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Research Article

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND RISK FACTORS AMONG YOUTHS IN ETCHE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the sexual behavior of young people in Etche Local Government Area (LGA), Rivers State, where concerns regarding risky sexual practices among youth have grown due to a rise in sexual activity. The research adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design, with a population of 351,200 young people in Etche, from which a sample of 400 youths was selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data collection was facilitated using a semi-structured questionnaire, which was tested for reliability with a coefficient of 0.71. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS V-25, employing mean, t-test, and Pearson Correlation at a 0.05 significance level. The results revealed that common sexual behaviors among youths included spending time with the opposite sex ($\bar{X}$ = 2.95±1.23), having a boyfriend or girlfriend ($\bar{X}$ = 2.77±0.23), and being attracted to revealing clothing ($\bar{X}$ = 2.63±1.33). The study also showed a significant difference between male and female perceptions of sexual behavior in Etche LGA, with a t-cal value of 2.22 and a p-value of 0.02. The findings indicated that young people in Etche exhibited risky sexual behaviors, which increased their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and other associated health risks. Consequently, the study recommends that youth-friendly organizations develop targeted intervention programs to guide young people toward healthier sexual practices and reduce the incidence of STIs.

Keywords: Sexual behavior, Youth, Risky sexual practices, STIs, Etche Local Government Area

Introduction

The sexual behavior of young people has become an increasingly important public health issue, as their sexual activity patterns seem to be more prevalent and risk-laden than previously assumed, even in societies where traditional values oppose premarital sex. In countries like Nigeria, where cultural and religious norms typically view premarital sex with disdain, many young individuals still engage in sexual relationships, often without fully understanding the potential consequences. The rise of risky sexual behavior among the youth is an urgent concern, not just due to the potential for unwanted pregnancies, but also because of the increasing rates of sexually

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transmitted infections (STIs) in this demographic. Understanding the sexual behavior of young people and the determinants that influence such behaviors is crucial to addressing these risks and promoting sexual health in society.

Sexual behavior, as defined by Brain et al. (2016), is the manner in which individuals experience and express their sexuality. This expression is largely shaped by both biological factors and environmental influences, including social and cultural dynamics. Young people, particularly those in the adolescent and early adult stages (ages 10-24), are often exploring their sexual identities and practices. This group represents a significant portion of the world's population, with over a quarter of the global population falling into this age category, and 86% of them residing in less developed countries such as Nigeria. These young individuals are not just the future of society—they are also the current agents of sexual and reproductive health decisions that will shape the well-being of future generations. Given that young people in this age bracket are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, the implications for public health are enormous.

Public health experts and educators have long been concerned with the sexual behavior of youth. Their concerns are rooted in the link between sexual behavior and the transmission of STIs, unintended pregnancies, and other long-term health consequences. The most concerning aspect of youth sexual behavior is that it often includes high-risk actions, such as unprotected intercourse, multiple sexual partners, or engaging in sexual practices with little to no knowledge of the sexual history or health status of a partner. Additionally, young people may not perceive their actions as risky, even when engaging in these unsafe sexual practices (Kabir et al., 2014). This ignorance stems from their still-developing cognitive and emotional understanding of the consequences of their behavior, which further places them at risk for negative health outcomes.

High-risk sexual behaviors are not limited to unprotected sex. They include early initiation of sexual activity, which can increase vulnerability to infections and the emotional consequences of such behavior. Practices such as oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with multiple partners or with individuals whose sexual history is unknown are all prevalent among youth, further exposing them to potential health risks. These risky behaviors often occur against a backdrop of incomplete or inadequate education on sexual health, which compounds the dangers. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure and are more likely to engage in these behaviors due to social influences, such as the desire for acceptance within their peer groups or as a response to poverty and economic pressures (Thairu et al., 2015).

In addition to individual characteristics, numerous social, cultural, and environmental factors play a role in shaping the sexual behaviors of young people. Understanding the complex interplay of these factors is essential for devising effective interventions to mitigate the risks associated with youth sexual activity. Age, gender, and biological factors are primary determinants, with adolescence being a stage where individuals are undergoing rapid developmental changes, including physical maturation and an increased drive for sexual experimentation. However, psychological factors such as mental health issues (e.g., depression or anxiety) can also lead to risky

sexual behaviors. These mental health challenges are often exacerbated by the pressure to conform to societal expectations or peer norms (Klein et al., 2022).

Peer pressure is one of the strongest influencers of youth behavior, including sexual behavior. Adolescents may engage in risky sexual activities to fit in with their peers, particularly in environments where sexual experimentation is normalized or glamorized. However, peer pressure does not always result in negative outcomes. Positive peer influences can also encourage healthy sexual practices and behaviors, highlighting the potential for peer-led sexual education and intervention programs to promote better sexual health choices (Smith et al., 2023). Family structure and relationships further influence youth sexual behavior. Research suggests that adolescents from families with a history of substance abuse or other risky behaviors may be more likely to engage in similar behaviors themselves. On the other hand, supportive family environments that foster open communication about sexual health can serve as protective factors against risky behaviors (Liu & Chen, 2022).

Socioeconomic status (SES) is another significant determinant of youth sexual behavior. Young people from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to experience barriers to education, healthcare, and social support, all of which can influence their sexual health decisions. Financial instability, lack of access to healthcare, and limited recreational activities may lead to higher engagement in risky behaviors such as substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices. Moreover, economic stress can exacerbate negative coping mechanisms, further driving unhealthy behaviors among young people. It is not only the lack of resources that affects sexual health outcomes, but also the pressure to survive and make ends meet, which may lead youth to engage in transactional sex or exploitative sexual relationships (Gomez & Sanchez, 2023).

Inadequate access to sexual health education is another critical factor contributing to risky sexual behaviors. In many communities, sex education is either limited or non-existent, leaving young people to rely on peers, media, and unreliable sources for information. This gap in knowledge often leads to misconceptions about sexual health, safe sex practices, and the consequences of unprotected sex. The absence of comprehensive sex education results in a lack of understanding about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), contraception, and consent, increasing the likelihood of unsafe sexual practices (McMahon et al., 2023). In contrast, comprehensive and accessible sexual education can equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health.

The role of media and technology in shaping sexual behavior among youth cannot be underestimated. In today's digital age, social media, television, and other online platforms expose young people to a wide array of sexual behaviors and norms. The portrayal of risky behaviors such as drug use, violence, and unsafe sexual practices on these platforms can normalize and even glamorize such activities, increasing the likelihood that youths will engage in similar behaviors. Targeted advertising, particularly in areas like alcohol and tobacco use, can also influence sexual behavior by creating an image of desirability around behaviors that are often risky and

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harmful. The pervasive nature of media and technology makes it a powerful tool in both promoting and preventing risky sexual behaviors, making it a key focus for sexual health interventions (Akers et al., 2020).

As young people engage in sexual experimentation, their lack of awareness about the potential risks often leads to adverse health outcomes, such as the acquisition of STIs, unintended pregnancies, and psychological trauma. This is particularly true in communities where sexual activity is high but access to preventive measures such as condoms and knowledge about safe sex practices remains limited. The researcher's experience as a clinician in an STI clinic has shown that a significant proportion of young patients presenting with STIs are from diverse communities and institutions in Rivers State. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the sexual health needs of young people in such settings, where risky behaviors are prevalent, and knowledge of preventive measures is insufficient.

In conclusion, the sexual behavior of young people is influenced by a complex web of factors, including biological, social, and environmental elements. Addressing risky sexual behaviors requires a multifaceted approach that considers these influences and aims to provide comprehensive education, support, and interventions for young people. Given the high rates of STIs, unintended pregnancies, and other sexual health issues among youth, it is essential that policymakers, educators, and healthcare professionals work together to create a supportive environment that encourages healthy sexual behaviors and promotes the overall well-being of young people.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H_1: There is no significant difference between the perception of male and female youth on sexual behavior of youths in Etche local Government Area

H_2: There is no significant difference between the male and female youth on the factors that predispose youth to STI's in Etche local Government Area.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. The population for the study comprised of youths from Etche local government Area. The youths of Etche LGA, has a reference population of 351,200 as projected by Rivers State ministry of youth development in 2020 and city population in 2022. The inclusion criteria were: individuals between the ages of 15 to 35 years as recognized by United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA, 2012); individuals who reside in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State and individuals who provided informed consent to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were: individuals who are below 15 years of age or above 35yrs, individuals who do not reside in Etche Local Government Area, and individuals who cannot read and write.

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The sample size for this research was 400. This was determined by adopting the Andrew Fisher's method of sample size determination as described by Sin-Ho, 2014 shown thus: $ss = Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p) / c^2$. Where; ss is the sample size; Z is the Z-score corresponding to confidence level (Confidence level of 95% is usually 1.96); p is the proportion of the population with the characteristic or preference (usually 0.5 for unknown population). It is also the standard deviation and c is the confidence Interval expressed as decimal (0.05 for ±5%). Multi stage Sampling procedure was adopted firstly, stratified sampling technique was employed using the 19 wards in Etche LGA as a stratum hence 21 respondents will be selected from each ward. Secondly, simple random without replacement was used to select the respondents from the wards.

The instrument for the study consisted of an informed consent form, debriefing form and semi structured questionnaire on sexual behaviour and knowledge of prevention of sexually transmitted infections which will be structured according to the objectives of the study. The questionnaire will be divided into two (2) major sections, Section A will comprise of the personal data of the respondents while section B will be made up of closed ended questions from sexual Behaviour and knowledge of prevention of Sexually Transmitted infection. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The copies of questionnaires completed were collected, coded and analyzed using statistical product and service solution (SPSS version 25). Descriptive statistics of standard deviation and mean were used to analyze the research questions and inferential statistics of t-test was used to test Hypotheses at level of significance of 0.05.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics committee of the University of Port Harcourt. The participants were given sufficient information about the study and their right to withdraw at any time. The personal information of the participants was kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the study and participants were assured that their identities will not be revealed in the study.

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Results

The results of the study are shown below:

Table 1: Percentage distribution showing socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 393)

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age 15-19		
	148	37.7
20-24	209	53.2
25-29	36	9.2
Marital status Married		
	195	49.6
Single	198	50.4
Educational level Primary		
	78	19.8
Secondary	148	37.7
Tertiary	136	34.6
Others	31	7.9
Religion Christianity		
	347	88.3
Islamic	16	4.1
Traditional African religion	30	7.6
Occupation Student		
	104	26.5
Employed	102	26.0
Unemployed	187	47.6

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Table 1 presents the percentage distribution showing socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The result showed that more than half 209(53.2%) were aged 20-24 years, about half 198(50.4%) were single, more 148(37.7%) had secondary education, majority 347(88.3%) were Christians while more 187(47.6%) were unemployed.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation showing sexual behaviour of youths in Etche Local Government Area

SN	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remark
1	Like being around the opposite sex	2.95	1.23	Agree
2	Keeping a boy or girl friend	2.77	0.98	Agree
3	Attracted by sexy clothes	2.63	1.33	Agree
4	Loss of virginity does not mean promiscuity	2.21	1.04	Disagree
5	Keeps condom around all the time	1.97	1.10	Disagree
6	There is nothing wrong in having unprotected sex with someone's fiancé or fiancée	1.90	1.06	Disagree
7	Always used condom during sex with partner	1.89	1.00	Disagree
8	Finds it difficult to control sexual urge	1.77	0.98	Disagree
9	Keeping more than one sex partner is encouraged to avoid disappointment and heart break	1.68	0.76	Disagree
10	There is nothing wrong in having sex with same sex	1.48	0.81	Disagree
	Grand mean	**2.02**	**1.03**	**Disagree**

Criterion mean = 2.50. Guide: 0 - 1.49 = strongly disagree (SD); 1.50 - 2.49 = disagree (D); 2.50 – 3.49 = agree (A); 3.50 – 4.00 = strongly agree (SA)

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Table 2 revealed the mean and standard deviation showing sexual behaviour of youths in Etche. The result showed that the respondents like being around the opposite sex ($\bar{X}$ = 2.95±1.23), keeping a boy or girl friend ($\bar{X}$ = 2.77±0.23), and attracted by sexy clothes ($\bar{X}$ = 2.63±1.33). Thus, the sexual behaviour of youths in Etche Local Government Area were: being around the opposite sex, keeping a boy or girl friend, and attracted by sexy clothes.

Table 3: Pearson Correlations analysis showing relationship between sexual behaviours and level of knowledge of STI's

Variables		Knowledge	Sexual behaviour	Remark
Knowledge	Pearson correlation	1	0.58	Moderate
	Sig.		0.00*	relationship
	N	393	393	
Sexual behavior	Pearson correlation	0.58	1	
	Sig	0.00*		
	N	393	393	

Guide: 0.00-0.19 = very low, 0.20-0.39 = low, 0.40-0.59 = moderate, 0.60-0.79 = high and 0.80 above is very high relationship

Table 3 showed the Pearson Correlation analysis of relationship between sexual behavior and knowledge of STI's. The result revealed a correlation coefficient of r = 0.58 indicating a moderate positive relationship and $p<0.05$ indicate a significant relationship. Thus, the relationship between sexual behavior and knowledge of STI's was moderate and significant.

Table 4: t-test result showing the significant difference between the perception of male and female youths on sexual behavior of youths in Etche local Government Area

Category	N	Mean	SD	df	t-cal	p-value	Decision
Male	250	1.98	0.54	391	2.22	0.02	H_o Rejected

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Female	143	2.09	0.36

*Significant; p<0.05

Table 4 showed the t-test summary of the significant difference between the perception of male and female youths on sexual behavior. The result of the study showed that there was a significant difference between the perception of male and female youths on sexual behavior in Etche LGA as $p<0.05$ ($t\text{-cal} = 2.22$, $df = 391$, $p = 0.02$). Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference between the perception of male and female youths on sexual behavior of youths in Etche Local Government Area was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study are discussed below:

The finding of the study showed that the sexual behaviour of youths in Etche Local Government Area was: being around the opposite sex, keeping a boy or girl friend, and attracted by sexy clothes. The finding of this study is not surprising because the last four decades have witnessed an unprecedented effort in both human and financial resources devoted to the need to know the risk involve in unprotected sex and other sexual risk behaviour. This finding is not surprising given the high level of exposure of young people to the social media and the possibility of peer influence. The finding of this study corroborates that of Boladale et al. (2015) whose study in Nigeria on sexual orientation and quality of life which showed that more of the respondents who were young people were sexually active and keep boy or girl friend. The finding of this study is in divergence with that of Dutt and Manjula (2017) whose study on sexual behaviors among youths in India showed that the indulgence in sexual behavior among the respondents was low. It was also found that less than 10% of them indulge in unsafe sexual practices such as indulging in sexual activity with more than one partner and engage in sexual intercourse with commercial sex workers.

The result showed that the factors that predispose youths of Etche were: use of condom which they felt does not make sex enjoyable ($\bar{X} = 2.76 \pm 1.13$), lack of knowledge ($\bar{X} = 2.73 \pm 1.06$), and early initiation of sexual intercourse. The finding of this study is also in keeping with that of Ndongmo et al. (2017) which showed that more of the respondents used condom during sexual intercourse. The finding of this study is also in line with that of Boamah (2012) whose study on sexual behaviour among adolescents in Ghana showed that majority of the respondents used condom during sexual intercourse.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that, young people from Etche Local Government Area had risky sexual behaviours with the more prevalent sexual behaviours as being around the opposite sex, keeping a boy or girl friend, and attracted by sexy clothes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Youth friendly organizations should organize intervention programmes for youths in order to align their sexual behaviours with healthy practices.
2. Young people should make conscious effort to adopt good sexual behaviours so that their health and wellbeing will not be jeopardized.
3. Health educators should not relent in their effort to provide age-appropriate sexuality education and awareness for young people.
4. Policy makers should make policies that will ensure the adoption of healthy sexual behaviours among young people.
5. Young people should not allow any peer influence or social media influence that will make them to have a defiance in their sexual behaviours.

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