

Exploring transactional sex among undergraduates and implications for sexual health: A study of Lagos State University, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores the dimensions of transactional sex among Lagos State University undergraduates. The study employed two methods of data collection: non-participant observation and semi-structured interview. The analysis reveals that heterosexual activities thrive among undergraduates. Transactional sex appears common and it's likely more prevalent among females. The interviews indicate that poverty, broken homes and desire to make cheap money account for the high prevalence of risky sexual health behaviour. Measures of protection such as condoms are rarely used in transactional sex. To check risky sexual behaviour, the University could embark on more intensive campaigns on the dangers of transactional sexual behaviour and promote condom use in the community. This could be provided free at strategic points. It is also important that the University develop part-time job scheme for indigent students (giving females special consideration). Parents are strongly advised to regularly visit their wards in their hostels regularly, sometimes without notice.

Keywords: Transactional, Sex, Sexual, Health, STIs, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS epidemic remain deadly cyclones that continue to uproot lives in sub-Saharan Africa. Young people are the worst hit. In 2006, 40 percent of new HIV infections across the world among adults were estimated to be among young people (Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu, 2007). In Nigeria, although HIV/AIDS is spreading in the entire population, the youths are more infected. For instance, in 2005 sero-prevalence rate among young people age group 20-24 was 4.7 percent and 4.9 percent among age group 25-29 while the national rate was 4.4 percent (Federal Ministry of Health, 2006). The literature is replete with evidence that risky sexual health behaviour predominant among young people accounts for their

vulnerability to HIV and STIs (Guiella and Madise, 2007; Nwokocha, 2007; Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2007). In the context of this study, sexual health is conceived as the situation where young people are free to manage and enjoy sustainable sexual life devoid of diseases as well as physical, social, and economic pains. Sexual intercourse has been identified as the prime mode of transmission of HIV (Dyson, 1990). Transactional sex is a risky sexual health behaviour that escalates the rate of exposure of young people to these devastating infections. Since protection is not likely to be used in such sexual relationships. For instance, Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu (2007: 45) “observe that exchanges may pressure young people (women in particular) into sexual relationships with risky partners and into having sex without condom”.

Such risky sexual partners are often highly placed in the society, at least of higher status than their partners or rich enough to offer young people what they don't have. This category of individuals include lecturers who offer grades for sex (*quid pro quo*), young persons and others who have money and other materials that are attractive to their prey. More importantly is the fact that young people do not have what the risky partners can offer them and so they submit to risky, unsafe sex since they cannot influence their partners to use a condom. Bianchi, Lancianese and Hunter (2006) argue that when a highly placed fellow offers gifts of money, material or grade to partners who are not of their status, it is difficult for such partners to have any form of leverage over relationships. In this case, young people are not likely to enforce the use of condom in transactional sexual relationship with partners who offer various kinds of gifts in exchange for sex.

Luke and Kurz (2002) argue that transactional sexual relationship is likely to undermine the use of condom to ensure protection against infections. Luke (2003) in a review of quantitative and qualitative studies on transactional sex submits that sexual relationships that involve economic transactions is associated with unsafe sex and increased risk of HIV infection. In their study, Madise, Zulu and Ciera (2007: 83) report that “poor females are vulnerable to infections because of earlier sexual debut and non-use of condoms”. However, Moore, Bidlecom and Zulu (2007) in a study in selected sub-Saharan African countries did not find any association between condom use and engaging in sex for money or material/grade gifts. The forgoing suggests that the relationship between transactional sex and protection is mixed. Hence further studies are needed to grasp proper understanding of the association between transactional sex and vulnerability to infections.

Swidler and Watkins (2006) argue that sex for gifts is a way of life in societies where uncertainties and inequalities are pervasive. This observation suggests that Transactional sex is predominant in poor regions of the world. A number of studies lends credence to the observation that sex for money or material gifts is highly prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia (Abraham and Kumar, 1999; Luke, 2003; Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2007; Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu, 2007, Nwokocho, 2007; Uzokwe, 2008). In a study in four African countries, Madise, Zulu and Ciera (2007) argue that wealthiest girls had later sexual debut compared with their poorer colleagues in three countries. Rwenge (2003) reports that young people whose fathers were economically poor or who were living with parents who did not have sufficient means to meet their needs were likely to engage in poverty driven risky sexual health behaviour. Similarly,

Karim et al (2003) reviewing previous studies on this subject in sub-Saharan Africa argue that the ability of men to present financial and material gifts to female partners is an inducement in sexual relationships. These reports imply that poverty is a crucial determinant of transactional or risky sexual behaviour.

In view of the devastating effects of transactional sex it is a worthy research goal to examine its prevalence and dimensions among a highly vulnerable population. This is the motivating factor behind this research. Most of the studies reviewed above were carried out among either in-school adolescents or those out of school. Little is known about transactional sex among undergraduates in the tertiary institutions. The present study seeks to explore the dimensions of transactional sex among Lagos State University (LASU) undergraduates and the reciprocal effect on change in the use of space in the neighbourhood. Two main research questions are addressed: How prevalent is transactional sexual behaviour among LASU undergraduates? And what is the strategy for initiation to transactional sex in the population? In the following sections these questions are examined. The Herbert G. Mead interactionism theory is reviewed as the explanatory framework for the study, the sources of data and methods are explained, data are analysed and discussed and the major conclusions drawn are highlighted.

Herbert G. Mead Interactionism and Undergraduate Reproductive Behaviour

Perhaps the most imaginable way to begin is the description of human nature given by William James quoted in Martindale (1960: 340), one of the major personalities that exerted great intellectual influence on Mead. He describes the human nature as *plastic*. His concept of *plasticity* about the human nature connotes:

The possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield to all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits.

James' statement is an epitome of the process of the gradual formation and transformation of human behaviour in a social context. In Mead's conceptualization, the self image of people is built through the process of taking roles and imbibing the habits of members of the social group they belong to which he referred to as the "generalized others" (Cosser, 1971). The general pattern of the habits of a social group penetrates members through interaction among them. At every point a member associates with other members, new habits are picked up.

The reactions of members make it difficult for an individual in the group to sustain a particular self concept different from what obtains in the community such an individual belongs. Cosser (1971: 335) posits:

Human communicative processes involve the constant self-conscious adjustment of actors to the conduct of others, a repeated fitting together of lines of action through definitions and redefinitions, interpretations and reinterpretations.

Through this process the self image of members is either reinforced or modified consistent with the pattern in the group. As a result the behaviour of an individual will only be understood in terms of the behaviour of the social group he or she belongs to (Martindale, 1960; Cosser, 1971).

The sexual health behavioural pattern of undergraduates is likely explained by this perspective. Premarital sexual behaviour is a common phenomenon among young people (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2007). The campus community consists largely of young people who are constantly engaged in social interaction. Since premarital sex is the

“generalized self” in the community, members are often confronted with the demand to adjust to the predominant attitudes. Hence the high prevalence of risky reproductive health behaviour among undergraduates may be explained in terms of the influence of the general pattern of behaviour among this special population. As members come in contact with individuals who involve themselves in risky behaviours such as premarital and transactional sex on and off the campus or in the hostels; the tendency is there for the *plastic* nature of human to adjust gradually until they mature in the community whereby the “generalized me” is totally internalized. The observation made by ‘Lanre Olutayo as quoted in Nwokocha (2007: 61) may suffice as an epitome of the mechanism of the process of initiation and internalization of transactional sexual habits among undergraduates:

Most...entered that business through their friends while only...were introduced into it by their mothers at tender ages for financial reasons. Being introduced by a friend involves some form of subtle persuasion. The person to be introduced (hereafter referred to as ‘the green’) is often a willing person. This is because envying each other is the basis of beginning the relationship between the green and the initiator...the initiator informs the green about prices of what she wears and generally has...they even become so intimate that they sleep in each other’s room and may even exchange rooms with either’s official roommate. With time, the green is introduced to a man friend...she is however told not to be faithful to the man and that she should not expect any serious relationship. Immediately she is introduced to another man and she accepts, she needs no further monitoring. She is further taught sign-languages concerning car flashes and referring to any client as their ‘uncle’, ‘brother’ or ‘daddy’

Also, the reactions of members who have imbibed the prevailing reproductive health behavioural pattern to non-conformist members make it difficult for such individuals to sustain attitudes not consistent with the general pattern. Thus the general pattern is

reinforced in the community, especially among the student population. As a result, there is likely a high prevalence of risky reproductive health behaviour among undergraduates.

Source of Data and Methods

The study location is Lagos State University (LASU). LASU came into existence in 1983. Until this year (precisely 2008/2009 academic session) the university operated a completely off-campus system. Students find accommodation in the neighbourhood of the university. The location of the institution connects three main traditional communities (as at then), namely Ojo, Iba and Okokomaiko (the neighbourhood of the University is represented in the kite in Figure 1). These are the main communities constituting the present Ojo Local Government Area (LGA). The LGA was largely rural with 'one of the worst slum in the state' (Odumosu, 1999: 159). The Aworis are the original settlers, who were farmers and fishermen. However, these communities now possess a good mix of almost all the ethnic groups and the population can no longer be described as purely agrarian. In other words, the communities have grown over the years in population and infrastructures such that they can best be described today as growing sub-urban areas of the state. The role of the University in the urbanization process unfolding in this area cannot be over-emphasized. Although there are other organizations capable of facilitating this process, the transformation and growth began to be noticeable early 1990s when the University entered its consolidation phase.

The study population comprise of male and female undergraduates of the University. This category of people is best described as young adults in their twenties. Generally conventional University authorities every where give a kind of freedom to the

student population. As adults, they are given the right to make their choices. This liberty creates an atmosphere where one could say a sub-culture exists. Most of the values are of western origin and they demonstrate high level of sexual permissiveness which some observers are describing as campus prostitution (Nzokwe, 2008).

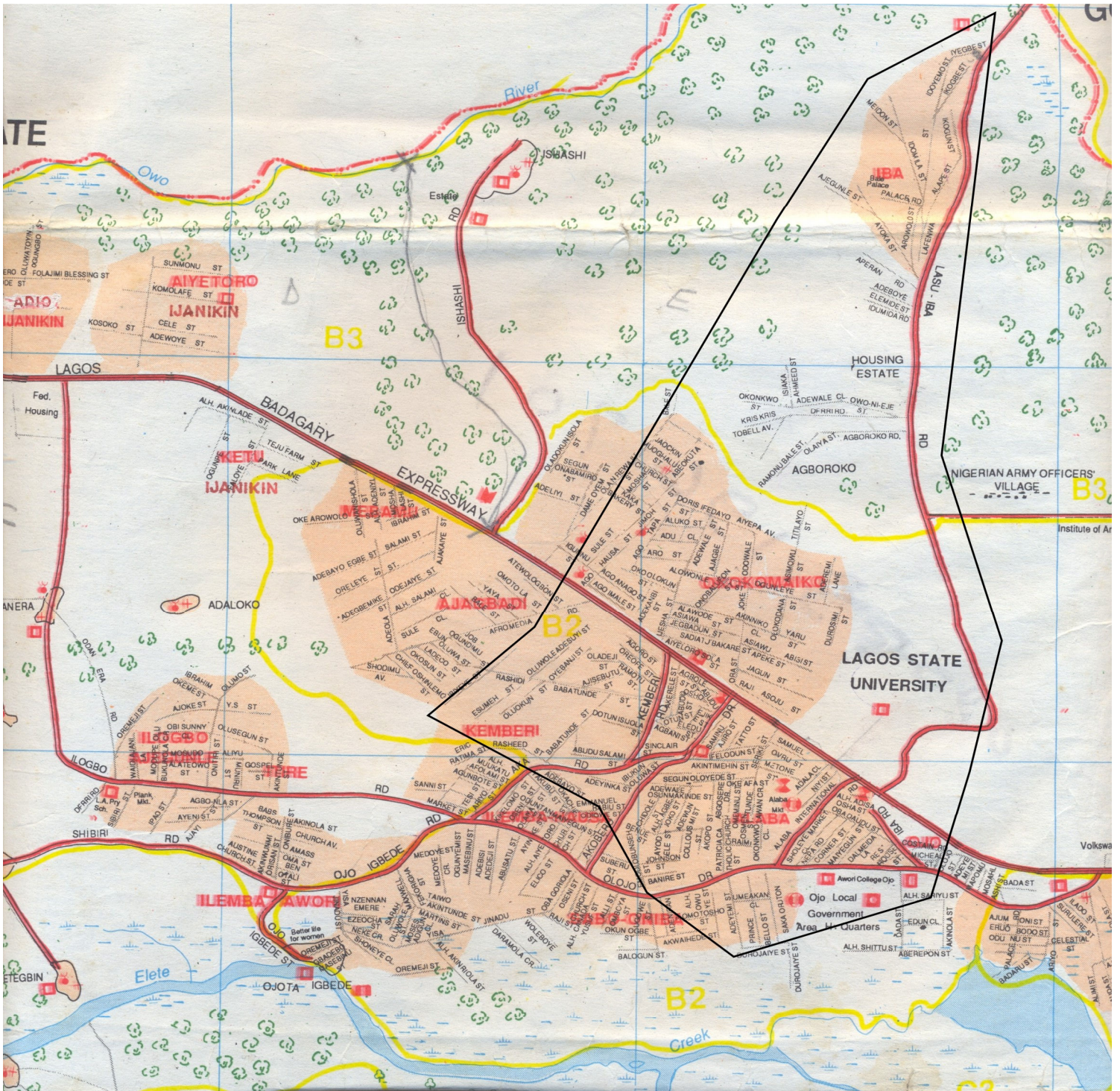
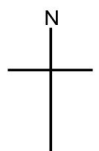


FIGURE 1: LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY NEIGHBOURHOOD



This study employed two methods of data collection: non-participant observation and semi-structured interview. First, a four day non-participant observation was carried out in the three (but two still existing, one has just been re-converted in 2008) hotels/brothels converted to female hostels. The main objective of the observation was to carry out an on- the-spot assessment of whether the hostels are hostels indeed or they are brothels branded as female hostels.

The second category of data was gathered through the conduct of 30 semi-structured and in-depth interviews mainly among fourth year full-time undergraduates of the University to explore transactional sexual behaviour prevailing on the Ojo Campus. Details of the distribution of the interview and basic demographic attributes of the participants are contained in Table 1. The interviewees were recruited with the assistance of three field assistants utilized in the study. We stressed that what was important was not whether they engaged in transactional sex but rather for them to express what was going on among their colleagues. This is to minimise instances of refusals. When we met a potential interviewee we endeavoured to brief the person on the objectives of the study before the interview was conducted. Questions were asked on the opinions of interviewees on the prevalence of various forms of sexual relationships and pre-marital heterosexual activities, transactional sex; the gender dimensions of sexual health behaviour and factors influencing involvement in risky sexual health behaviour. Notes were taken during the interviews.

Table 1: Distribution of the participants of the semi-structured interviews

S/N	Faculties	Number of males	Average age	Number of Females	Average age
1	Arts	2	21.5	3	20
2	Education	2	23	3	21
3	Law	2	20.5	3	19.5
4	Management	2	22	3	20
5	Sciences	2	21	3	20
6	Social Sciences	2	21	3	20.5
	Total	12		18	

Data analysis was handled manually. Notes from the semi-structured interviews were sorted and main themes were drawn out. Data were quantified by examining the frequencies of the themes. Thus discussion in the next section is based on notes prepared from the interviews and the outcome of the quantification process which yielded simple descriptive statistic.

Results and Discussion

Sexual health behaviour

The campus environment appears to present undergraduates with a platform for sexual interactions with little inhibitions. Heterosexual activity is pervasive on campus. About 93 percent of the interviewees support this assertion. This suggests that involvement in sexual interaction among students is a very common occurrence. It is also vivid from the data that the campus provides a fertile ground for multiple sexual partnerships to thrive.

About two-third of the informants testified to this. In a similar vein, transactional sex is quite predominant in the study population. Almost all the interviewees are of the opinion that there are students whose survival on the campus depends on their involvement in transactional sex. The result shows that premarital sex is a common phenomenon among undergraduates and the findings are consistent with the results of earlier studies that transactional sex and multiple sexual partnerships are common risky sexual behaviour among young people (Luke, 2003; Swidler and Watkins, 2006; Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu, 2007; Nwokocha, 2007).

Table 2: Prevalence of transactional sex or heterosexual activities among undergraduates in LASU, Ojo.

S/N	Sexual Health Behaviour	Freq. (n=30)	%
1.	Prevalence of heterosexual activity among both male and female undergraduates on this campus	28	93
2.	I know my very good friends who have multiple sexual partners	19	63
3.	There are students whose survival on this campus depends largely on transactional sex	29	97

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

Table 3 shows the quantification of the responses of the interviewees on the nature of sexual relationships on the campus and the dimension of recruiting sexual partners. Sexual partnership is generally of two major categories. Fellow students engage each other in heterosexual relationships—horizontal and students also go into sexual relationship with rich, ‘powerful’, older opposite sex branded ‘Aristos’ (sugar daddies and mummies) and lecturers—vertical. Almost all the interviewees testify in the affirmative that the two patterns of sexual relationships exist. It is interesting to note the activities of pimps in the recruitment of sexual partners among the undergraduates. Pimps are fellow students who engage in arranging fellow students (females) for the ‘Aristos’

who pay them in return for service rendered. Over two-third of the interviewees support the existence of pimps who facilitate the recruitment of sexual partners for mostly outsiders for the purpose of transactional sex. A few of the interviewees indicated that they have friends whose survival on the campus depends on the proceeds from pimping activities. These observations had earlier been reported by other studies (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2007; Uzokwe, 2008).

Table 3: Dimensions of sexual relationships among undergraduates in LASU, Ojo

S/N	Sexual Health Behaviour	Freq. (n=30)	%
1.	Sexual relationships occur between fellow students and between students and ‘Aristos’	28	93
2	There are pimps among male and female undergraduates who arrange their female colleagues for the ‘Aristos’ mostly from outside	23	77
3	I know my class mates who live on the proceeds from the activities of pimping	10	33

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

As shown in Table 4, transactional sex is more common among female undergraduates. Almost all the interviewees support the assertion that transactional sex is more prevalent among female undergraduates. This confirms the findings of earlier studies that young females are more likely to engage in sex for money or material gifts (Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu, 2007). This suggests that young ladies may have different reasons that motivate them into this type of sexual relationship. Luke (2003)’s three categories of benefits females derive from transactional sex: “(1) assistance with economic survival; (2) a way to secure longer-term opportunities; and (3) a means of increasing status among one’s peers” may suffice (this includes grades from lecturers).

Table 4: Gender differentials in the prevalence of Transactional sexual behaviour among undergraduates in LASU, Ojo

S/N	Reproductive Health Behaviour	Freq. (n=30)	%
1	More of male students engage in Transactional sex	7	23
2	More of female students engage in Transactional sex	27	90

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

Figure 2 shows the frequencies of different factors advanced by interviewees that influence the involvement in risky sexual health behaviour among their colleagues. Among the factors frequently mentioned by the interviewees are poor financial background, influence of friends, desire to make cheap money and greed or love for luxuries as well as originating from broken homes. It is note worthy that poverty and peer influence are of particular mention. As explained in the interviews, many poor young people, especially females, seek financial resources to fund their education and take care of themselves through transactional sex. Earlier studies had reported that poverty is a driving force influencing young females to engage in transactional sex (Rwenge, 2003; Karim et al, 2003; Moore, Biddlecom and Zulu, 2007; Guiella and Madise, 2007). Peer influence is also most frequently mentioned. In many studies of young people’s sexuality the influence of friends has always been mentioned as a crucial factor. Peer influence underscores the significances of interactionist argument that the human nature is plastic and it can be influenced through interaction. One of the interviewees narrated the experience of one of her friends:

She was a room mate to two of her friends who were having nice time with their Aristos. When this lady got admission, she was a very decent girl who did not believe in having sex to make money. However, her room mates would always bring the money made out of their ‘sugar daddies’ into the room. They dangled thousands of naira before this innocent girl from day to day. Along the line she began to accompany her friends out, sometimes their Aristos would buy things for her too. Gradually, she developed interest and she joined them in patronizing men who offered money for sex.

A year four female English undergraduate, aged 23

This excerpt epitomizes the fact that friends could exert tremendous influence on their colleagues to get involved in risky sexual behaviour. This finding is consistent with the reports of earlier studies that peer behaviour and influence is a strong predictor of sexual behaviour among young people (Karim et al, 2003).

More than three-quarter of the respondents mentioned that greed or love for luxuries push young people into sex for money. This is not surprising in a society where materialism takes the central place and almost everybody concentrates on how to amass wealth. Some studies argued that young people, especially females, use transactional sex to garner financial resources from older partners and to raise their social status (e.g. Luke, 2003). Family background in terms of broken homes also enjoyed frequent mention among the interviewees. This factor becomes important in view of the fact that the sexual orientation given to young people by their parents especially by the example they show their children impart on their sexual perceptions which tend to influence them greatly. Broken homes expose young people to early sexual debut or encourage risky sexual behaviour because children raised by single parents rarely live a sexually decent life (Rwenge, 2000; 2003 and Karim et al, 2003).

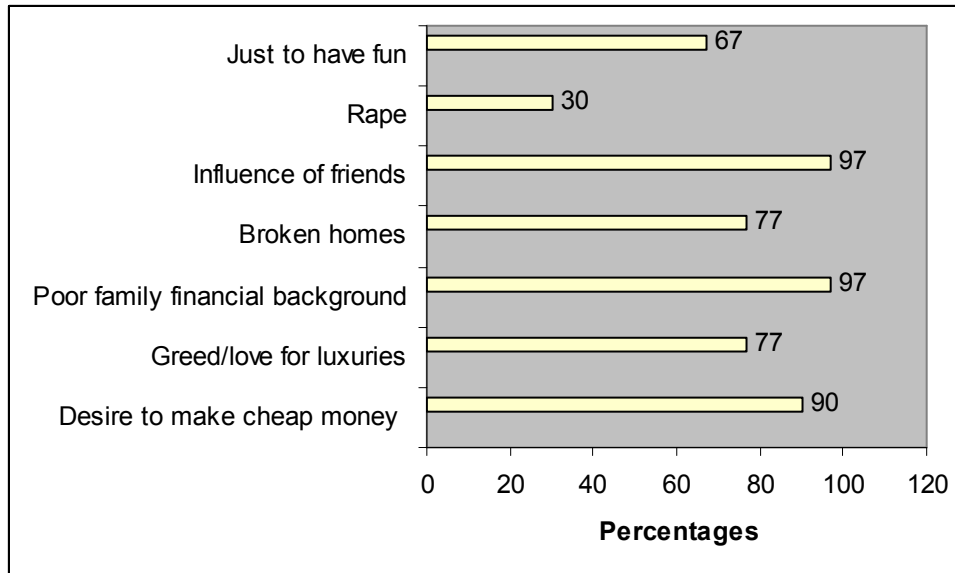


Figure 2: Factors influencing involvement in Transactional sex among LASU Undergraduate

One could imagine that maybe young undergraduates are not conscious of the consequences of contracting STIs and HIV in view of the predominance of risky sexual behaviour among them. According to Table 6, it is surprising that 90 percent of the interviewees mentioned it that most of those who engage in transactional or risky sexual behaviour are fully aware of such consequences. Yet the practice is so common among the students (Nwokocha, 2007). It becomes more pathetic if we consider the fact that only 40 percent of the participants mentioned the possibility of using condoms in such sexual relationships. Studies have established that it is difficult to negotiate condom use in such situations, especially poor females (Luke, 2003; Moore, Zulu and Ciera, 2007). Beside STIs and HIV/AIDS, some of the students who engage in transactional sex fall victim of ritual killers who offer them money to have sex with them. One of the interviewees explained:

Many of the ladies who engage in transactional sex with Aristos are usually drugged through soft drinks. While they are under the influence of the drug their Aristo partners use white handkerchief to clean up the

private part of the ladies for ritual purposes. I know a friend who went out with an Aristo and when she came back she bled to death.
A year four female Sociology undergraduate, age 24

Table 6: Condom use and Perceived consequences of Transactional sexual activities among undergraduates in LASU, Ojo

S/N	Sexual Health Behaviour	Freq. (n=30)	%
1	Students use condom for protection	12	40
2	Contraction of STIs and HIV	27	90

Source: Fieldwork, 2008

Conclusion

The nature of sexual health behaviour of young people is a matter of serious concern in sub-Saharan Africa because this is where the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is highest besides the devastating effects of STIs. Since sex is the main mode of transmission, a good understanding of reproductive health behaviour is certainly a major way by which we can develop policies and programmes to check further spread of the epidemic. In the light of this, this study has sought to describe the dimensions of transactional sexual health behaviour among undergraduates in LASU within the interactionist framework, highlighting changes in the use of space as a function of reproductive health behaviour of the student population of the university.

Generally, heterosexual activity thrives among undergraduates. Transactional sex is also common; it is more prevalent among females. Sexual relationships could exist between two fellow students (horizontal relationship) or between student and non-student. Lecturers who exchange grades for sex, non-academic staff and outsiders who offer monetary reward or material gifts to have sex with the students constitute non-

student partners (vertical sexual relationship). At the national level, about 10 percent females and 26 percent males aged 15-24 years engaged in transactional sex in 2005 (Federal Ministry of Health, 2006). Factors influencing undergraduates involvement in risky reproductive health behaviour includes poverty, broken homes, peer influence and desire to make cheap money. But according to the interactionist framework, opportunity for continuous social interaction provided by the University environment is cardinal in the initiation to and sustenance of transactional sexual behaviour. It provides the platform where new members are shown the reward of transactional sex thus igniting their own interest. This is the process accounting for the wide spread of this nefarious behaviour among undergraduates.

The data suggest that most students who engage in transactional sex rarely use measures of protection such as condoms. This is not surprising. Most of the partners who engage students in risky sexual behaviour are of higher social and economic status who are more powerful to dominate scene of sexual encounters. Inequality in social and economic status makes it very difficult for the students to negotiate safe sex (Bianchi, Lancianese and Hunter, 2006). Hence they are vulnerable to STIs and HIV as well as ritualistic manipulations in the hand of some of their sexual partners, especially the 'Aristos' and 'sugar mummies'. A crucial implication of this pattern of sexual behaviour among the undergraduates for the neighbourhood may be rapid spread of HIV and STIs in the neighbourhood and even beyond it.

This study was purely qualitative and therefore generalization may be difficult. The insightful findings it has generated could be useful as a preliminary assessment of the prevalence of transactional sex and the associated sexual health problems among

undergraduates. Further studies may be needed on this subject- mater across a sample of the Universities in the country. However, in view of the potential devastating consequences of the nature of risky reproductive health behaviour observed here, the following policy actions are recommended. All stakeholders must invest deliberate effort to assist this vulnerable population. Parents are strongly advised to regularly visit their wards, sometimes without notice. It will also be rewarding if the University could embark on more intensive campaigns targeting the entire University community, especially the female folk on the dangers of transactional sexual behaviour. The need to use protection device may also be publicized in the University community with special emphasis on the student population. It is also important that the University develops a kind of part-time job scheme for indigent students with females being giving special consideration.

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