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“It is not the end of my life”: positive identity (re)constructions among young mothers in rural South-Western Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Social norms around the timing of motherhood mean that young mothers are often viewed as different and negatively stereotyped. Drawing on data from South-Western Nigeria, this paper explores unmarried young women's identity (re)construction in the context of the negative societal representations of young motherhood. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 young mothers, using photo-elicitation as a complementary method. The results revealed that despite facing social stigma, some young mothers were able to challenge negative societal stereotypes, reframe the challenges they faced as mothers and construct positive maternal identities for themselves. Our findings offer insights into the complex interplay between stigma and identity formation and provide recommendations for sustainable interventions and social support to empower young mothers in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Worldwide, an estimated 14% of young women give birth before the age of 18 annually (UNICEF, 2021). Across many societies, early motherhood is often presented as a social, economic, and public health concern to be prevented, leading to a heightened sense of urgency and social control in tackling the issue. One major discourse in academic and policy arenas is that young mothers are physically, emotionally, and mentally unprepared to deal with the demands of motherhood (Bekaert et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2022; Twintoh et al., 2021). Several studies detail how some young mothers struggle to embrace a maternal identity and negotiate their developmental stages, leaving their children vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and severe health complications such as malnutrition and under-five mortality (see for example, Mangeli et al., 2017; Twintoh et al., 2021). Quantitative studies show associations between early motherhood and educational disruption, intergenerational poverty, poor psychological wellbeing and maternal health outcomes (Asare et al., 2019; Manzi et al., 2018). These studies additionally describe how young mothers are more likely to depend on public benefits and experience lower lifetime earnings than their counterparts (ibid). As such, young women who become mothers are likely to face societal disapproval, be negatively stereotyped and categorized as incompetent and problematic mothers (Mangeli et al., 2017). This problematization of early motherhood means that young women's navigation of their motherhood identity is likely to also consist of having to traverse other people's responses to their 'differentness' (Chase, 2019).

Research is increasingly documenting an alternative view of young motherhood and identity construction. In an integrative review of teenage mothers' experiences in both high, middle and low-

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income countries, including the United States, Ghana and Mexico, SmithBattle and Phengnum (2022) note that young women derived fulfilment in being mothers, whilst other studies have illustrated how young motherhood can motivate positive behavioural change and provide meaningful improvements in future aspirations and self-development (Ford, 2016; Mollborn & Jacobs, 2012; Stapleton, 2010; Watts et al., 2015). These studies suggest the potential for young mothers' resistance to and transformation of meanings attached to their stigmatized identities.

Most studies that qualitatively explore young women's experiences of motherhood have been conducted in high-income countries. Yet, understanding early motherhood as a social phenomenon implies that socio-cultural contexts affect how young motherhood is perceived and experienced (Amod et al., 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the highest adolescent births globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). The lived experiences of young mothers in sub-Saharan Africa remain relatively underexplored, and research of this nature is mostly concentrated in the Ghanaian and South African context (for example, Gbogbo, 2020; Gyan, 2017; Singh & Naicker, 2019; Undie & Birungi, 2022; Aparicio et al., 2018). Drawing on data from South-Western Nigeria, this paper explores how unmarried young mothers are able to positively reconstruct their identities despite the prevailing negative societal representations of young motherhood. In our prior publication on failed abortion and forced motherhood, using a sub-set of the current sample, we discuss instances where young mothers internalized stigma, sought to avoid motherhood by attempted abortion, and rejected their maternal identities (Oluseye et al., 2021). Our present study does not seek to categorize young mothers into simplistic dichotomies of positive or negative outcomes. Instead, our focus lies in providing a nuanced perspective on the dynamic nature of identity construction. Notably, we observed overlap in motherhood experiences, where some young mothers who initially grappled with negative reactions to motherhood went on to successfully reconstruct positive identities for themselves. Our paper highlights the complexity and fluidity of these experiences, emphasizing that while stigma may pose significant hurdles, it is also possible for young mothers to navigate and positively reconstruct their identities in empowering ways.

Identity, early motherhood, and the Nigerian context

Identity formation results from an individual's interaction with their wider socio-cultural context (Kroger, 2017). Bos et al. (2013) conceptualize identity as being formed of two components: self-identity (how individuals see themselves) and social identity (how society views an individual according to perceived group membership). Occasionally, these two identity components may conflict.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has one of the highest adolescent birth rates (National Population Commission, 2018). Culturally, there is a strong emphasis on family, and mothers are seen as central to protecting and sustaining the family lineage (Omobowale et al., 2018). Socially, motherhood is central to a woman's social status as it secures her position within her husband's home and accords her with respect for her reproductive abilities (Alabi, 2020). Mothers also have a strong communal role as they are viewed as nurturers, responsible for raising children and passing down traditional norms, beliefs, and values (ibid). However, while motherhood is highly valued, unmarried early motherhood is stigmatized and heavily discriminated against, as it deviates from societal, cultural, and religious norms (Degge et al., 2022). Thus, unmarried young women who become mothers are seen as undesirable, challenging societal norms and expectations about reproduction, sexual restraint, and the institution of marriage (ibid). This stigmatization can significantly impact young mothers' identity construction. When stigma and identity intersect, it can influence how individuals perceive themselves and how others perceive them, causing them to internalize shame and experience discrimination and marginalization (Mangeli et al., 2017, Gbogbo, 2020; Oluseye et al., 2021). In some cases, however, these intersections of stigma and identity can create space for challenging social norms through stigma resistance. Consequently, young women's navigation of their stigmatized social identity is important to their identity construction.

Adolescence is a key period of identity formation (Kroger, 2017). An established literature base demonstrates the importance of young people's navigation of this process for both short-term and long-term psychological wellbeing and psychosocial adjustment (see Branje et al., 2021 for a review). Therefore, considering the intersection of stigma and identity formation is essential to understanding young women's challenges in forming their identities and considering their wellbeing. Despite this, research on pregnancy and motherhood in Nigeria and wider sub-Saharan Africa has predominantly been quantitative and focused on exploring associations between health and socio-economic outcomes with young motherhood or the factors associated with adolescent pregnancy (Kola et al., 2020; Nwosu, 2017; Oyeyemi et al., 2019). Current public policy and humanitarian responses to early motherhood tend to be grounded in framing young mothers as problematic and focused on preventing early motherhood. These approaches continue to potentially harm the image of young mothers, paint a narrow view of early motherhood, and reduce their access to support. Studying how young women navigate their motherhood identity enables us to understand their perspectives on motherhood and provides a rich context into the complexities of re-constructing stigmatized identities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to providing appropriate support and designing effective and inclusive interventions that improve the future outcomes of young mothers and their children.

Methods

Study setting and recruitment

This study was conducted in a rural setting in Osun State, South-Western Nigeria. Twenty-four unmarried young mothers were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Posters containing study details were placed in primary health centres, secondary schools, community centres and local gatherings. Local gatekeepers also helped identify potential participants. All young mothers who were included in this study were: (i) unmarried at the time of they had their first child; (ii) of Yoruba ethnic origin; (iii) between 18–30 years of age; and (iv) had their first child before 19 years of age.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken by the first author between November 2018 to January 2019. Ethical approval was obtained from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC: HREC/2290/), and the study was conducted following guidelines from the 'National Code of Health Research Ethics', Nigeria (Yakubu & Adebamowo, 2012).

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] as its' research methodology. IPA draws on principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography to explore individuals' lived experiences, engage both the researcher and participants in a sense-making process, and examine detailed descriptions of individual accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In line with these principles, our study focused on young mothers' accounts of their lived experiences [phenomenology], how they understood these experiences, and how we, as researchers, interpreted these experiences [hermeneutics and idiography].

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method for data collection. Photo-elicitation was also used as a complementary method to enrich the interview process, promote participant autonomy, and maximize participants' engagement with the research. According to Liebenberg (2018, p. 4), when images are used in research, they create 'important links that participants can use to reflect on their lived experiences more critically and to discuss and share these experiences with others more accurately'. Photographs can also capture internalized perspectives (of thoughts, feelings and emotions) that may not be easily captured with conventional interviews alone (*ibid*). This approach allowed young mothers to identify and discuss aspects of their lived experiences that were important to them, making them active agents in the research process.

Young mothers were asked to take pictures of anything related to their experiences of early motherhood. Participants took photographs over a one-week period and were asked to avoid taking pictures of themselves, people or potentially identifiable places (such as churches and schools) due to ethical concerns. All participants chose to use their personal devices to capture their images. Once participants had taken their pictures, arrangements were made with the first author to discuss the photos, select appropriate photographs for the interviews and print the selected photographs. The first author did all printing, and participants were given a copy of the printed photographs. Participants were provided with a consent form to sign for the use of their photographs (regarding retention and reproduction of images). The consent form also notified participants of their rights to withdraw the use of their generated photographs from the research at any given point in time.

An interview schedule was used to guide the interviews. This was pilot tested, and changes were made to the terminology used (for example, from teenage mother to young mother) and ordering of questions. Depending on the respondents' preference, English or Yoruba were used to conduct interviews. All interviews began with an explanation of the background and purpose of the research using an information sheet; participants were then asked to provide written consent (including for audio recording) if they felt comfortable participating in the study. The photographs selected by participants were used as prompts to start the interviews. Young mothers were asked to talk about their photographs, why they chose them and what they represented.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted, 19 in Yoruba, and five in English. This aligns with IPA's approach of studying small groups to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The duration of the interviews was between 40 and 60 minutes. All were audio-recorded, and participants were asked if they wanted a copy of their transcript once completed. Instead, participants requested a replay of the recordings and sometimes offered further information and detail, which was recorded by the first author in field notes. After the interviews, the first author engaged in post-interview discussions with the young mothers to assess the impact that the interviews may have had on them. Although some distressing topics (including experiences of stigmatizing practices) were discussed during the interviews, participants described the interviews as valuable as it allowed them to discuss and reflect on their experiences of motherhood. Participants were given vouchers to compensate for their time.

Throughout the fieldwork, the first author reflected on their positionality and possible influence on the research process. Shared gender and ethical identity meant knowledge of the participants' socio-cultural context and helped build trust. However, the first author also occupied the status of an outsider as they did not have the shared experience of young motherhood. This, nonetheless, had benefits as the participants became acknowledged experts in narrating their lived experiences.

Data analysis

This study adopted a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, viewing people's experiences as socially constructed through the meanings they assign to them (Smith, 2004). To interpret participants' experiences in-depthly, we analysed their data using Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA approach to data analysis. The photographs generated by the young mothers were not analysed, though the interview data connected with the photographs were.

All interviews were transcribed and translated by the first author into English. Transcripts were anonymized, and pseudonyms were given. To enhance rigour of the study, translation of Yoruba to English was validated with professional translators. Following Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines, each transcript was read and re-read to identify emerging themes, insights and concepts. Connections and patterns across transcripts were analysed, while differences in participants' narratives were further investigated to develop sub-themes that further captured the complexity of participants' experiences. Themes and subthemes were constantly refined through discussions among research team members. This analytical approach helped the authors critically analyse the data and provide an in-depth thematic analysis of participants' lived experiences. To enhance the study's rigour,

member checking, peer debriefing, reflective journaling, contextualization, and audit trails were employed during the data gathering and analysis.

Respondents' characteristics

In our study, ten women were aged 15 years at the birth of their first child; eight were 16 years; four were 17 years, and two were 18 years of age. All young mothers lived with their children, and at the time of the interview, 16 participants had children aged 1 to 7 years, while eight had children aged 8 to 15 years. Living arrangements at the time of the interview varied, with ten participants cohabiting with partners, two living with their parents, and twelve living alone. Employment status also varied, with two participants working in the formal sector, three being students (two at the university and one in secondary school), three owning a business in the informal sector, five learning a vocational trade while unemployed, and eleven unemployed without vocational training. Among the 24 young mothers, three were supported by parents for childcare and continued education, and two by parents and partners for vocational apprenticeship – all five were living with their partners. The remaining five young mothers who cohabited with their partners reported receiving no support from them or their families, while the remaining fourteen young mothers in the overall study reported navigating life without partner or family support. This underscores the diverse experiences and levels of social support among the young mothers in our study.

Results

This section discusses how unmarried young mothers are able to reframe challenges and positively reconstruct their identities in the context of negative societal representations of young motherhood. It also highlights the overlapping nature of young mothers' experiences, showcasing a dynamic process wherein young mothers are able to transcend initial negative experiences to successfully reconstruct positive identities. Four major themes were identified from the analysis of the young mothers' accounts: redefining young motherhood; embracing maternal sacrifice; challenging stereotypes; and self-development. The themes are discussed below, supported by illustrative quotations and occasional photographs.

Redefining young motherhood

Young mothers in this study described how motherhood was demanding and sometimes challenging, for them. They detailed experiences of sleepless nights, concern for children's health, limited social gatherings, and balancing competing demands of their needs with those of their children. They also made mention of feeling excluded from social activities with their peers due to their responsibilities as mothers. However, they also argued that this experience is not peculiar to them and often counteracted by referring to the joys to motherhood:

Things are different now that I have a child. Whenever I want to go out, I always have to consider where I will drop my child, who will help me to take care of her. Now, if I have money, it is for me and my child; I have to share it between me and my child. Everything I do, I have to think of her too; I miss the former times, but this is the sacrifice you make. All mothers make this sacrifice, and I love my daughter; she makes me so happy. Even when I am going through a lot, when I see her, I am always happy.

Funke (pregnant at 17 years, interviewed at 25 years)

From Funke's narrative, the yearning for more freedom and autonomy is evident. However, she argues that these feelings and new changes are part of the realities of motherhood rather than a disadvantage of early motherhood. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, she responds positively to her new role as a mother, seeing her daughter as a welcome addition. In this way, she is constructing a new identity by positively redefining early motherhood.

In their reflections on early motherhood, some young mothers – particularly those who had older children – noted it as having some specific rewards. These rewards included enduring relationships and proof of fertility:

Yes, it is stressful, but giving birth young has so many benefits. Death no longer goes to the elderly, it is now coming to the young. If you wait too long, you may die and leave no child behind. Now that I have a child, I am more mature and responsible. We are like sisters; our bond is strong because the age gap is small . . . unlike other mothers, I have more energy to take care of her and once I'm done, I will be able to face my life without any stress.

Wura (pregnant at 16 years, interviewed at 23 years)

In Wura's narrative, she redefines early motherhood as a way of dealing with life's uncertainties (death) and safeguarding against potential future complications (delayed fertility). Across some participants' narratives, they also expressed relief in their ability to conceive, echoing similar sentiments. This has both cultural and social connotations. Within the Yoruba culture, a woman's proof of fertility increases her social standing, and the fear of dying without leaving a child behind is increasingly common (Fehintola et al., 2017). As such, fertility concerns and preserving one's legacy come to the fore. This may have led some study participants to gain self-fulfilment in becoming mothers; albeit in a non-conventional way (outside wedlock).

Further, Wura itemizes the benefits of young motherhood for herself. She believes that her young age gives her more physical energy than older mothers, allowing her to keep up with her caring responsibilities. By stating that '*once I'm done, I will be able to face my life without any stress,*' Wura demonstrates how early motherhood can allow her to complete her child-care responsibilities earlier in life and solely focus on pursuing her aspirations. She also references the short age gap between her and her daughter and states that this will promote a close relationship, as they are likely to have shared interests, and foster a special bond.

The rewards of having an emotional bond with their children that may buffer them against difficulties in life was a theme repeated by several participants. In our study, some young mothers described how they initially struggled with becoming a mother, due to negative experiences and how this experience gradually changed over time. For example, one young mother said:

I suffered a lot during my pregnancy. My parents lost hope in me that I will become something in life. I had to leave school, and people made fun of me a lot, so, I did not want to be a teenage mother. When I became a teenage mother, I did not see anything good that could come out of it.

Over the course of fifteen years, she gradually adjusted to seeing motherhood as a valued social role and now describes her experience this way:

Before I used to think that being a teenage mother was very bad because of how people talk about it, but after I had my own child, I realised that it was not that bad. My child is a bundle of joy. She makes me laugh during tough times and makes me proud to be a mother.

Tanwa (pregnant at 15 years, interviewed at 30 years)

Despite Tanwa's initial negative perceptions of young motherhood, influenced by wider social norms, she successfully navigated what motherhood meant for her sense of self as reflected in her use of the phrase '*proud to be a mother*'. By balancing the difficult experiences against the positive, Tanwa has reconstructed her identity to counteract the stigmatized social identity attached to young mothers.

Embracing maternal sacrifice

The fulfilment motherhood brought to young women's lives was not without its challenges. Before becoming a mother, Danni experienced a range of emotions triggered by the challenges she faced during her pregnancy. She had been forced to leave school to avoid being expelled [as was the norm] and was experiencing a strained relationship with her parents and her partner. This often led

her to initially have conflicting feelings at the early stages of motherhood, which she describes this way:

When I had my baby, sometimes I'll be happy but when my mates are coming back from school, I will always feel bad and wish I was not yet a mother because I used to wonder if I would have the opportunity to do the things [such as going to school] that they are doing.

Dunni (pregnant at 16 years, interviewed at 21 years)

Despite witnessing these conflicting feelings, a lack of support and educational and financial setbacks, some young mothers were eventually able to connect improving the life outcomes of their children to a positive maternal identity. They also rationalized some of the significant difficulties they experienced as part of navigating early motherhood. Decisions were often made in their children's best interest, even when it may have been detrimental to young mothers. For instance, while Dunni was able to return to school after her pregnancy, she decided to delay her education to fund her daughters' own as she could not afford both fees. In describing her experience, Dunni brought a picture drawing of two people celebrating winning a trophy. She described how this picture depicted that a win for her daughter is also a win for her:



I really want to go back to school, and I enjoy schooling, but if I want to sponsor myself back to school, what about my child? It will affect one of us, so I must stay behind. I am sacrificing myself so that my child can go to school and become someone important in the future... I don't mind staying back. We will both benefit in the long run. When her education is over, if there is still time for me, I will enroll, but if not, it will still be worth it.

Dunni (pregnant at 16 years, interviewed at 21 years)

By placing her daughters' needs before hers, Dunni exemplifies proactiveness in catering to her daughters' developmental needs. This was also seen across other study participants' narratives. Many young mothers spoke of depriving themselves of immediate needs to ensure their children's needs were catered for, and this was often related to education. Mothers spoke of leaving school or working extra jobs to send their children to private schools or pay for tutorial lessons or extracurricular activities. However, they did not see this as a setback, rather, they saw it as a form of investment in their children's lives, which made them proud.

In discourses around educational attainment, young mothers are often painted as uninterested and unwilling to pursue educational goals, limiting their full potential and affecting their identity development (Amod et al., 2019; Gbogbo, 2020). Here, young mothers' narratives expose the 'invisible' dilemma they face regarding lack of support, finances, sacrifice and education. From

these accounts, it can be concluded that while education is a desire for many young mothers, motherhood shifts priorities where children's aspirations and future outcomes become a primary concern. This reflects how young mothers make conscious decisions to prioritize their children's well-being and development over their ambitions and shows how individuals can redefine their future aspirations and find fulfilment through maternal sacrifices.

Challenging stereotypes

Most young mothers in this study tried to resist and challenge the negative stereotypes associated with their identities. For instance, Toke had to drop out of school for three years due to child-rearing responsibilities. In describing her experience, she brought a picture of an incomplete building and described her story as unfinished, stating that she would still be beautiful and complete in the end. She said:



It is not the end of my life; I'll still go back to school, find a man to marry, and my child will be alright. No matter all the problems I have faced, I know that I will be fine in the end. As you can see, even though I am not yet back to school, I am learning a trade. I am working hard to be better than people that think my life is over. I'll show them that being a teenage mother is not the end of one's life.

Toke (pregnant at 16years, interviewed at 20years)

Toke's narrative challenges the negativity associated with early motherhood by emphasizing its temporal dimension and stating that she will be fine *'in the end'*. By perceiving her challenges as temporary and displaying optimism that she will overcome her 'setbacks', she shows determination in constructing a positive identity for herself. This shows the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual resistance to stereotyping. On one hand, Toke's narrative reveals the struggles associated with early motherhood, the stereotypes surrounding it and its perceived effects on women's life trajectories. On the other hand, her words around the picture showcase how young women can reframe their experiences and resist being defined solely by societal norms and stereotypes.

Self-development

Some young mothers' accounts emphasized the transformative effect of motherhood through responsibility, encouraging increased maturity. For example, Tade recounted:

Sometimes I think about it [responsibility], but then I see it as something that has to happen because I am no longer the person I used to be. I am grown now; I am no longer childish.

Tade (pregnant at 15, interviewed at 18 years)

This reveals how some young mothers view motherhood as a process of positive self-development. Motherhood and the sense of responsibility attached acted as a turning point for many young mothers, encouraging behavioural and attitudinal changes in ways that they perceived were for the better.

Many young mothers in this study described how motherhood improved their willingness to return to school and change their lives for the better. One of the young mothers who had initially lost interest in education due to prior academic failures felt motivated to try again because of her son:

Some people think that being a teenage mother is bad, but it changed me a lot; motherhood changed me. It was good for me because I had no plans to continue schooling before I became a teenage mother. After all, during my WAEC, I had F9 parallel [failed all 9 subjects]. When I became a teenage mother, I changed my attitude towards education. I reasoned that in 3–4 years, my child would go to school and need a good role model. How would I help him if I'm illiterate? That's why I said giving birth as a teenager benefited me because it was when I gave birth that I reasoned on how to make my life better.

Itunnu (pregnant at 15 years, interviewed at 20 years)

For some other young mothers, the experience of motherhood became a catalyst for their determination to complete their education. These young mothers theorized that having an education would help them get good jobs, have financial freedom and overcome negative stereotypes, thereby providing a better life for their children. Tanwa brought a picture of a steering wheel to the interview to describe how she felt about being a young mother. In discussing her picture, she said:



A lot of people thought that my life was over when I got pregnant young but I was determined to show them that it is not the end of my life. Then, I saw my life as a car that I was in control of, with my daughter at the backseat. I knew I had to drive my life well so that I can prove to them [people] that something good can still come out of me. After nursing my baby for about a year, I worked as a maid and a salesgirl to save up for my WAEC exam after which I proceeded to study Nursing at the university. Now I am a nurse, and I am doing well with my life and people are surprised that I made it.

Tanwa (pregnant at 15 years, interviewed at 30 years)

Tanwa's narrative provides a vivid description of how her journey into motherhood served as motivation to reclaim a socially acceptable position through self-development, over a period of years. Her commitment, agency and motivation is evident through her additional efforts, such as taking on part-time jobs to ensure the continuity of her education. These narratives illustrate how young women can actively reject the prevailing notion that early motherhood is negative and leverage their experiences and agency to reconstruct a positive identity.

Discussion

Through photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of young motherhood in South-Western Nigeria, contextualizing it within the larger discourse of motherhood as a social identity that is influenced by cultural values, beliefs, and norms. While the dominant discourse in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa often frame young motherhood as problematic, our research highlights how young mothers can reframe their challenges and construct

positive identities in the face of societal stigma. Our paper focuses specifically on the process of identity (re)construction rather than outcomes, acknowledging that some of these women faced significant challenges such as disruptions to their education. By emphasizing the positive identity (re)constructions of young mothers, our study suggests that motherhood can be a positive experience for these women, offering new knowledge and providing an alternative perspective to prevailing discourses on early motherhood in Nigeria.

Young mothers in this study spoke of the challenges and shifts in their lives as they transitioned into motherhood. However, they were able to frame these challenges as a normal part of identity construction and see benefits in early childbearing. From their perspectives they argue that they experience similar motherhood challenges with older mothers and attribute the challenges they encounter [such as educational disruptions and financial challenges] to the stigma linked with early motherhood and the insufficient support they receive. These findings may suggest that while negative stereotypes of early motherhood exist, these do not determine how young mothers position themselves, as study participants were able to use their agency to transform the meaning attached to their social identities positively. This process of reframing, whereby individuals challenge their stigmatized identities and negate stigmatizing aspects of their identities by infusing it with positive outcomes, has also been noted widely in stigma literature and other literature on young motherhood (Bauer et al., 2021; Fernando et al., 2020).

Young mothers in this study were able to transform their situations and reconstruct their identities by acquiring new skills, learning a trade, or returning to education. This is similar to findings from Ghana, where young mothers engaged in various jobs to secure better socio-economic outcomes for themselves and their children (Anima & Tampah-Naah, 2023). Contrary to dominant discourses regarding early motherhood and education, most of the young mothers in this study showed increased educational aspirations following motherhood and displayed agency in their commitment to education despite difficulties. Similarly, a study in the Philippines highlighted how young mothers became more interested in improving their academic performances following motherhood (Gatbonton, 2021). Both findings showed that this was often done to reclaim an acceptable societal position or distance themselves from negative stereotypes of early motherhood.

For some young mothers, the transition to the maternal role itself provided them with a strong sense of identity that went beyond the resistance of negative stereotypes. Young mothers were able to create strong emotional bonds with their children, an expression of positive parenting. Several participants spoke of their children positively, often referring to them as '*a bundle of joy*'. Positive feelings arising from early motherhood have also been highlighted in many studies conducted in high-income countries like the UK and the United States (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Watts et al., 2015; Wenham, 2016).

Early motherhood, however, comes with unique vulnerabilities which require adequate support (Amod et al., 2019). In this study, some young mothers described dropping out of school to support their children in education. This was fuelled by the desire to meet the material needs of their children and improve their educational outcomes. A study by Okine and Dako-Gyeke (2020), detailed how teenage mothers drop out of school to take care of their children due to lack of support. Other studies have also discussed young mothers' educational challenges and coping strategies (Amod et al., 2019; Singh & Naicker, 2019). Our study adds to this existing literature. Nevertheless, by prioritizing their children's needs ahead of theirs, these young mothers are seen to go through a developmental phase in motherhood known as 'sacrificial motherhood' where they are willing to make sacrifices for their children to be successful in their new roles as mothers (O'Reilly, 2004). This engagement in sacrificial motherhood also contradicts popular studies which echo beliefs that young mothers are unable to navigate their new identities as mothers and reconcile it with other aspects of their identity, such as their personal aspirations and goals (Gbogbo, 2020; Mangeli et al., 2017; Singh & Naicker, 2019).

Among study participants who had been mothers for extended periods (8–15 years), improved educational, economic and employment outcomes were often evident. Additionally, while some

young mothers initially struggled with negative feelings of motherhood, they were able to transcend their negative experiences and successfully construct positive maternal identities over time. Our findings suggest that the challenges and emotions associated with early motherhood are dynamic and subject to change, and over time, young mothers may develop better abilities to navigate these challenges associated and create alternative pathways towards their personal growth and self-development. This supports qualitative and longitudinal studies, indicating that young mothers' educational, employment, and economic outcomes can improve over time (Ellis-Sloan, 2022). Additionally, with children getting older and becoming more independent, young mothers may be able to carve out time to pursue personal ambitions and seek better life opportunities that enhance their life outcomes. Recognizing this temporal aspect is crucial in early motherhood research, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of the trajectories young mothers navigate.

Although these findings may not be generalizable to other contexts, this study has provided valuable insights into how mothers in rural South-Western Nigeria navigate dominant stereotypes surrounding their identities. It also adds to a growing body of literature globally that has challenged early motherhood discourses that often associate it with poor parenting skills and poor outcomes for children. Within the Nigerian context, the study is unique in its consideration of the intersection between identity formation and stigma. The use of photo-elicitation methods in the study was a strength in that it enhanced rapport between the researcher and the study participants, further building connection and trust during the interviews. For most of the interviews, this approach generated rich data, helped explore the complexities of early motherhood, and allowed both the researcher and the participant to engage in the co-construction of meaning. As the realities of early motherhood are often contextual, it is necessary to create spaces for young mothers to tell their stories in ways that can be empowering. More research using different forms of creative methods can continue to be used with young mothers to enable key stakeholders and policymakers to understand their lived experiences.¹

Conclusion and recommendations

Young mothers in this study showed agency in improving their life outcomes, commitment to caring for their children, and increased motivation to complete their schooling. Our findings thus support previous studies from high-income countries (Ford, 2016; Mollborn & Jacobs, 2012; Stapleton, 2010; Watts et al., 2015) which indicate a need to move from the narrow view of early motherhood as being associated with only negative outcomes.

The women's transition to motherhood in this study was marked by challenges. To optimize positive outcomes among young mothers, targeted policies need to pay more attention to providing support and sensitizing communities to encourage the inclusivity of young mothers. From young mothers' stories, it was evident that they experienced stigmatization within their communities. This can constitute a social challenge in access to support and essential services and negatively impact their wellbeing (Anima et al., 2022). Thus, partnerships between schools, policies, communities, media, and academia need to be forged to offer support, tackle social norms, and negative attitudes, and affirm positive stories of early motherhood.

While most/many young mothers in our study were determined to improve their life outcomes, they were often constrained by financial challenges which required compromise and prioritization of children. In Nigeria, there are no welfare packages or financial aid that support young mothers to manage the competing demands of their needs and that of their children. Benefits and welfare grants have been shown to improve economic outcomes among young mothers and can be used to support educational retention (Gyan, 2017). The Nigerian Government should look into creating social welfare packages and establishing social agencies that cater to the wellbeing of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Additionally, the observed improvements in educational, economic and employment outcomes among women who had been mothers for an extended period show a promising trend that initial setbacks and challenges may be alleviated or improved over time. This

calls for a need to provide long-term support and sustainable resources to young mothers and better understand the factors that contribute to positive outcomes among them,

Further, it is important to conduct more research to understand the complexities and challenges of school dropout among young mothers in rural Nigeria and inform strategies to improve school re-entry and retention among this vulnerable group. These interventions can also focus on factors that promote or act as barriers to early motherhood resilience in improving life outcomes. For example, educational policies supporting school re-entry and retention for young mothers can focus on various activities (such as flexible learning, remedial classes and onsite child-care) that have worked in other countries (Amod et al., 2019; Undie & Birungi, 2022).

This study was a qualitative study conducted with young mothers; however, diverse aspects of young motherhood still remain to be explored. Longitudinal studies on experiences of support, educational experiences, and partner and family relationships are also needed to understand young mothers' long-term experiences and outcomes. This can contribute to contextual understanding and generate a robust knowledge base that informs evidence-based policies and interventions to create positive change and improve the lives of young mothers and their children.

Note

1. However, it should be noted that this approach is not without its challenges. In this study, some potential participants opted out of the research due to their perceived lack of confidence in taking pictures. Amongst those who opted to be in the study, some of the study participants felt that the images they captured simplified the complexities of their experiences.

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Author contribution statement

AO, PW and LH contributed substantially to the conception of the work. AO, PH and LH developed the research design while AO collected and analysed the data. AO and PW drafted the article, and LH was involved in revising it critically for important intellectual content. The research team [i.e. AO, PW and LH] were involved in the systematic analysis of the data. AO, PW and LH have approved the final version of the manuscript to be published and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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