

HETEROSEXUALITY AND PREMARITAL COHABITATION: RISING TRENDS AMONG NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

In most traditional African societies, chastity is one of the prized premarital values. This also portrays good moral upbringing that in most cases mothers are rewarded for bringing up their female children this way. With acculturation and globalization, much of this cherished traditional values are being eroded. The current study explores heterosexuality and premarital cohabitation among Nigerian university students. The study wants to understand (a) the factors responsible and (b) challenges these students face. In order to accomplish this task, 24 students were interviewed through chain referral. The interviews were conducted in English as the official Nigerian language. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. Major findings reflect economic, peer influence, and sexual exploration. The challenges ranges from sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy which could lead to complications during abortion and thereafter, and poor academic performance. The explanation for this rising trend in heterosexuality and premarital cohabitation finds relevance with symbolic interactionist theory. The students learn uncensored behavior from their peers, which creates the avenue for exploration into these practices. As such, these findings have implications to African marriage and sexual identity.

Key words: heterosexuality, cohabitation, Nigerian students, African marriage, premarital values

Introduction

Heterosexual premarital cohabitation is a global problem that poses great danger to academic success of undergraduates and the society at large (Andrew 2017:18). The problem of premarital heterosexual cohabitation has increased throughout the world (Brown, 2013:14). In 1960, when it was officially illegal in the U.S. to cohabit, there were an estimated 450,000 couples living together. By 2017, that number had increased to 7.5 million. A recent study estimated that 48% of first cohabiting women choose to live with their male partner. Africa and particularly Nigeria has not been spared from the issue of premarital

heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates (Thompson, 2015:19). This is because many youths in tertiary institutions are cohabiting (Okoro, 2016:11). The growing incidence of cohabitation among undergraduates is at an astonishing rate in public tertiary institutions in Nigeria (Alabi, 2019:31).

As a way out of the aforementioned challenge, the Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted a liberal policy on the provision of hostel accommodation for students of tertiary institutions. Some private hostel developers are allowed to build hostels outside the university campus among others (Anselem, 2011). It is quite pathetic that the intervention of the government and other stakeholders to reduce premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates is contrary to expectation (Anselem, 2011). Some reasons attached to this include: love, sexual motive, high cost of house rent among others.

In most traditional African societies, chastity is one of the prized premarital values. This also portrays good moral upbringing that in most cases mothers are rewarded for bringing up their female children this way. With acculturation and globalization, much of this cherished traditional values are being eroded. The current study explores heterosexuality and premarital cohabitation among Nigerian university students. Drawing from symbolic interactionism and qualitative interview, the study wants to understand (a) the factors responsible for rise in heterosexuality and premarital cohabitation among Nigerian students and (b) challenges these students face.

Review of Literature

Causes of premarital heterosexual cohabitation among students

Cohabitation is totally against the norms and values of African society; that it is religiously hyperactive (Wisdom, 2017). The situation where youth lived together especially where they do not have any family affinity is often regarded as an aberration. It is

disheartening to note that while some students cohabit without the knowledge of their parents, some parents feign ignorance when they get to know. Another factor that could influence cohabitation among students of higher institution is age. Nowadays, many students commence higher institution at very young age and as such are naïve. Adeoye, Ola, and Aliu, (2012) asserts that early young adults were mostly prone to premarital sexual behavior. Cohabitation among undergraduates could also be a response to unguarded freedom, being free for the first time from parents and school authority rules and regulation in boarding house at secondary school level, they tends to enjoy the freedom, independence and less monitored by either parents or guardians. Religion is an important variable in cohabitation among undergraduates. Literature reveals that those with religious affiliations are less likely to cohabit than those without religious affiliation. Irma (2015) also observed that individuals who are religious are more inclined to positive traditional family attitudes and behaviors. They stated further that norms regarding family formation behaviours of individuals are commonly shaped and reinforced by religious institution. In addition, strong religious parents can affect their child's behaviors through guidance and supervision. The understanding that family values require children to behave in a manner not to embarrass parents may discourage cohabitation. The decline in religious commitment/piety and fanfares of religion may be partly responsible for rise in immorality. Students are now able to do what they desire as well as maintain membership of religious bodies without any sense of guilt (Osondu, 2018). Fareo and Moses (2018) investigated cohabitation among students of tertiary institutions in Adamawa State Nigeria, and found out that many students cohabited due to financial constraints, desire for intimacy and sex on regular basis and lack of conducive hostel facilities. Some students cohabit in order to avoid the harsh rules and regulations guiding their stay in halls of residence.

The non-residential accommodations in many higher institutions tend to encourage this new trend of students cohabiting, unlike what was in operation in the olden times. Initially all students were accommodated within institution's halls of residence (Ekpenyong & Ekpenyong, 2016). Those students accommodated within institution's hall had rules and regulation guiding their stay. Thus within a short time, Nigerian tertiary institutions began to experience challenge of inadequate hostel accommodation because the population of students continue to grow without corresponding growth in the number of halls of residence and other physical facilities. There are a number of probable reasons for cohabitation among university students and they include:

Some studies have suggested that higher tuition fees and other associated costs are the cause of cohabitation. Students in higher educational institutions are experiencing a critical situation in terms of higher tuition fees and other associated college costs related to facilities and services provision, especially on campus accommodation. Aluko (2011), stated that students in higher educational institutions are experiencing a crunch of spiral college costs hence, they have to take to cohabitation. Schoen (2019), stated that human behavior is shaped and related to the attributes of physical environment. The environment determines the range of behavior that can occur in it. Therefore, the students' behavior is either positively or negatively influenced by the physical environment. The high costs of college fees have in some cases, forced students to cohabit (Nelson, 2018).

Shortage of on-campus accommodation is seen also as a factor in cohabitation. Svodziwa and Kurete (2017), explained that shortage of on-campus accommodation, make students to resort to renting off-campus residential buildings. This is common with the public tertiary institution students in Nigeria. Svodziwa and Kurete (2017) pointed out that as contained in the university of Ibadan students' Handbook, accommodation is only available albeit on "first come first serve" basis to students in the first and final year of study.

Therefore, majority of students in the second to penultimate years of studies are forced to live off-campus in communities adjoining their institutions. Soboye (2013), stated that inability of tertiary institutions to manage the increasing population through the provision of adequate hostel accommodation, have led to cohabitation among tertiary students in some public institutions. Aluko (2011), stated that, because the population of students continues to grow without corresponding growth in the number of halls of residence and other physical facilities, therefore, cohabitation becomes the order of the day among the students in higher institution of learning.

There are other studies that suggest that students cohabit for premarital acquaintance: the main goals of cohabitation is for students to carefully study each other if they really matched for marriage. Hence, cohabitation may and may not eventually result into marriage. Therefore, the durability of cohabitation is dependent upon purpose and the experiences of the individual involved. Brien, Lee and Steven (2006), opined that couples learn about the quality of their relationship during cohabitation and some of them decide not to go through with their marriage. Brien, Lee and Steve (2006), stated that on the other hand, some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married partly because they cohabitated.

Financial distress is another factor in cohabitation. Financial distress is one of the reasons why students of higher institutions cohabit (Adeniyi (2019). Adeniyi (2019), equally opined that students of higher institutions cohabit as a way to save on rent, food and other living expenses.

Other studies suggest that social change led to the abandonment of valued African cultures. Consequently, students of higher education institutions are violating their culture that forbids a boy and a girl from having sexual relationship until they are legally married. Probably, this was why Adeoye, Ola, and Aliu (2012), opined that the contemporary youths have abandoned valued African tradition for inglorious culture of premarital sexual activities.

Arisikwu (2013), noted that cohabitation is totally against the norms and values of African society. Therefore, allowing young unmarried couple to live together especially where they do not have family affinity is often regarded as albatross. However, some students cohabit without the knowledge of their parents, and on the other hand, some parents encourage their wards to cohabit because of inability of such parents to meet the basic needs of their children in the institution.

Consequences of Premarital Heterosexual Cohabitation among Students

There are many consequences in a male and female cohabitation in the university. Probably, that is why Adeniyi (2019), stated that high rate of abortion in tertiary institutions can be attributed to cohabitation. Some of the cohabiting female students often get pregnant and because they are not prepared for parenting, some of them take to abortion which exposes the female partners to the risk of death or damaged uterus. Adeniyi also stressed that it is common place to find both cohabitants battling with one sexually transmitted disease or the other. Those involved in cohabiting tend to indulge in vices including stealing, lying and cyber - crimes in order to raise finances to keep the affairs going. Adeniyi equally pointed out that at times, the females are more often than not abused and molested by their partners or “would be husbands” when they quarrel leading to grave psychological trauma that could affect their health and education. Adeniyi asserted that most of the students who cohabit find it difficult to graduate and they make lower grades because there is not enough time to read. Majority often withdraw from school, while some spend longer time than necessary as a result of carryovers.

Arisukwa (2013), stated that most students that cohabit do not allow their parents to know about it. This therefore exposes the students to all forms of risk and harm as they continue to cohabit. Aluko (2019), stated that some of the problems of cohabiting are, sacrificing of the primary aim of being in school, unwanted pregnancy, use of oral

contraceptives by female students and the danger inherent in such practices. Aluko (2011), further, stated that financial involvement can bring the cohabiters into serious conflict. Aluko (2011) pointed out that some of the consequences are unprotected sex and its attendant effects such as unwanted pregnancies and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Fareo and Moses (2018), found out that the consequences of cohabitation include, the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, poor academic result, prostitution, and prolonged years of studentship, involvement in abortion, death, depressing and suicidal attempt.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted social learning theory as its theoretical framework. Social learning theory was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977 (Castle, 2009). Social learning theory states that new behaviours can be acquired by observing and imitating others (Brubacher, 2010). The social learning theory emphasizes the role of societal influences on individuals. It focuses on peer pressure and human interaction. This theory suggests that role modeling affects personal decisions and choices (Akers, 2011).

In application to this study, social learning assumes that people learn by observing others, It explains how people learn new behaviours, values and attitudes. For example undergraduates may be encouraged to engage in premarital heterosexual cohabitation by observing and learning the lifestyle of others who cohabits from the media such as (Internet, television), peers, friends, significant figures directly or indirectly.

Also, the social interactions that have the greatest influence among undergraduates are those with the people who are important in their lives as they grow. This includes peers, parents and other family members as well as teachers and neighbours. For instance, undergraduates who observe their neighbours cohabiting are more likely to try out this

behaviour as they socialize. This is when undergraduates learn through observation that premarital heterosexual cohabitation help people to become happy, also as a good way to maintain their relationships, have steady sexual intercourse and love.

Methods

Participants

The area of this study is Awka. Awka is in Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria. 24 students from universities in Awka were interviewed through chain referral. The interviews were conducted in English as the official Nigerian language. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. The participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and they agreed to participate.

Aside acquaintances, consents were sought before the interviews. I also assured them of confidentiality of the sources of the information. With their consents, the interviews were recorded with a phone. Among the questions were, “would you disclose why you cohabit?” “How long have you been into this practice?” What challenges have you experienced living with your mate? Many probes strategies were used to get deep into their narratives.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. Codes were given to the transcriptions based on similarities and differences. The reports were organized in themes, generated by the data. We compared and contrasted the interviews to another. The themes are discussed below.

Findings

Findings of this study derives from the analysis of the data gathered through in-depth interview among students selected through chain referral. As such the data describes and

explains their lived reality as obvious from their responses. The findings are presented in themes as shown below.

Insufficient campus accommodation

One of the factors that encourage heterosexuality and premarital cohabitation is insufficient accommodations inside and the campus. The experience is that the accommodations within the campus locus are highly expensive. Consequently, some students decided to cohabit. Most of the students interviewed, one way or the other attest to this. When asked why cohabiting, a male student has this to say.

Yes I decided to move in with my girlfriend due to shortage of this campus accommodation and high cost of outside Campus accommodation is one of the major factors that influenced and pioneered the decisions of staying with my girlfriend. As it is said 2 heads are better than 1, (400 level male undergraduate).

In a related response, a female student laments how getting accommodation was a problem to her after gaining admission to the university. She recalled seeing an advert placed on the school gate that read, roommate needed. She called the number and it was a male student. But out of desperation from both of them, they agreed to stay together for the semester. Having stayed with him and loved him, she decided to continue to live with him. She has this to say.

When I gained admission, I had a lot of challenges. I don't know much about the school and the environment. So I needed accommodation urgently. When I saw an advert for roommate, I immediately called the number, only to realize later that he was not a female. But I summoned courage to live with him and conclude my registration, hoping that I would find a low cost accommodation thereafter. It wasn't

as I planned and continued living with him. He is a good guy and we go on well. (200 level female).

Data from these participants show that their primary reasons for cohabitation is lack of campus accommodation. Putting up the act became beneficial that the act continued.

Sexual and marriage related factors

Most of the participants who are at their advanced level, penultimate to graduation have seen cohabitation as a means to sexual gratification and preparation for marital life. To them, practicing how to live and doing so with the one you love allows you to know more about each other. This according to them will reduce the chances of divorce after marriage. This is because you are in a better position to know the weakness and strength of each other. One of the female students recounts the following.

This is helpful to study ourselves for marriage which is also one of the major reasons for this act, this cohabitation helps us to reduce the rate of the ongoing prevalence of divorce. Divorce these days is becoming a menace. The rate in which young couples divorce is alarming and this issue of cohabitations can be a way it can be curbed and reduce which is; when partners study themselves and know if they are compatible for marriage before walking down the alter to say I do (300 level female).

Another female notes that it is her choice to love and gratify her sexual desires. Living with a guy offer her the opportunity to stick to one person. This according to her reduces the chances of being infected and other related sexual matters.

It is a thing of “choice”, if I feel like I want the person to stay with me I really do not need any one’s opinion to do that, I’m old enough to make my decision. I short, I don’t like double dating. I don’t to be infected (400 level female).

When asked if she does not protect herself with contraceptives like condom, she responds, “that’s why I make a choice of whom to stay with, I prefer to feel it natural”.

Financial challenges

Most of the students report that they engage in this act because of financial challenges. This is not limited to the females alone as males have also moved in with well to do females. Some of the males report that they help each other. This happens especially when the two students are studying the same course and the male seems to be intelligent. One of the female students says:

When we talk about economic factors we talk about finance. That is money. Poor parental care due to low income is one of the major economic factors that influence this premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates there was no much money at hand to rent an apartment outside campus and pay my bills. In that sense I had to move in with my boyfriend (200 level female).

This means that students embark on cohabitation because of the inherent economic gain they make out of the situation. Thus, financial challenges constitute a propelling factor premarital heterosexual union.

Consequences of heterosexual cohabitation

Data revealed that one of the consequences associated with heterosexual cohabitation is unwanted pregnancy. Students interviewed are in unanimous in agreement that this act propels unwanted pregnancy. As such, this has also fueled abortion in an attempt to clear the shame. One of the female students has this to say:

Most of these guys who engage in premarital heterosexual cohabitation always engage in unprotected sex. This act might bring up some regrettable consequences.

For instance, one can easily get infected or impregnated. This can result in abortion or even death. Some may even drop school (female, 300 level).

The consequences extends to distraction from academic activities. Some of the students have abandoned the very essence of being in the university since they are now in a romantic relationships. Data show that some of those involved in this practice are not regular in school activities and as such are most likely to perform poor academically.

Recommendations

According to our data, the following recommendations were raised. Among them are: Management of tertiary institutions should endeavour to engage in effective orientation on sex education programmes periodically for fresh students. Data suggest that when students know the truth as regards sex related issues, they are not more likely to engage in premarital heterosexual cohabitation.

Moreover, management of tertiary institutions should reduce accommodation cost and also lobby for building of more hostels in campuses. This will to a large extent reduce off campus accommodation where this act is mostly prevalent.

Data also suggest that parents should induct their children in morals, norms and values of the society and also educate them on the consequences of premarital sex and premarital heterosexual cohabitation. By so doing, students will not engage in premarital heterosexual cohabitation.

Furthermore data suggest that management of tertiary institutions should encourage students to organize debates, symposia and other related activities to boost their academic potentials and do away with premarital heterosexual cohabitation. If they are much more engaged from inception they are most likely to continue with that trend.

Discussions

The first findings of the study reveals that premarital heterosexual cohabitation exist among undergraduates of universities in Awka. The presence of the practice reveals some causative factors. To support this finding, Samuelson (2019) reported that premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates in Abia state University, Uturu was of a high extent. In another related study, Offor and Anadi (2017) reported that premarital cohabitation is prevalent among undergraduates in Anambra State University, Igbariam.

Findings of our study have suggested that lack of campus accommodation is a causative factor to heterosexual cohabitation among students. Study by Onunkwo (2016) corroborated this position when it reported that inadequate campus accommodation is one of the factors influencing premarital heterosexual cohabitation in Nigerian universities.

Also, some of the personal factors influencing premarital heterosexual cohabitation were to study for marriage, sexual gratification and choice. This report is in agreement with the findings by Offor and Anadi (2017) that some students engage in cohabitation for sexual advantage. Also the findings by Osuala (2014) reported that some students feel that cohabitation is the best way to study their partner when they are in sexual relationship that is more likely to lead to marriage.

Regarding the economic factors influencing premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates, the findings of the study revealed that financial distress, poor standard of living, and poor parental care due to low income as the economic factors responsible for such situation. To support these findings, Obiora (2016) reported that many undergraduate students engage in cohabitation because of financial problems and parental upbringing.

Thirdly, the findings of the study revealed that the consequences of premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates of universities, Awka. Accordingly, it was discovered that abortion, unwanted pregnancy, school dropout, poor academic performance,

sexually transmitted diseases, etc, were the social and health consequences of premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates of universities in Awka. To support this finding, Udom (2015) posited that abortion and sexually transmitted diseases were common among premarital female cohabiters in Nigerian universities.

Also, findings showed that school authorities, parents, etc, have significant roles to play in reducing the causes and consequences of premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates of universities in Awka. Some of these roles includes; educating students on sex related issues, enacting laws against premarital heterosexual cohabitation within school premises, educating students on dangers of premarital heterosexual cohabitation, etc. This was why Collins (2018) posited that if parents can educate students on the dangers of premarital heterosexual cohabitation, some students are not likely to indulge in the act. More so, Nwankwo (2019) stated that the school management can reduce premarital heterosexual cohabitation by giving students quality sex education and also educate them on societal norms and values.

Conclusion

The study explores premarital heterosexual cohabitation among undergraduates in Awka, Anambra, South-eastern Nigeria. Evidence from the study makes it is clear enough that premarital heterosexual cohabitation is inevitable among undergraduates. However, primary socialization takes place in the family and it's the basis. If a child is not properly trained and directed at the family level and he/she develops bad manners, such bad manners will be reflected in his dealing with people outside the family. Therefore parents should arise to their responsibilities of training their children, inculcating the norms and values in them and deemphasize the pursuit of wealth, fame and premarital sex. Having leant moral virtues from the home, they can face challenges outside the home which will make them to good students within dictates of the code of conducts.

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