Clara, to assess strength of faith, the Religious Coping Questionnaire (BRIEF-COPE) to assess the religious coping mechanisms, the Compulsive Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI) for sexual impairment and the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test - Lite (ASSIST-Lite) for substance use.

Data was analysed quantitatively using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, version 29) utilizing Kendall's tau-b, and scatter plots were generated to assess the nature of the relationship between spirituality and ambivalent behaviors.

Findings pointed to a positive statistically significant relationship between sexual behaviors and negative religious coping ( $\tau_b = .223$ , 95% C.I. .117-.324,  $p = .008$ ) showing that increased use of negative coping mechanism was related to increased sexual behaviors. The scatter plots showed that overall, ambivalent behaviors had a weak negative relationship with positive coping mechanisms ( $R^2 = 1.1\%$ ) and strength of faith ( $R^2 = 1.1\%$ ), and a weak but positive relationship with negative coping ( $R^2 = 2.1\%$ ). There were several outliers in all the three scatter plots, showing a non-linear relationship implying that other factors were related to the ambivalent behaviors aside from the spirituality.

The findings thus pointed to a moderate correlation between spirituality and ambivalent behaviors, where increased faith and use of positive coping mechanisms can mitigate against ambivalent behaviors, but there is also need for additional programs that could directly address the underlying causes, as well as the propagating factors.

The study thus recommends a multi-faceted approach, incorporating psychological programs alongside the spiritual nurture, to address ambivalent behaviors among Christian youth. Such programs have the potential to be escalated to other non-Christian youth.

**KEY WORDS:** Youth, Spirituality, Substance use, Sexual behaviors, Ambivalent, Correlation

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The youth stage of life is marked by significant developmental changes, particularly in cognitive abilities and spiritual beliefs. According to King (2013), young individuals start to adopt more complex ways of understanding life. However, many young people today encounter numerous challenges that lead them to view spirituality as less relevant. This perception may result in a sense of disconnect from God, who they believe is indifferent to human concerns (Büssing et al., 2010). Consequently, Christian youth often face difficulties in decision-making, which can lead to engagement in risky behaviors (Leshem, 2016).

Christian teachings emphasize high moral standards, and when youth exhibit behaviors contrary to these teachings, they experience ambivalence. Many Christian youths find themselves torn between adhering to biblical principles and conforming to societal norms (Swindell, 2010). For instance, while the Bible prohibits premarital sex, societal norms may encourage sexual relationships outside marriage, leading to peer pressure and potentially harmful behaviors.

Research indicates that incorporating spirituality and religiosity into the lives of young people can improve mental health

outcomes. Studies show that participation in religious activities is correlated with positive behavior and overall well-being (Arndt & Naudé, 2016). A longitudinal study demonstrated that regular church attendance and a belief in a higher power predicted lower rates of substance use among non-Hispanic youth (Scott et al., 2018). Similarly, Hardy et al. (2023) noted that spirituality plays a vital role in school behavior and general conduct. In a comparison of sexual behaviors among different age groups, Vasilenko and Espinosa-Hernandez (2019) found that younger individuals in religious settings were less likely to engage in casual sexual relationships compared to those in secular environments.

Francis (2020) conducted a study with over 23,000 participants aged 13-15 in Wales and England, revealing a direct link between consistent church attendance and moral values, suggesting that belief in God and personal prayer reinforce these values. In a meta-analysis of youth aged 15 to 19, Hayward (2019) found that religious beliefs significantly influenced the likelihood of engaging in sexual activities.

Cheung's (2010) meta-analysis of 40 studies indicated that religion strongly encourages youth to participate in constructive rather than destructive activities, promoting traits such as hope and integrity. A study by Harley and Hunn (2015) highlighted spirituality as a protective factor that instills hope in African American youth living in impoverished areas.

Despite the benefits of spirituality, many youths may turn to escapist activities like substance use and risky sexual behaviors (Dariotis & Chen, 2020; Eppelmann et al., 2016). For instance, Wachira (2016) studied church-attending youth in Nairobi, finding a high prevalence of substance use despite many recognizing the conflict with their religious beliefs. While church attendance provided some protective effects against substance abuse, no targeted youth programs were available to address these issues directly.

In summary, while youth experience profound changes and face challenges that can lead to ambivalence in their spiritual and moral lives, research consistently demonstrates the positive impact of spirituality and religiosity on their behavior and well-being. Church involvement is linked to lower rates of risky behaviors and substance abuse, indicating that fostering a strong spiritual foundation can serve as a protective mechanism in their development.

Nevertheless, the discourse in spite of citing various studies lacks depth in analyzing the methodologies and contexts of those studies. This would strengthen the argument regarding the protective role of spirituality. The current study thus sought to investigate the relationship between spirituality and ambivalent behaviors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A descriptive research design was employed to collect data on spirituality and ambivalent behaviors. Data was analysed quantitatively using correlations to give information on how spirituality related to ambivalent behaviours. The study site were four assemblies of Deliverance church in Kajiado County, Kenya with two of them based in Ngong town and the other two were in Kiserian town. In total, 145 youth who were consistently attending the Sunday services in the four churches were recruited. The age range was 14-35 years old, with 73 being male and 72 being female. The inclusion criteria was signing the informed consent form for therapy, and for those below 18 years, their parents signed the informed consent on their behalf.

### **Instrumentation**

Ambivalent behaviors in this study constituted sexual behaviors and substance use. Sexual behaviors were assessed using the Compulsive Sexual behavior Inventory which has 13 items to assess for control of sexual urges, and total scores of 65. A score of 35 and above qualifies for classification of significant sexual impairment. In previous studies, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  has demonstrated high internal-consistency reliability at .96 for the control subscales (Coleman et al., 2001). The items capture difficulties in controlling the frequency of sexual urges and behaviors, emotional distress related to sex, and the frequency with which sex interferes with relationships, activities, and financial stability (Storholm et al., 2011).

The ASSIST-Lite collected data on substance use which included alcohol, cannabis, cigarettes, stimulants, sedatives, opioids and psychoactive substances. The tool was designed to assess severity in substance use and abuse and has been widely used in medical settings (Ali et al., 2013; Patston et al., 2017).

Spirituality was assessed using the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire - SRSCORF, to investigate the strength of faith, and the Religious Coping Questionnaire - RCOPE to collect data on the level of positive or negative religious coping mechanisms. The SRSCORF is scored on a Likert scale of 1- strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-Agree and 4-Strongly Agree, with a total score of 40 indicating high strength of faith.

Edwards et al. (2002) research among university students in the US found the SRSCORF tool was reliable and valid in testing for spiritual strength. Wen (2017) study in Poland found the SRSCORF had a high reliability of  $\alpha = 0.952$ . The SRSCORF was found valid for this study because it tackles issues of purpose and the importance of one's faith.

The RCOPE categorizes the coping mechanisms into either positive or negative religious coping mechanisms. The positive religious coping methods deal with the relationship of oneself with God, others, and self, whilst the negative centers on spiritual tensions and struggles with self, others and God. It is scored on a Likert scale of 1- strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-Agree and 4-Strongly Agree. Total scores in each of the scales are tallied where the Santa Clara has a total score of 28 for each coping mechanism category (positive and negative). Previous studies have affirmed a high internal consistency ranging from .71 to .90 for 13-25-year-old (Kaufman et al. (2023; Khodayarifard et al., 2020). The items in the RCOPE are shown in table 1.

**Table 1: The Religious Coping Mechanisms Inquiry (R-COPE)**

Positive religious coping	Negative religious coping
1. Looked for a stronger connection with God.	1. Wondered whether God had abandoned me.
2. Sought God's love & care.	2. Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion.
3. Sought help from God in letting go of my anger.	3. Wondered what I did for God to punish me.
4. Tried to put my plans into action together with God.	4. Questioned God's love for me.
5. Tried to see how God might be trying to Strengthen me in this situation.	5. Wondered whether my church had abandoned me.
6. Asked forgiveness for my sins.	6. Decided the devil made this happen.
7. Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems.	7. Questioned the power of God.
Scoring: 1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree	
Interpretation of total scores: Low (0-13); High (14-28)	

Table 1 shows the categorization of the coping mechanisms into either positive or negative coping mechanisms. Each category has 7 questions giving a total of 28 scores. Thereafter, this study ranked each of the coping mechanisms as either low (0-13) or high (14-28), based on the total scores. The Santa Clara questionnaire on the other hand has 10 questions as shown in table 2.

**Table 2: The Faith Strength Inquiry in Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire**

Strength of faith	1	2	3	4
1. My religious faith is extremely important to me.	1	2	3	4
2. I pray daily.	1	2	3	4
3. I look to my faith as a source of inspiration.	1	2	3	4
4. I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life.	1	2	3	4
5. I consider myself active in my faith or church.	1	2	3	4
6. My faith is an important part of who I am as a person.	1	2	3	4
7. My relationship with God is extremely important to me.	1	2	3	4
8. I enjoy being around others who share my faith.	1	2	3	4
9. I look to my faith as a source of comfort.	1	2	3	4
10. My faith impacts many of my decisions.	1	2	3	4
<b>Scoring:</b> 1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree				
<b>Interpretation of total scores:</b> Very low faith (0-10); Low faith (10-20); High faith (21-30); Very high faith (31-40)				

Table 2 shows the items in the SCSRCOF and how they were ranked. There are 10 questions with total scores of 40. This study ranked the strength of Faith as follows: for total scores of 0-10 (Very low faith), 10-20 (Low faith), 21-30 (High Faith) and 31-40 (Very high Faith). The ranks of spirituality measures were then correlated with the levels of substance use risk (low, moderate and high risk) as shown in the ASSIST-LITE questionnaire and CSB (significant sexual impairment; 35-65) and non-significant sexual impairment; 0-34)

**RESULTS**

The Kendall's tau-b ( $\tau_b$ ) correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between the spirituality measures (Faith Strength, positive coping and negative coping) and the ambivalent behaviors (CSB and substance use). The Kendall's tau-b is a nonparametric measure of the strength and direction of association that exists between two variables measured on at least an ordinal scale. The findings for the relationship between Spirituality (Faith Strength, Positive and Negative religious coping) and CSB are presented in table 3.

**Table 3: The Correlation between Spirituality and CSB**

Correlation between	Kendall's tau_b	Significance(2-tailed)	95% Confidence Intervals (2-tailed) <sup>a</sup>	
			Lower	Upper
CSB /Strength of Faith	-.123	.132	-.229	-.015
CSB /Positive religious coping	-.024	.772	-.134	.086
CSB/Negative religious coping	.223	.008	.117	.324

a. Estimation is based on Fisher's r-to-z transformation.

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The table 3 shows the correlations of CSB with spirituality (Strength of Faith and Religious coping). The Kendall's tau b points to a positive statistically significant relationship between CSB and negative religious coping ( $\tau_b=.223$ , 95% C.I .117-.324,  $p=.008$ ). This implies that increased use of negative coping mechanism was related to increased sexual behaviors (CSB). The relationship between spirituality and substance use was analyzed by assessing the correlation between substances risk levels and spirituality ranks (positive religious coping, negative religious coping and strength of faith) as shown in table 4

**Table 4: Correlation between Substance Use Risk and Spirituality**

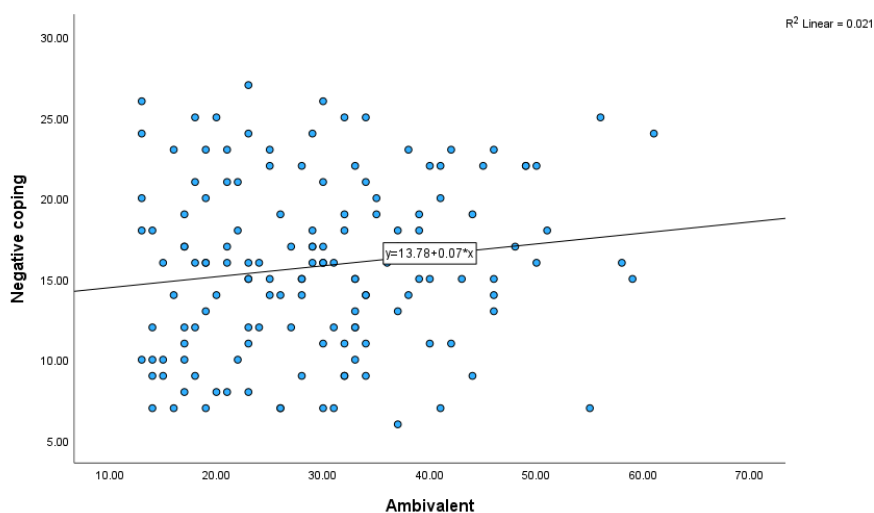
Substances	Spirituality Measures	Kendall's tau_b	Significance (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Intervals (2-tailed) <sup>a</sup>	
				Lower	Upper
Alcohol	Positive coping	-.096	.248	-.204	.014
	Negative coping	.059	.470	-.050	.167
	Strength of Faith	-.070	.385	-.177	.039
Cigarette	Positive coping	.025	.766	-.085	.134
	Negative coping	.050	.544	-.059	.158
	Strength of Faith	-.068	.402	-.176	.041
Cannabis	Positive coping	.053	.521	-.057	.162
	Negative coping	-.009	.911	-.118	.100
	Strength of Faith	-.040	.617	-.148	.069
Stimulants	Positive coping	.033	.691	-.077	.143
	Negative coping	-.016	.849	-.124	.093
	Strength of Faith	.006	.944	-.103	.114
Sedatives	Positive coping	.028	.739	-.082	.137
	Negative coping	.073	.377	-.036	.181
	Strength of Faith	.041	.612	-.068	.149
Opioids	Positive coping	.022	.798	-.089	.131
	Negative coping	.117	.160	.008	.223
	Strength of Faith	.090	.269	-.019	.197

a. Estimation is based on Fisher's r-to-z transformation.

Table 4 represents the findings for Kendall's Tau-b correlation between spirituality measures (positive coping, negative coping and strength of faith) and substance use risk. Across all the substances (alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis, stimulants, sedatives, opioids), there was no statistically significant relationship between the spirituality measures and substance use risk ( $p>.05$ ). Thus, spirituality did not have a relationship with substance use risk. The findings thus indicate some underlying risk factors for substance use that need to be addressed using targeted interventions.

### *The Relationship between Spirituality Measures and Overall Ambivalent Behaviors*

The total scores for Ambivalent behaviors in this study were obtained by getting the sum of the scores for CSB and all the substances. Scatter plots were generated to inform on the nature of the relationship of spirituality and overall ambivalent behaviors. The relationship between negative coping and ambivalent behaviors are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The Relationship between Negative Coping and Ambivalent Behaviors**

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Figure 1 shows the scatter plot for the relationship between negative coping and ambivalent behaviors (substance use and CSB). This scatterplot shows a weak, positive, non-linear association between negative coping and number of substances used. The direction shows a trend where increased negative coping is related to increased CSB, such that negative coping accounts for 2.1% ( $R^2=.021$ ) of the variance in ambivalent behaviors. There are many outliers however, showing that other extraneous variables influenced the ambivalent behaviors, other than just utilization of the negative coping mechanism. The scatter plot for the relationship between Strength of Faith and ambivalent behaviors is shown in figure 2.

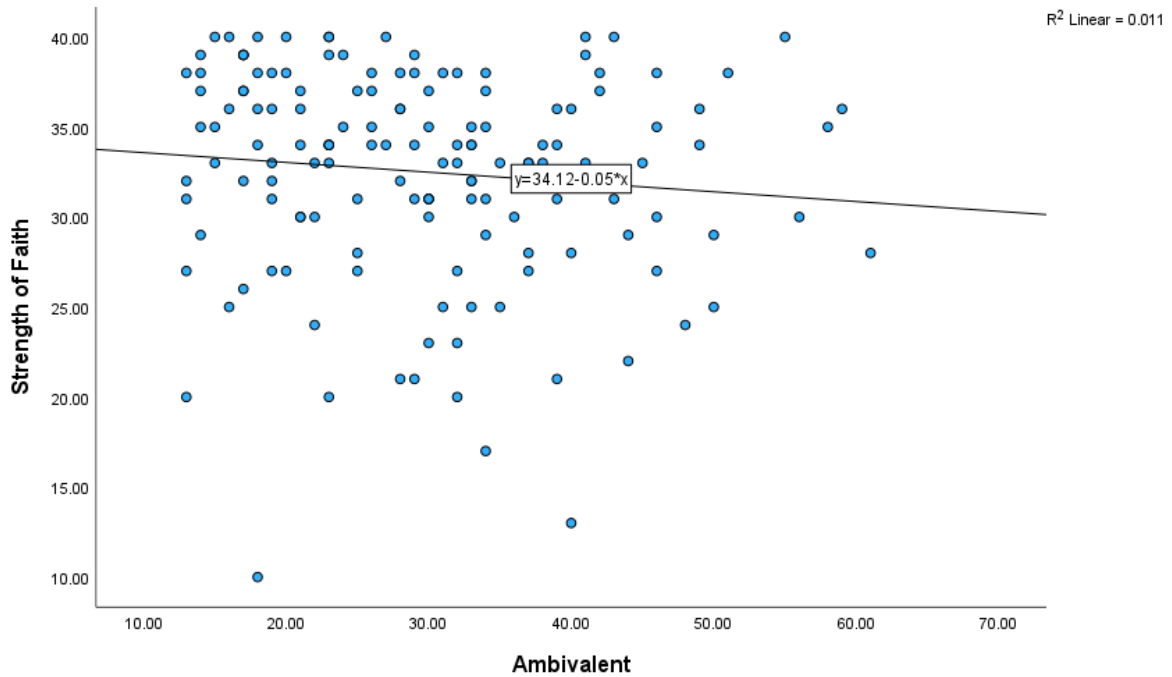


Figure 2: The Relationship between Strength of Faith and Ambivalent Behaviors

Figure 2 shows the scatter plot for the relationship between strength of faith and ambivalent behaviors. This scatterplot shows a weak, negative, non-linear association between strength of Faith and ambivalent behaviors. The direction shows a trend where increased faith is associated with decreased ambivalent behaviors, and the strength of faith accounts for 1.1% ( $R^2=.011$ ) of the variance in ambivalent behaviors.

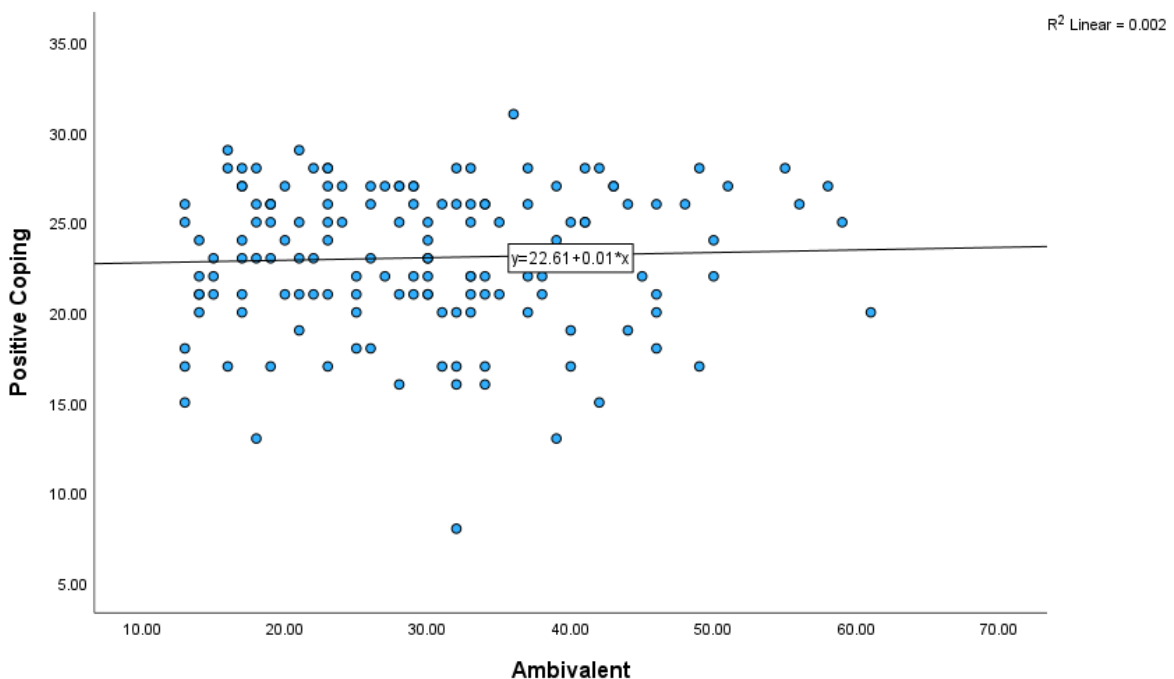


Figure 3: The Relationship between Positive Coping and Ambivalent Behaviors

Figure 3 shows the scatter plot for the relationship between positive coping and ambivalent behaviors. This scatterplot shows a weak, negative, non-linear association between positive coping and ambivalent behaviors. The direction shows a trend where increased faith is associated with decreased ambivalent behaviors, and the positive coping accounts for 0.2% ( $R^2=.002$ ) of the variance in ambivalent behaviors.

#### Discussion of findings

This study found a positive statistically significant relationship between CSB and negative religious coping ( $r_b=.223$ , 95% C.I .117-.324,  $p=.008$ ) showing that increased use of negative coping mechanism was related to increased CSB. None of the spirituality measures were correlated with substance use, pointing to several extraneous factors that may influence substance use. This was additionally affirmed by the scatter plots which showed that overall, ambivalent behaviors had a weak negative relationship with positive coping mechanisms and strength of faith, and a weak but positive relationship with negative coping but there were several outliers, showing non-linear relationships, where other factors influenced ambivalent behaviors. The findings thus pointed to a moderate effect where increased strength of faith and positive coping can mitigate against ambivalent behaviors, but there is also need for additional programs that could directly address the underlying causes, to decrease the engagement in the ambivalent behaviors.

The result is informative as it could indicate that being a Christian is not necessarily associated with abstinence from risky behaviors such as alcohol/substance use among the youth. In deed research finds that religiously active youth are significantly less likely than non-religious youth to engage in risky behaviors, but there are also significant numbers (20%-40%) of religiously active youth who are involved in ambivalent behaviors (Mathai,2022). Thus, religion does mitigate against negative outcomes, but it does not eliminate them.

Other studies also find prevalent ambivalent behaviors among religious youth. A study in the US revealed that 39% of 12th graders (mean age 16.8 years) who attended religious services weekly or more had used illegal drugs in the previous year, 31% had smoked marijuana in the previous year and 20% had used hard drugs in the previous year. For those who said their faith was "very important" in their lives, nearly 40% had used illegal drugs, 32% had smoked marijuana and 21% had used hard drugs in the previous year. Furthermore, 11% of 12th graders who attended religious services weekly or more and roughly 13% of those who said religious faith was "very important" in their lives had tried marijuana or hashish by the ninth grade. Additionally another 83.7% of the sample population had engaged in sexual activity although 30% of them had reported that religion was an important factor in their personal life (National Study of Youth & Religion, 2024).

Olaore (2013) study in a Nigerian faith-based private university, found that some students engaged in substance abuse and concluded that whilst students may be exposed to religious activities and programs, and parental restriction, they can still be driven to substance abuse. Thus, in spite of a moralistic upbringing, peer pressure and the environmental factors may affect their moral stability (Olaore, 2013).

Other studies however, have shown that religion is a protective factor against ambivalent behaviors. A longitudinal study in the United States found that attendance and involvement in Church and a belief of a greater supernatural force predicted a low prevalence in illegal drugs and substance use among the non-Hispanic (Scott et al., 2018). Dalmida et al. (2018) in the US among 65 girls in the 15-20 years age bracket observed that older girls with lower religious cognition tended to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Similarly, a study done in Israel among 345 male Jews showed that religious education and religiosity played a big role in decreased alcohol use and positive behavior, more so in religious high schools compared to the non-religious ones.

Hur et al. (2019) study in Nigeria ( $n= 2860$ ; 12-18 years) also established that frequent religious attendance and growing up in an environment where strong religious and spiritual doctrines and rituals are emphasized and practiced, resulted in a child embracing prosocial behaviors. This is because youth may be mentored through friends, church activities, and programs that stimulate their innate spiritual hunger.

Another aspect is that the youth may be experiencing psychological distress that might be emanating from childhood and this leaves them more vulnerable to risky behaviors because of childhood wounds. This is evident in other studies like (Hollar et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023; Miedema et al., 2023; Magidson et al., 2016) where life satisfaction, mental wellbeing and positive childhood experiences accounted for low prevalence of risky behaviors and substance use.

Despite the ambivalence shown among the Christian youth, research offers hope that religion does have a mitigating effect against ambivalent behaviors. Hence, it is important to keep such youth grounded in their religious faith to promote prosocial behaviors.

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