



## Multiple sexual partnerships among Nigerian undergraduates: Students' perspectives of the underlying factors

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### KEYWORDS

#### ABSTRACT

##### Introduction

This study explored factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships among Nigerian undergraduates.

##### Method

Students aged 16-30 years took part in four focus group discussions that was followed by a cross-sectional survey involving 819 students in this age group.

##### Result

Peer pressure and strong moral values were identified as major factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships among students. Knowledge of sexually transmitted infection (STI), living off campus and boredom were ranked less important. Ranking of factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships however varied between male and female students.

##### Conclusion

The study showed that students had perceptions that various individual and environmental factors influence multiple sexual partnerships. These factors were noted to either encourage or discourage multiple sexual partnerships among students but more factors were identified as encouraging such partnerships than those discouraging it. Similarly, male students tended to rank these factors as having significant influence on multiple sexual partnerships than their female counterparts.

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### INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa has the greatest global burden of HIV1. The 2010 estimates of HIV prevalence shows that about 68% of all the people infected with HIV live in this region,<sup>1</sup> a region that accounts for only 12% of the world population.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, about 70% of the new infections in 2010 were from this region.<sup>1</sup> The situation in Nigeria is similar, with the country accounting for about 9% of the global HIV burden and being only second after South Africa.<sup>3</sup> Heterosexual intercourse has been implicated in 80-95% of HIV transmission in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> Further, HIV prevalence in Nigeria has been shown to be higher in those with formal education than those without formal education.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the 2010 HIV prevalence in Nigeria shows a steep rise from 3.0% in the age group 15-19 years to 5.7% in the age group 30-34 years with subsequent decline in prevalence

thereafter(country's average: 4.6%).<sup>3</sup>

Heterosexual intercourse can occur in the context of monogamous or multiple sexual partnerships. Multiple sexual partnerships could take one of two forms or a combination of both. The first is what has been described as sequential or serial monogamy which is the tendency to have one relatively long-term (a few months or longer) partner after another or the 'one-off' casual and commercial sexual encounters that occur in many parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, concurrent sexual partnership are those kinds of partnerships that either overlap in time or where two or more partnerships continue over the same period or where one partnership begins before the other terminates.<sup>6</sup> Multiple sexual partnerships, particularly the concurrent type, have been suggested as the factor responsible for HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, studies have shown that multiple sexual partnerships are more common and better accepted in sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions.<sup>8</sup> Reinforcing this practice is the popular belief that multiple sexual partnerships may be insignificant in the spread of HIV when condom is used regularly.<sup>9</sup> Reviews on condom use however show that condom use is often inconsistent.<sup>10</sup> Moreover a Cochrane review showed that consistent condom use (using a condom for all acts of penetrative vagina intercourse) only offers 80% reduction in HIV incidence.<sup>11</sup> It has equally been argued that without multiple sexual partnerships, HIV epidemic would not have reached global proportions.<sup>10</sup> Newly infected individuals initially have high viral load and when this is coupled with multiple sexual partnerships; the rate at which HIV spreads would increase.<sup>12</sup>

According to a study conducted in tertiary education institutions within Lagos, Nigeria, about 24% of the students had multiple sexual partners.<sup>13</sup> As many as 44% were not favourably disposed to condom use.<sup>13</sup> It has been suggested that the school environment acts as a catalyst for risky sexual behaviour.<sup>14</sup> While studies on HIV prevention have focused on condom use, research has shown the relevance of fidelity and partner reduction towards HIV prevention.<sup>15</sup>

It therefore becomes imperative to conduct research on the factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships in Nigerian education institutions. A special focus also needs to be placed on students within the age groups in which the HIV prevalence is on the upward trend.

#### AIM

The overall aim of this study was to explore and assess factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships among Nigerian undergraduates, by identifying perceptions of students with regards to factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships and analyzing the gender variation in these perceptions.

#### METHODS

Data were collected in July and August 2011 using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Outputs from the qualitative study were used to modify the

questionnaire for the cross-sectional survey. The qualitative data were used to explore the perception concerning factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships.

The quantitative data helped to assess the magnitude of the findings. The principal investigator conducted the data collection with the aid of four research assistants after training the latter with the research instruments.

#### Study location and population

The study was conducted at the University of Lagos, a Federal University in the commercial capital of Nigeria. The University has 10 faculties and an undergraduate population of about 22,000 registered students.\* Qualitative study Study design- The qualitative aspect of the study involved four focus group discussions (two male and two female groups). FGD was facilitated by a moderator and a note-taker. Each FGD had six participants.

Students were selected by purposive sampling. Selection criteria included students belonging to other faculties apart from the four faculties to be used for the cross-sectional survey. Furthermore, students selected had experienced multiple sexual partnerships either in person or by proxy and were willing to talk about it.

#### Study Instrument

The qualitative data were collected with the aid of a FGD guide. The central theme of the FGD guide was pressures to engage in multiple sexual partnership/ serial monogamy. \*Source: Centre for Information Technology and System, University of Lagos).

The participants were also requested to sign an informed consent form before participation. Method of data analysis - Data analysis was done using Graneheim and Lundman's method of Qualitative content analysis.<sup>16</sup> The text was analyzed into meaning units, condensed meaning units, codes, sub-categories, categories and themes.

#### Quantitative study

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed

among students as a cross-sectional survey of their perceptions. Self-administration was encouraged to ensure privacy and promote truthfulness. The sample size was determined using Epi info software (Version 3.5.1, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA 2008) where- Population size= 22,000 (Estimated population of the University)

Expected frequency- 50%

Confidence limits- 5%

Confidence level- 95%

Sample size was calculated to be 378 but sample size of 819 was used to have increased number of students represented in the study. Student participants for the cross-sectional survey were selected by cluster sampling using the identified 10 faculties of the University. Four faculties with the largest population of undergraduates were selected to minimize cost of the research.

A total of 829 questionnaires were administered by convenience sampling from the various departments in the four faculties based on student population and gender distributions within the faculties (Education-30%, Social Sciences- 20%, Sciences-28% and Business Administration-22%). The percentage of total male enrollment in the study was 50.1 and female 49.9 to reflect the gender distributions in departments of the four faculties. However, only 819 questionnaires which were properly filled were used for the analysis. Inclusion criterion for participation was undergraduates between the ages 16 years and 34 years (the official minimum age of entry into the University being 16 years).

The questionnaire for the cross sectional survey had sections to assess the socio-demographic status of students and their perceptions in relation to factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships. The section assessing perception consisted of a Likert scale<sup>17</sup> used to rank students perceptions about factors influencing multiple sexual partnership. The Likert scale was ranked from 1-5 as follows: 1- Totally agrees with the other extreme being 5- Totally disagree.

Prior to administration of the questionnaires, 15 copies were used for pilot study outside the four faculties to ascertain clarity. The students that participated in the study were approached with the purpose of the study explained to them and the voluntary nature of it. Confidentiality was also assured. The participants were recruited based on their willingness to partake in the study and there was no financial reward for participation.

A descriptive analysis was done to detail the students' perceptions of factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships. Subsequently, the relationship between gender of the students and perceptions were analyzed using Mann-Whitney U test in SPSS software (version 17, SPSS Inc., Chicago U.S.A.). Higher mean ranks of the test suggested that students disagreed that these factors influenced multiple sexual partnership while lower mean ranks suggested otherwise

## RESULTS

### Qualitative sub study

The central theme of the study (having multiple sexual partners) had two categories: encouraging factors and discouraging factors.

The sub-categories for the theme were:

*Individual/Internal pressures*

*Environmental/societal pressures*

*Individual/Internal motivators, and*

*Environmental/societal motivators*

### Theme - Having multiple sexual partners

Individual/Internal pressures encouraging having multiple sexual partners

Having insatiable sexual appetite was mentioned as a factor encouraging multiple sexual partnerships.

One of the male students said:

*"Being a nymphomaniac, I mean she wants sex severally, all the time, and if you can't do that, definitely whether she is committed to you or not, she may have to go outside to find two or three other people who may be able to satisfy her".*

External/societal factors encouraging having

## multiple sexual partners

Non-availability of sexual partner or partner's refusal of sex is a factor encouraging multiple sexual partnerships. A female participant in one of the FGDs said:

*"..... say the girl is not ready to have sex yet ..... it is inevitable that the boy is going to sleep with someone else other than the girl. .... most times, he is sleeping with different people and not just one person. He is not sleeping with the person he is committed to. So, either way, he will not see the need to remain faithful to someone he is not in a relationship with. So, most time, likely, he is sleeping with many people".*

Also mentioned by a male participant were financial benefits:

*"They say there is nothing like sexual urge when you are looking for money, you are ready to sleep with 10 people at the same time because you need that money".*

Peer pressure was also noted by one of the female participants:

*"Actually, it's a clique thing .....but you are proud when you have slept with a number of girls, for guys, but for girls, I can't say".*

Individual/Internal factors discouraging having multiple sexual partners/serial monogamy

Commitment to partner was highlighted by one of the female participants as one of the factors discouraging multiple sexual partnerships:

*"I think commitment goes a long way in whether you keep more sexual partners or not. If you are committed to your boyfriend, if you feel that if I do this thing, it will hurt him, I don't think you will have multiple sexual partners, no matter what. If you really love the person..."*

Environmental/societal factors discouraging having multiple sexual partners/serial monogamy

One of the female participants identified the high level of morality in Nigeria as a factor preventing this practice:

*"The Nigerian girl feels, let me have sex, with someone I don't know, I don't believe this characteristics is with many Nigerian girls. I don't think so".*

The responses from the focus group discussions are summarized in Table I below

Table I - Having multiple sexual partners/ serial monogamy (Themes, categories, sub-categories and codes)

Theme	Having multiple sexual partnership/serial monogamy			
<b>Categories</b>	Encouraging factors		Discouraging factors	
<b>Sub-categories</b>	Individual/ Internal pressures	Environmental/ societal pressures	Individual/Internal motivators	Environmental/societal motivators
<b>Codes</b>	-Lack of sexual satisfaction from partner. -Having insatiable sexual appetite. -Lack of mutual trust. -Being tired of erstwhile sexual partner. -Sense of freedom/ Idleness.	-Peer influence. -Historical polygamy in Africa. -Non-availability of sexual partner. -Partner's refusal of sex. -Financial reward. -Irresistible shower of love, gifts and affection from non-partners.	-Self-contentment with partner. -Self-control. -Commitment to partner.	-High level of societal morality

## Quantitative sub study

### The study population

The study involved 820 student participants whose ages ranged between 16 years and 30 years. The mean of their ages was 21.4 years (SD  $\pm$ 2.24). Almost an equal proportion of male and female students participated in the study (50.1% and 49.9% respectively). Ethnic distribution showed that 63% of the participants were Yoruba, 19% Igbo and 7% Hausa.

Students of other ethnicity aside these three main ethnic groups made up the remainder of the participants. The distribution of the participants across the four faculties and levels of study was

representative of the student enrollment.

Perceptions of factors influencing having multiple sexual partners/ serial monogamy Table II shows that the mode and median of responses centered around “agree” (2). However, responses to three factors (knowledge about the prevention of S.T.I.; living alone “off campus”; boredom/ lack of leisure activities influencing multiple sexual partnerships) had median scores of 3 (indifferent). Conversely, responses to two factors (peer pressure and strong moral values/religious beliefs and practice influencing multiple sexual partnerships) had modal scores of 1 (totally agree). The overall internal consistency had an alpha score (Cronbach) of 0.75.

Table II: Perceptions of factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships

S/N	QUESTIONS: the following may influence having multiple sexual partners	Responses % (N <sup>1</sup> )					Median	Mode
		1	2	3	4	5		
1.	Peer pressure	38.6% (316)	36.9% (302)	8.5% (70)	8.2% (67)	7.8% (64)	2.0	1.0
2.	Suspicion of partner's sexual unfaithfulness	32.1% (263)	37.2% (305)	14.3% (117)	11.6% (95)	4.8% (39)	2.0	2.0
3.	Reduced sexual satisfaction from current partner	28.2% (231)	41.3% (338)	17.6% (144)	8.1% (66)	4.8% (39)	2.0	2.0
4.	Financial reward for sexual activities	30.8% (252)	35.8% (293)	16.7% (137)	8.9% (73)	7.7% (63)	2.0	2.0
5.	Knowledge about the prevention of S.T.I.	22.1% (181)	27.5% (225)	18.4% (151)	17.9% (147)	14.0% (115)	3.0	2.0
6.	Living alone “off campus”	20.9% (171)	28.4% (233)	16.8% (138)	19.5% (160)	14.3% (117)	3.0	2.0
7.	Not committed to any sexual partner	26.0% (213)	34.2% (280)	15.4% (126)	13.6% (111)	10.8% (88)	2.0	2.0
8.	Curiosity about trying another sexual partner	28.7% (235)	38.4% (314)	16.3% (133)	11.9% (97)	4.8% (39)	2.0	2.0
9.	Boredom/ lack of leisure activities	20.3% (166 )	28.6% (234)	20.8% (170)	19.4% (159)	10.9% (89)	3.0	2.0
10.	Strong moral values, religious beliefs and practice	31.9% (261)	21.3% (174)	7.5% (61)	13.7% (112)	25.7% (210)	2.0	1.0

Cronbach's alpha- 0.75

1=Totally agree 2= Agree 3=Indifferent 4=Disagree 5=Totally disagree

### Gender differences in perception

Table III shows that there were significant gender differences in perceptions of factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships. Female students more frequently had higher mean ranks for

responses suggesting that they disagreed that these factors influenced multiple sexual partnerships ( $P < 0.05$ ). This held true for all the factors considered.

Table III: Perception of factors influencing multiple sexual partnerships

S/N	QUESTIONS: the following may influence having multiple sexual partners/serial monogamy	Sex	N	MR	Sig.
1.	Peer pressure	M	411	392.63	<0.0003
		F	408	427.50	
2.	Suspicion of partner's sexual unfaithfulness	M	411	384.23	<0.0001
		F	408	435.96	
3.	Reduced sexual satisfaction from current partner	M	410	383.88	<0.0001
		F	408	435.25	
4.	Financial reward for sexual activities	M	410	384.11	<0.0001
		F	408	435.01	
5.	Knowledge about the prevention of S.T.I	M	411	380.01	<0.0001
		F	408	440.21	
6.	Living alone "off campus"	M	411	358.82	<0.0001
		F	408	461.56	
7.	Not committed to any sexual partner	M	410	383.48	<0.0001
		F	408	435.65	
8.	Curiosity about trying ano	M	410	383.48	<0.0001
		F	408	435.65	
9.	Boredom/ lack of leisure activities	M	411	356.46	<0.0001
		F	407	463.06	
10.	Strong moral values, religious beliefs and practice	M	411	359.62	<0.0001

MR= Mean rank score

M- Male

F-Female

N= Number of respondents who answered in the affirmative.

## DISCUSSION

Our study showed that different individual (internal) and environmental (societal) factors influence the practice of multiple sexual partnerships among students. We also observed that there were variations in perceptions between male and female students.

The quantitative study identified factors having great influence on multiple sexual partnerships as peer pressure and strong moral values. This corroborates findings from a multi-campus study in China which shows that peer influence encourages multiple sexual partnerships among female students.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, factors such as knowledge about the prevention of S.T.I., living alone “off campus” and boredom were ranked low. Additionally, the perceptions were found to vary between men and women. Female students more likely disagreed that these factors influenced multiple sexual partnerships. Our study showed that “ego boosting” influenced multiple sexual partnerships among male students and financial rewards influenced this practice among female students. This is similar to results of a study conducted in tertiary institutions in Lagos (study location included), Enugu and Kaduna States of Nigeria,<sup>19</sup> which also indicates that transactional sex was responsible for multiple sexual partners among females<sup>19</sup>.

Our study showed that sexual satisfaction with partner could influence multiple sexual partnerships. This finding is similar to that from a study among Zimbabwean students which showed that sexual satisfaction was one of the reasons advanced by female students for having multiple sexual partners.<sup>20</sup>

However, contrary to findings from the Zimbabwean study, our study showed that female students tended to have perception that disagree that sexual satisfaction influenced multiple sexual partnership as against their male counterparts. Similarly, our study showed that historical polygamy in Africa and peer influences were among factors

influencing multiple sexual partnerships. This finding is similar to a study conducted among young people in Zambia.<sup>21</sup>

The study showed that growing up in an environment with polygamy and peer pressure on males to live up to the “cultural expectation” influenced multiple sexual partnerships.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study showed that students had perceptions that various individual and environmental factors influence multiple sexual partnerships. These factors were noted to either encourage or discourage multiple sexual partnerships among students but more factors were identified as encouraging such partnerships than those discouraging it. Similarly, male students tended to rank these factors as having significant influence on multiple sexual partnerships than their female counterparts.

This study underscores the need to tailor sexual health messages to meet gender-specific needs and perceptions. Hence, stakeholders in the field of sexual health must channel more effort towards curbing multiple sexual partnerships while promoting condom use. It will be rewarding to tailor sexual health messages to meet specific needs of groups that have been stratified by gender.

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