

Religiosity and Risky Sexual Behaviour among Undergraduates in South West Nigeria

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the relationship spirituality and religion had on sexual behaviour and experiences. A cross-sectional analytical survey involving 215 undergraduates from three tertiary institutions was conducted. These students were interviewed while on rural health practicum in a town in south west Nigeria. Spirituality was assessed with 9 questions having dichotomous responses. Maximum obtainable score was 18. Scores above the mean were classed as high spirituality. Mean age of respondents was 23.1 ± 3.7 years, 59.1% were female, and 78.1% were Christian while 11.9% were Muslims. In all, 54.4% were sexually active. Among the sexually active 76(65%) were involved in Risky Sexual Behaviour (RSB). Spirituality/faith was an important part of the lives of 92.6% while 80% considered themselves to be moderately or very spiritual. Religious practices were reported on a daily basis by 83.7%. The mean age at sexual initiation was 17 ± 5.2 years. Less than half (49%) had multiple sexual partners, 22% received gifts for sex, 53% did not use condom at last sex, and 22% had unwanted pregnancy while 9% had Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI). Logistic regression analysis revealed that spirituality had no influence on sexual risk behaviour. Many students were sexually active and a high proportion exhibited RSB. Sustainable sexual health responses targeted at reducing risk behaviour among young people should not be limited by perceived spirituality.

Keywords: spirituality; religiosity; sex; sexual health; risky sexual behaviour

1. Introduction

A number of factors are involved in the evolution of sexual attitudes and behaviour, such as one's personal philosophy about life (e.g., spirituality), exposure to sexual content (e.g., experience with sexual content or behavior), or moral teaching learned from parents, peers, or society (e.g., religious background, culture and societal norms). (Barnett et al., 2010, Steinman and Zimmerman, 2004) The assumption can also be made that there are a combination of these factors that bring about a person's understanding of what he or she believes about sex and how he or she will approach sexual behaviour. (Hardy and Raffaelli, 2003) Religiosity is a crucial factor which has a significant effect on sexual initiation among young people. It has been measured by the level of spirituality, the frequency of religious attendance and level of involvement in religious activities. (Beckwith and Morrow, 2005, Bankole and Malarcher, 2010)

Young people face pressures which cause them to exhibit risky sexual behaviours such as early sexual initiation, casual unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners, with resultant consequences such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDs, unwanted pregnancies, abortions and adolescent parenting. (Morhason-Bello et al., 2008, WHO) Adolescence as defined by WHO is the period in human growth and development that occurs after childhood and before adulthood, from ages 10 to19(UNESCO) while young people are defined by the United Nations as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 and the experiences of these groups of persons vary from country to country.(WHO, 2010)

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa has at least one in 3 African adolescent living within her.(USAID, 2009) It has one of the highest birth rates for adolescents in the world with an increasing prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and HIV and this may be due to poverty and high rates of unemployment.(Bernstein and Hansen, 2006) There is an intricate relationship between poverty and reproductive health. Young women often engage in these

risky behaviours such as unsafe sex in exchange for monetary incentives. Promotion of abstinence and suppression of sexual desire is the teaching of many of the religious groups in Nigeria.(National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and Macro, 2009)

According to the 2008 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) most Nigerians are involved in the two popular religious groups (Christianity = 54 % and Islam = 44 %) while only 2 % fall into no religious or traditional category. There are several diverse denominations or sects which have sprung up in the last three decades among the two popular religious groups– Christianity and Islam – but are more obvious among the Christian religious group in all nooks and crannies of the country.(Durojaiye, 2008) Despite the fact that these risky sexual behaviours such as premarital sexual practices are prohibited by these religions, young people are not refraining from such practices.(Morhason-Bello et al., 2008) Many of them have low or inaccurate knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, and have very little use of family planning or other protective measures .(Okonofua, 2007) The apparent pervasive religiosity in the country makes it difficult for these young people to access and accept help or interventions that have been used to abate these similar issues in the western part of the world.(Pargament and Mahoney, 2002)

The role of religion in regulating sexual behaviour is complex and has far-reaching implications. It is a broadly-held religious belief that sexual desires ought to be repressed. Some roles that religion play in regulating sexual behaviour have clear social and cultural benefits, however the influence of spirituality and religion on sexual behaviour and experiences is yet to be fully explored. It is therefore of a necessity to explore the effect of both religion and its function (spirituality) on sexual behaviour among young adults in Nigeria.(Ball et al., 2003)

2. Methods

The study was a cross-sectional analytical survey involving 215 undergraduates from three tertiary institutions. All the institutions are in Oyo State, Nigeria. These students were interviewed while on rural health practicum in a town in south west Nigeria.

Self-administered questionnaire was used to collect information from the students. Section A of the questionnaire contained sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents' their age, sex, marital status, present religion and religion while growing up. Section B contained frequency of religious experiences. A single general question was asked to assess level of spirituality, response was in four categories. Questions were also asked to determine the respondents age at sexual debut.

The following questions were asked with yes/no responses

1. Do you believe in God or higher power?
2. Do you have important religious experiences and thoughts?
3. Do you see your relationship with God as personal?
4. Do you follow a spiritual path or practice?
5. Do you have special spiritual experiences?
6. Do you pray often?
7. Has prayer worked for you?
8. Has your prayer been answered?
9. Do you apply spirituality to situations of life?

The main outcome measure used in these analyses examined how many different types of risky behaviour the person reported practices. Occurrence of risky sexual behaviour among the sexually active was determined using the following questions. A positive response to at least one of the questions was classified as sexual risk behaviour:

1. Do you have multiple short-term sexual encounters?
2. Have you ever received gifts for sex?
3. Did you use condom at last sex?
4. Have you ever had unwanted pregnancy?
5. Have you had Sexually Transmitted Diseases? Questions like past itching of the genitals and discharge within two week of sex without the use of condom were used to support it.

3. Data Analysis

Data was entered, cleaned and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 15 software. Frequencies and proportions were used to summarize variables of interest. Spirituality was assessed with 9 questions with dichotomous responses. Maximum obtainable score was 18. Scores above the mean were classed as high spirituality

while scores from the mean and below were classified as low spirituality. Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test were used to find the association between Socio demographic characteristics and risky sexual behaviour and Religious experiences and risky sexual behaviour. Logistic regression was done. The dependent variable on the logistic regression model was risky sexual behaviour while the independent were sex, age, religion and spirituality level. Odds ratios (OR), 95% confidence intervals (CI) and p-value were presented. In all analysis the level of significance was set at 0.05, two-tailed.

4. Results

Table 1: Frequency of demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	N	(%)
Age		
<25 years	164	76.3
≥25 years	51	23.7
Sex		
Male	88	40.9
Female	127	59.1
Marital status		
Single	206	95.8
Married	9	4.2
Present Religion		
Christianity	168	78.1
Islam	47	21.9
Religion while growing up		
Christianity	207	96.3
Islam	8	3.7

Table 2: Frequency of religious experiences among respondents

Variable	N	(%)
Believe God		
No	3	(1.4)
Yes	212	(98.6)
Important spiritual experiences		
No	11	(5.1)
Yes	204	(94.9)
Relationship with God as personal		
No	24	(11.2)
Yes	191	(88.8)
Spiritual path or practice		
No	44	(20.5)
Yes	171	(79.5)
Spiritual experiences		
No	67	(31.2)
Yes	148	(68.8)
Do you pray		
No	5	(2.3)
Yes	210	(97.7)
Has prayer worked		
No	3	(1.4)
Yes	212	(98.6)
Prayers been answered		
No	9	(4.2)
Yes	206	(95.8)
Application of Spirituality to life situations		
No	16	(7.4)
Yes	199	(92.6)

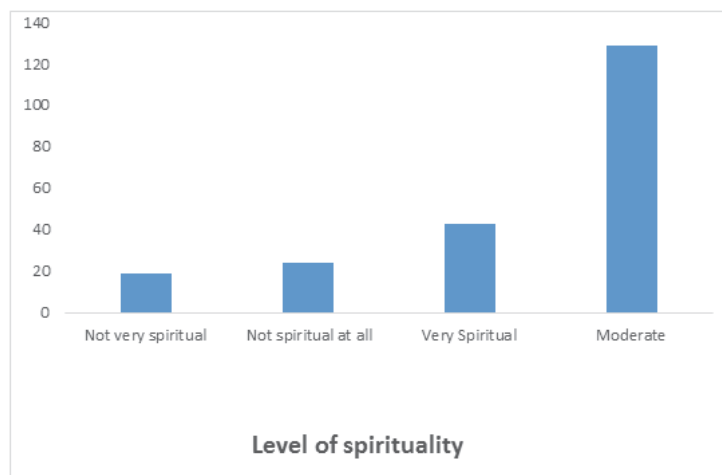


Figure 1: Self reported level of spirituality

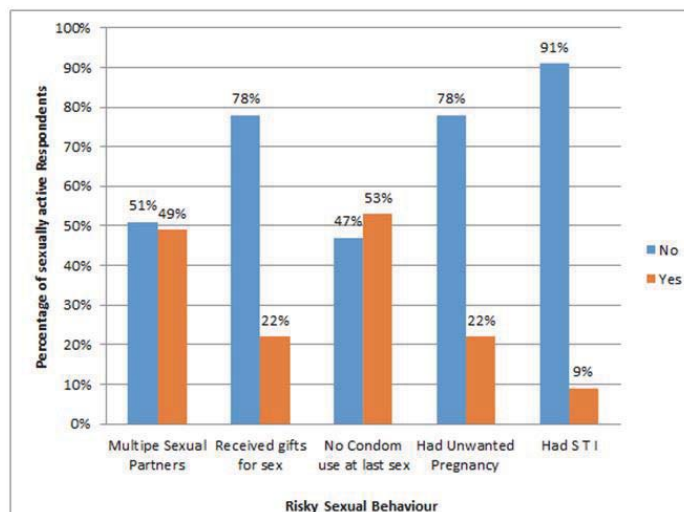


Figure 2: Showing risky sexual behaviours among sexually active respondents

Table 3: Sociodemographic characteristics and risky sexual behaviour

Characteristics	Risky Sexual Behaviour		Chi-square	P- value
	Present (%)	Absent (%)		
Age				
<25 years	61(70.1)	26(29.9)	3.965	0.046
≥25 years	15(50.0)	15(50.0)		
Sex				
Male	36(69.2)	16(30.8)	0.751	0.386
Female	40(61.5)	25(38.5)		
Marital Status				
Single	72(66.7)	36(33.3)	1.802	0.179
Married	4(44.4)	5(55.6)		
Religion				
Christianity	55(63.2)	32(36.8)	0.451	0.502
Islam	21(70.0)	9(30.0)		

Table 4: Religious experiences and risky sexual behaviour

Religious experiences	Risky Sexual Behaviour		Chi-Square	P-value
	Present (%)	Absent (%)		
Believe God				
Yes	74 (64.9)	40(35.1)	0.004	0.950
NO	2 (66.7)	1(33.3)		
Have important spiritual experiences				
Yes	70(64.2)	39(35.8)	0.380	0.530
No	6(75.0)	2(25.0)		
Have personal relationship with God				
Yes	67(66.3)	34(33.7)	0.617	0.432
No	9(56.3)	7(43.8)		
Have spiritual path or practice				
Yes	57(64.8)	31(35.2)	0.005	0.942
NO	19(65.5)	10(34.5)		
Have any spiritual experiences				
Yes	54(66.7)	27(33.3)	0.338	0.561
No	22(61.1)	14(38.9)		
Praying always				
Yes	74(65.5)	39(34.5)	0.407	0.523
No	2(50)	2(50)		
Prayer worked for you				
Yes	76(66.1)	39(33.9)	Fishers exact test	0.121
No	0(0)	2(100)		
Prayer been answered				
Yes	72(66.1)	37(33.9)	0.844	0.358
No	4(50)	4(50)		
Having spirituality or faith in life				
Yes	68(65.4)	36(34.6)	0.075	0.784
No	8(61.8)	5(38.5)		
Overall level of spirituality				
High	37(61.7)	23(38.3%)	0.586	0.444
Low	39(68.4)	18(31.6)		

Table 5: Predictors of risky sexual behaviours

Variable	Odd Ratio	Confidence Interval	p-value
Sex			
Male	1.48	0.645-3.395	0.356
Female	1		
Age			
24 years and below	2.48	1.017-6.026	0.046
25 years and above	1		
Religion			
Christianity	0.654	0.230-1.863	0.427
Islam	1		
Spirituality level			
Low spirituality	0.702	0.238-2.075	0.522
High Spirituality	1		

The mean age of respondents was 23.1±3.7 years and more than half (59.1%) were females. 95.8% were single, 78.1% were Christians while 96.3% practiced Christianity as a religion while growing up. Out of the 215 students who participated 117(54.4%) were sexually active. Among the sexually active 76(65%) were involved in Risky Sexual Behaviour (RSB). The mean age at sexual initiation was 17±5.2years.

Mean spirituality score was 17.15±1.3. Using the mean spirituality score, those who were spiritual by scoring above the mean were 115(53.5) while 110(46.5%) were not spiritual. Table 2 shows frequency of religious experiences 212(98.6%) believed in God while 191(88.8%) had a personal relationship with God, 212 (98.6%) said prayer had worked

for them and 206(95.8%) have had their prayers answered. Figure 1 shows the self-reported level of spirituality among the respondents which revealed that about 129 of the respondents had moderately high level of spirituality while 24 were not spiritual at all.

Figure 2 shows risky sexual behaviour among the sexually active respondents, 49% had multiple sexual partners, 22% received gifts for sex, 53% did not use condom at last sex, and 22% had unwanted pregnancy while 9% had Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI). Table 3 shows the association between socio demographic characteristics and risky sexual behaviour, respondents who are < 25 years of age are more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviour compared to respondents who are \geq 25 years ($p= 0.046$). Table 4 shows the association between religious experiences and risky sexual behaviour, 76 (66.1%) of the respondents who believed that prayer had worked for them participated in risky sexual behaviour.

Table 5 shows the predictors of risky sexual behaviours, the only significant factor predicting risky sexual behaviour is age [OR=2.48(1.017-6.026)] $P=0.046$. Spirituality had no significant effect on risky sexual behaviour of the respondents [OR=0.702(0.238-2.075)] $P=0.522$

5. Discussion

Religion has been found to be protective against risky sexual behaviour and has an important influence in the lives of young people.(Birndorf et al., 2005) Sexual risk-taking involves inconsistent condom use or the absence of its use as well as having multiple sexual partners and serial monogamy.(Kaestle and Halpern, 2007) However, most young people participate in these risky sexual behaviours such as inconsistent condom use and oral and anal sex which places them at risk of sexually transmitted infections and other negative health implications either to maintain an intimate relationship or for exchange of gifts and in most cases due to peer pressure. Thus negotiation of sexual activity remains a persistent challenge.(Garwick et al., 2004, Onipede, 2011)

The mean age at sexual initiation for the studied population was 17 ± 5.2 years which is similar to a study carried out among students in a university in south east United States with a mean age of sexual debut to be 17 years.(Tana, 2005) Another similar study was conducted among adolescents in Lagos which showed that most of the respondents had their first sexual intercourse at age 14 and above. The level of spirituality was moderately high among the respondents in the studied population which is also similar to the study conducted among adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria.(Beckwith and Morrow, 2005)

Spirituality had no significant effect on risky sexual behaviour among the respondents in the studied population; this is in contrast to a study conducted among college students from a south eastern doctoral research university which showed that there was a negative relationship between spirituality and sexual attitudes suggesting that students who tend to hold core spiritual beliefs, such as the belief in the importance of actively pursuing a spiritual life or who have had significant spiritual experiences that has changed the person's life, are likely to possess less sexually permissive attitudes about sex and tend to hold more conservative, traditional views about sexual practices.(Holder et al., 1999, Tana, 2005)

The results showed that students who had core spiritual beliefs/experiences or who were highly spiritual were more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviours and this is in contrast to a study where a dimension of spirituality (i.e., interpersonal relationships within a body of faith) was significantly related to fewer voluntary sexual experiences.(Holder et al., 1999) This is also in contrast to a study conducted among American adolescents which showed that adolescents who frequently attended church and church youth activities, prayed often, and said religion was important to them were less likely to report ever having had sex.(James et al., 2003)

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Many students were sexually active and a high proportion exhibited risky sexual behavior. The common belief that spirituality modulates sexual behavior was not evident in this study. Sustainable responses targeted at reducing risk behavior among young people while being sensitive to spirituality and religiosity should not be limited by perceived spirituality values.

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