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## Original Research Article

# Drivers of transactional sexual relationships among students in a Nigerian University: implications for elimination of reproductive rights violation

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The objective of the study was to assess the prevalence and drivers of transactional sex in a Nigerian University.

**Methods:** Data was collected through Mobile Data Collection platform (Google form). The dependent variable was transactional sex. The independent variables are self-reported household wealth group, gender, current age, marital status, age at sexual debut, family structure, consumption of alcohol, and use of psychoactive drugs. Two binary logistic regression models were fitted.

**Results:** The prevalence of transactional sex was 23.85%. The odds of transactional sex were higher among females (OR=1.642, 95% CI: 1.499-1.799) and older students, but lower among undergraduates who were 18 years or older at the time of first intercourse (OR=0.842, 95% CI: 0.764-0.927). Results further revealed that while being from richest household wealth group (OR=0.587, 95% CI: 0.486-0.710) and being from a nuclear family structure (OR=0.446, 95% CI: 0.213-0.933) lowers the odds of transactional sex, the use of psychoactive drugs and alcoholic consumption increased the likelihood of transactional sex among undergraduates.

**Conclusions:** The drivers of transactional sex in tertiary institutions in Nigeria are age, age at sexual debut, family structure, use of psychoactive drugs and alcoholic consumption. Promoting responsible sexual behaviour of undergraduates is imperative in the country.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Sexual and reproductive health, Transactional sex, Young people

## INTRODUCTION

Transactional sexual relationships are non-commercial relationships in which sex is demanded mostly by men and exchanged for cash, goods, services, commodities, or privileges mostly by women for the purpose of meeting the needs of men and women involved in the relationships.<sup>1,2</sup> Transactional sexual relationships has been widely reported across the world and linked to several adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes such as increasing sexually transmitted infections

including HIV/AIDS and intimate partner violence and several socio-economic exploitative practices.<sup>3-15</sup> Its continued prevalence in tertiary institutions of learning across the world requires further research into the possible drivers for two important reasons.<sup>3,7,16,18</sup> One, transactional sex within academic institutions erode the credibility of scholarship and promotes mediocrity which endangers national development in the long run. Two, transactional sex is a harmful practice that violates the sexual and reproductive rights of young girls involved because the circumstances of such sexual relationships do

not empower girls or women to negotiate safer sex. Studies have documented the drivers of transactional sexual relationships. A number of studies reported that young people particularly young women practice transactional sex due to economic factors.<sup>12,13,19-20</sup> Many desire to escape poverty; many are in need of cars, cash, expensive clothes and phones and agree to exchanging sex as means of meeting their needs. Another widely reported reason for transactional sex is the widespread phenomenon of 'Sugar Daddy or Aristo' which refers to the patronage of rich men by young girls in order to acquire very expensive material things.<sup>3,11,17</sup> Studies have also reported that transactional sex thrives due to the practice of intergenerational sexual relationships.<sup>21-23</sup> Such sexual relationships often undermine the ability of young women to negotiate safer sex, thus elevating their vulnerability to unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion. A recent study argue that gendered expectation that men should always be the one to provide economic resources in a relationship while women reciprocate with sex may be a driver of transactional sex in the society particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>14</sup> However, studies have not documented these drivers in some Nigerian Universities, hence this study. The objective of the study was therefore to assess the prevalence and drivers of transactional sex in a Nigerian University. Findings from the study will provide further inputs for strengthening of the 2017 National Reproductive Health Policy in Nigeria by providing additional information on harmful practices that violates the sexual and reproductive health of Undergraduates in the country.<sup>24</sup> The study was guided by the question what are the drivers of transactional sex?

## METHODS

This study was a descriptive cross-sectional research study which sought information from respondents through the Mobile Data Collection platform (Google form), a tool that allows collecting information from users via a personalized survey or quiz. Information collected was automatically connected to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was populated with the survey and quiz responses.

The target populations for the study were the undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The University lies between Longitude 4°31'1.427"East, and 7° 31'32.153"North and Latitude 4°31'50.165"East and 7°31'31.869"North and bordered on all sides by Ile-Ife town, a prominent city in southwest Nigeria. The study was conducted in November 2019 and analysed a sample size of two hundred and thirty nine respondents (239) students who completed and returned the survey questionnaire.

### *Selection criteria and procedure*

Students selected into the study are those who owned an Android phone and consented to participate in the study. A non-probabilistic sampling technique was employed to

select a sample size of two hundred and thirty nine respondents (239) from the study area. The samples were respondents who were readily available and willing to participate in the online survey. Evidence of spreadsheet for collection of data attached.

### *Research variables*

The dependent variable for the study was transactional sex. To capture data on transactional sex in the study, respondents were asked if in the last 12 months if they had entered into a sexual relationship with a non-sex worker mainly to get some items such as cash, gifts, phones, or other needed things important to them. The responses were dichotomous with yes indicating transactional sex practice and no indicating otherwise. The independent variables for this study are self-reported household wealth group (poorer, middle, richer, richest), gender (male or female), current age (15-19, 20-24, 25 years or older), marital status (cohabiting, married, never married), age at sexual debut (less than 18 years or 18 years or older), family structure (foster, nuclear, polygynous, single-parent), consumption of alcohol (yes or no) in the last three months, and use of psychoactive drugs such as cannabis and tobacco (yes or no) in the last three months preceding the survey. These variables have been identified as covariates of transactional sex and other risky sexual behaviour among young people in the country.<sup>7,25,26</sup>

### *Statistical analysis*

Data were analysed using frequency distribution and percentages. Two binary logistic regression models were fitted to determine the variables influencing transactional sex among the undergraduates. Model 1 was unadjusted. Any variable not showing statistical significance in the model was excluded from Model 2. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . All analyses were performed using Stata (Version 14).<sup>27</sup>

### *Ethical approval*

The study was conducted as part of the requirements for the award of a Bachelor of Science Degree in the Department of Demography and Social Statistics. The survey protocol was assessed and approved by the Department. The analyses are done anonymously.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents respondents' profile. More than half (53.14%) of the respondents were males but the proportion of females in the sample was equally substantial. The dominant (44.35%) age group among the respondents was the age group 20-24 years. The majority (73.22%) of the students had their first sexual intercourse at age eighteen or older ages. Likewise, the majority (86.20%) of the students were never married. The

majority (79.50%) also reported residing in households in the middle wealth group.

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	127	53.14
Female	112	46.86
<b>Age</b>		
15-19 years	72	30.13
20-24 years	106	44.35
25 years +	61	25.52
<b>Age at sexual debut</b>		
Less than 18 years	64	26.78
18 years +	175	73.22
<b>Marital status</b>		
Cohabiting	10	4.18
Married	23	9.62
Never married	206	86.20
<b>Household wealth group</b>		
Poorer	11	4.60
Middle	190	79.50
Richer	25	10.46
Richest	13	5.44
<b>Family structure</b>		
Foster	20	8.37
Nuclear	161	67.36
Polygynous	27	11.30
Single-parent	31	12.97
<b>Psychoactive drug use</b>		
No	198	82.85
Yes	41	17.15
<b>Alcoholic consumption</b>		
No	184	79.99
Yes	55	23.01
<b>Transactional sex</b>		
No	182	76.15
Yes	57	23.85
<b>Total</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Fieldwork, 2019

More than two-thirds (67.36%) of the respondents had nuclear family structure. Less than one-fifth (17.15%) had used at least one type of psychoactive drugs in the last three months while more than one-fifth (23.01%) of the respondents had consumed alcoholic drink in the last three months preceding the survey. The prevalence of transactional sex was 23.85% among the respondents.

Table 2 presents the bivariable and multivariable results. In Model 1, all the independent variables with the exclusion of marital status revealed significant statistical associations with transactional sex. Marital status was thus excluded from further analysis. The full model (Model 2) showed that all the included variables had significant effect on the likelihood of transactional sex among the respondents. Females were 64.2% more likely to engage in transactional sex compared to male students (OR=1.642, 95% CI: 1.499-1.799). The odds of transactional sex increased with age of respondents though inconsistently. The odds were twice more higher among students aged 20-24 years (OR=2.059, 95% CI: 1.314-3.226) and as well twice higher among students age 25 years or older (OR=2.043, 95% CI: 1.181-3.532). In contrast, students who had first intercourse at age 18 or older were 15.8% less likely to experience transactional sex compared to those who had first intercourse at more younger ages (OR=0.842, 95% CI: 0.764-0.927).

As household wealth group improved from poorer to middle, the odds of transactional sex almost double (OR=1.980, 95% CI: 1.605-2.443) but decline consistently thereafter. The odds were lower as household wealth group improved to the richest wealth group (OR=0.587, 95% CI: 0.486-0.710). While respondents from nuclear families had lower likelihood of engaging in transactional sex (OR=0.446, 95% CI: 0.213-0.933), respondents from polygynous families (OR=1.782, 95% CI: 1.440-2.204) and single-parent families (OR=2.882, 95% CI: 2.389-3.476) had higher odds of transactional sex. Respondents who had used psychoactive drugs were 78.2% more likely to engage in transactional sex compared to those who do not take the drugs (OR=1.782, 95% CI: 1.440-2.204). Likewise, respondents who had consumed alcoholic drinks were 35.9% more likely to engage in transactional sex (OR=1.359, 95% CI: 1.089-1.696).

**Table 2: Results of bivariable and multivariable logistic regression models.**

Characteristic predicting transactional sex	Model 1			Model 2		
	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI
<b>Gender</b>						
Male <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
Female	1.726	p<0.01	1.408-2.114	1.642	p<0.01	1.499-1.799
<b>Age</b>						
15-19 years <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
20-24 years	3.157	p<0.05	1.043-9.557	2.059	p<0.05	1.314-3.226
25 years +	2.269	p<0.01	1.468-3.507	2.043	p<0.05	1.181-3.532

Continued.

Characteristic predicting transactional sex	Model 1			Model 2		
	OR	p-value	95% CI	OR	p-value	95% CI
<b>Age at sexual debut</b>						
Less than 18 years <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
18 years +	0.703	p<0.01	0.632-0.781	0.842	p<0.01	0.764-0.927
<b>Marital status</b>						
Cohabiting <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-			
Married	0.934	0.897	0.328-2.655			
Never married	1.087	0.658	0.751-1.572			
<b>Household wealth group</b>						
Poorer <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
Middle	2.014	p<0.01	1.612-2.519	1.980	p<0.01	1.605-2.443
Richer	1.492	p<0.01	1.193-1.866	1.467	p<0.05	1.066-2.020
Richest	0.137	p<0.01	0.008-0.024	0.587	p<0.01	0.486-0.710
<b>Family structure</b>						
Foster <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
Nuclear	0.690	p<0.01	0.572-0.833	0.446	p<0.05	0.213-0.933
Polygynous	3.135	p<0.01	2.531-3.884	1.782	p<0.01	1.440-2.204
Single-parent	5.254	p<0.01	3.471-7.956	2.882	p<0.01	2.389-3.476
<b>Psychoactive drug use</b>						
No <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
Yes	1.292	p<0.05	1.045-1.597	1.782	p<0.01	1.440-2.204
<b>Alcoholic consumption</b>						
No <sup>ref</sup>	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
Yes	2.161	p<0.01	1.822-2.562	1.359	p<0.05	1.089-1.696

Notes: (reference category), CI (confidence interval), OR (odds ratio)

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to identify the drivers of transactional sex in a Nigeria University. The study builds on numerous existing studies that investigated the prevalence and motivations for transactional sex in tertiary institutions of learning across the world.<sup>3,7,16-18</sup> In the study, the prevalence of transactional sex was 23.85%. This is consistent with the 23.8% observed in a recent study in another Nigerian University 7 but slightly higher than the 17.6% prevalence observed in another recent study elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The study thus further confirms that transactional sex is prevalent in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In most cases, transactional sex are perpetrated by men and sustained by young girls and older women who are always willing to exchange sex in fulfilment of several economic or social needs.<sup>12,13,19,20</sup> Large numbers of undergraduates have already accepted the phenomenon of 'Sugar Daddy or Aristo' as a social practice of giving something-for-something.<sup>3,11,17</sup> This could be discouraged through behaviour change communication that stressed the importance of moral values and contentment in sexual relationships.

Such practices have serious implications for the sexual and reproductive health of female undergraduates because they usually do not have the power to negotiate safer sex in such sexual relationships because the men are usually older and richer.<sup>21-23</sup> This further exposes young girls to the risk of both unintended pregnancy and unsafe

abortion. In cases where the men are not older, transactional sex still thrives in University campuses because of the expectation of young girls that their male partners should provide their needs while they take care of his sexual needs.<sup>14</sup> It is thus plausible for the administrators of Nigerian Universities to develop more strategies to promote responsible sexual behaviour of undergraduates through the introduction of compulsory sexual health curriculum as part of the courses to be taken by all university students. There is a possibility that such curriculum will raise awareness about the level and consequences of transactional sex which may translate into reduction in its prevalence among undergraduates in the country. Another possible means of eliminating transactional sex on University campuses is for University administrators to create opportunities of part-time work for students who are not on any scholarship or bursary schemes. This may reduce the need for exchanging sex for economic items on campuses especially among students who do not have supportive families.<sup>18</sup>

It is important that governments in Nigeria should recognise transactional sex as a major form of sexual and reproductive rights violation that endangers the victims. Already, the 2017 National Reproductive Health Policy has included the elimination of transactional sex as part of the target for achieving gender equality and elimination of all forms of discrimination in the country.<sup>24</sup> However, there is need to strengthen the



capacity of the Universities by ensuring the provision of youth-friendly services in all University health centers to enable the centers respond promptly to the sexual health needs of undergraduates. The health centers should also be empowered to monitor use of psychoactive drugs in the Universities. Also, governments should take more proactive steps to ensure punishment for all acts of reproductive health violations on University campuses. This may reduce the prevalence of transactional sex by discouraging many others from engaging in the practice.

### Limitations

The study was not able to establish causality between the independent and dependent variables examined. This limitation is peculiar to all cross-sectional studies. However, this does not invalidate the findings because the significant correlations shown in the result suggests that the variables may have both direct and indirect influence on each other. The qualitative reports generated from the study are not presented. This may have provided more support for the findings.

### CONCLUSION

This study identified gender, age, age at sexual debut, household wealth group, family structure, use of psychoactive drugs and alcoholic consumption as key drivers of transactional sex in Nigerian Universities. The study notes that transactional sex has serious implications for the sexual and reproductive health of undergraduates. The need to promote responsible sexual behaviour of undergraduates through the introduction of compulsory sexual health curriculum is imperative in the country. Governments across the country need to strengthen the capacity of Universities health centres to respond promptly to the sexual health needs of undergraduates.

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