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Emotional Stability And Sexual Risk Among Emerging Adults In Higher Institution: A Study Of Federal University Otuoke

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the relationship between emotional stability and risky sexual behaviour among emerging adults in Federal University Otuoke, with a focus on how demographic variables influence these patterns. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 200 undergraduates via a structured questionnaire and key informant interviews with selected students and lecturers. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative responses underwent thematic Analysis Findings revealed a significant inverse relationship between emotional stability and engagement in risky sexual behaviours, indicating that students with higher emotional stability scores were less likely to engage in behaviours such as unprotected sex, multiple sexual partnerships, and transactional sex. Demographic factors, particularly age and gender, were found to influence both emotional stability and sexual risk-taking. Younger students and females with lower emotional regulation reported higher involvement in risky behaviours. Thematic analysis highlighted the role of peer influence, economic pressures, lecturer–student relationships, and access to reproductive health services as mediating factors. The study concludes that improving students' emotional stability through targeted mental health support and comprehensive sexual health education could reduce risky sexual behaviours. Recommendations include integrating emotional intelligence training into the curriculum, expanding campus health services, and fostering open, supportive lecturer–student relationships. This research contributes to the growing literature on sexual health among Nigerian undergraduates by linking psychological well-being to behavioural outcomes, with implications for policy and intervention design in higher education settings.
Keywords: Emotional Stability, Sexual Risk, Emerging Adults, Higher Institution

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a stage of the lifespan between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood encompassing the late teens and mid- to late 20s (Arnett, 2007). This describes young adults who do not have children, do not live in their own home, or do not have sufficient income to become fully independent. Frank (2020) defined emotional stability as the ability to maintain a balanced emotional state and manage emotions in a healthy way, even in stressful situations. It's often used interchangeably with emotional intelligence and emotion regulation. This trait influences one's ability to cope with stress, resist impulses, and adapt to change. People who score high on emotional stability tend to be calm, composed, and stress resistant. They're also generally confident and not easily provoked or disheartened by setbacks. People change as they age. Individuals experience not only physical but also psychological changes across their entire lifespan. According to Stevenson, et.al., (2023), risky sexual behaviors include

non-condom use, concurrent sexual partnerships, multiple sexual partners, early sexual debut, age-disparate relationships, and transactional sex behaviors that are well documented among young people in sub-Saharan Africa.

The impact of risky sexual behaviors can have serious consequences for both the individual and their partners, including unintended pregnancy, STIs, other health complications, and mental health issues. In 2022, nearly 143,500 infants were born to females aged 15–19. Similarly, a 2020 report showed that young people aged 15–24 accounted for 53% of new STI cases (CDC, 2023). Risky sexual behaviors have also been linked to conditions such as cervical cancer, ectopic pregnancy, and infertility, as well as negative mental health indicators including anxiety, depression, and physical health problems (CDC, 2019). While several studies have examined the impact and prevalence of risky sexual behavior among emerging adults, little research has been conducted on the relationship between emotional stability and sexual risk behavior. This study is therefore uniquely positioned to address the gap regarding emotional stability and sexual risk among emerging adults in higher institutions.

Young people constitute about a fifth of the world's population and in many developing countries there is a far more significant proportion of the population. Majority of sexually active people are youths aged 15-24, it is the age group in which exploration of sexuality and sexual relationship begin making accountable for about one-half of all new sexually transmitted infections due to the susceptibility of the age period (Odimegwu, 2018).

Globally, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) remain a very important public health problem, and with the emergence of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, it has become imperative for a more coordinated approach to reduce its burden. It is estimated globally that 499 million new cases of curable STIs occur each year. These consist of 10.6 million cases of Syphilis, 106.1 million cases of Gonorrhea, 105.7 million cases of Chlamydia, and 276.4 million cases of Trichomoniasis (NASCP, 2024). These figures do not include the additional health burden caused by HIV and other viral STIs such as Herpes Simplex Virus Infection. While data on the incidence of STIs is not readily available, the report of the 2013 National Demographic and Human Survey (NDHS) indicated that 4 percent of women and 2 percent of men in Nigeria experienced a Sexually Transmitted Infection and abnormal genital discharge or sore 12 months before the survey (NASCP, 2024).

With an estimated population of 200 million people of which 42% is made up of emerging adults, Nigeria has the second largest HIV epidemic in the world and one of the highest rates of new infections in sub-Saharan UNAIDS (2019). Similarly risky sexual behavior has contributed to population growth in Nigeria. According to data from the Guttmacher Institute (2024), approximately 29% of pregnancies are considered unintended, with an estimated 1.4 million of these ending in abortion annually; this translates to around 2,990,000 unintended pregnancies out of 10,500,000 total pregnancies per year. The impact of risky sexual behavior among emerging adults is indisputable because they are associated with significant socio-economic consequences. This includes: the cost of treatment and absenteeism from work, social stigmatization, psychological consequences and infertility. Untreated Sexually Transmitted Infections/Reproductive tract infections can lead to loss of employment and broken marriages leading to disruption of the family unit (Aral & Adimora, 2018). This study is set to explore ways emotional stability impact risky sexual behavior among emerging adults in higher institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Emerging adulthood refers to a developmental stage typically occurring between the ages of 18 and 29, experienced predominantly by individuals in their twenties within Westernized societies and potentially in other regions as well. The concept was first introduced by Arnett (2000), who has since conducted extensive research on this age group, often referred to as "millennials." His work explores the timing and impact of key transitional life events, including leaving the parental home, completing formal education, securing employment, entering marriage, starting a family, redefining relationships with parents, exploring romantic relationships, forming a career identity, developing religious or spiritual beliefs, and cultivating aspirations for the future. Arnett (2014) observed that conventional indicators of reaching

adulthood such as moving out, marrying, or having children have shifted significantly. According to Jeffrey (2020) the conceptualization of Emerging Adulthood is a distinctly new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood.

Characteristics of Emerging Adult

Identity exploration: The age of identity exploration is probably the "most distinctive characteristic of emerging adulthood Noba (2022). During this time of life, Arnett, (2000) found that many of his participants were in a stage of trying to figure out who they are and who they want to be. They are trying to find out "what they want out of work, school and love" and experiment in each of those areas. According to Lazzara and Julie (2020) through exploring these different possibilities, emerging adults develop a clearer sense of identity, including an understanding of who they are, their strengths and limitations, their beliefs and values, and how they fit into the society around them.

Instability: Emerging adults explore various possibilities in love and work, their lives tend to be unstable (Lazzara & Julie, 2020). In his interviews with emerging adults, Arnett found that this stage often involves moving back and forth between college and a guardian's home, seeking independence, or relocating due to romantic relationships. During this period, work, education, and romantic relationships are unstable and subject to change. This instability is largely because individuals at this stage have not yet secured stable careers, making it difficult to afford housing or settle down (Christopher, 2006). While some may view this instability negatively, it is during this time that many young people attain education and training that forms the foundation for their future income and occupational success (Arnett, 2000).

Self-Focus: Emerging adults concentrate on themselves as they develop the skills, knowledge, and self-awareness necessary for adult life (Lazzara & Julie, 2020). Since they have not yet settled down or assumed major responsibilities for others, this is a period where they can focus on personal growth. According to Arnett (2000), "Identity formation involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions."

Feeling In-between: Emerging adults often view themselves as neither adolescents nor fully adults, but somewhere in between. Arnett (2000) and Larry (2011) note that this can be an awkward period, as individuals may experience a mix of independence and reliance on parental support, for example, through insurance, housing, or groceries. They can manage many aspects of their lives, yet not fully self-sufficient.

Possibilities/ Optimism: This is a stage marked by high optimism, where "many different futures remain possible" (Lazzara & Julie, 2020). Emerging adults tend to be hopeful and enthusiastic about their future opportunities. Freed from the immediate responsibilities of providing for a family, they often explore different paths to discover what suits them best. Interestingly, most believe they have a good chance of achieving a better life than their parents (Christopher, 2006), and they are willing to pursue their dreams even if they seem far-fetched.

Risky Sexual Behaviour (RSB), as defined by keto et al. (2020), refer to sexual activities that expose individuals to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, as well as unplanned pregnancies. These behaviours significantly impact reproductive and overall health and pose serious challenges to public health (Nwokacha, 2012). This concern has grown, especially since the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) reported that there are 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 who are the largest youth population in history. Kharsany and Karim (2023) emphasized that eliminating new HIV infections among emerging adults is critical for achieving an HIV/AIDS-free generation. UNAIDS (2021) Global AIDS Update, in Sub-Saharan Africa, assert that six out of seven new infections among adolescents are among girls aged 15–19, and young women aged 20–24 are twice as likely as men to be living with HIV. In 2021 alone, 38.4 million people were living with HIV, 9.7 million were not receiving treatment, and 650,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses (UNAIDS, 2021). Research has consistently shown that emerging adults contribute significantly to the high rate of new HIV infections in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria (Burgoyne & Drummond, 2008). UNICEF (2020) considered several intersectional factors that contribute to the vulnerability of emerging adults to HIV/AIDS through risky sexual behaviour. These factors include:

- Level of education

- Place of residence
- Religious practices
- Poverty
- Decision-making capacity

Mathur, et.al., (2020) in their study collaborate this as they emphasized that vulnerability to HIV among other sexually transmitted infections varies among emerging adults depending on factors such as residence, education level, age, and financial status. They assert that reproductive health challenges, including unplanned pregnancies, STIs, and sexual violence contribute to emerging adults crisis.

From the foregoing, emerging adulthood represents a distinct and transformative phase in human development. During this period, individuals strive to define their identity, develop personal values, and find their place in the broader social landscape. It is a stage marked by exploration, self-discovery, and crucial decision-making. Examples of risky sexual practices include early sexual initiation, unprotected sex or the use of ineffective contraceptive methods, having multiple or frequently changing sexual partners, casual sexual encounters, group sex, and sexting (Baranowska, et.al., 2016). These behaviors increase the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), experiencing unintended pregnancies, or undergoing abortions. They also pose serious psychological risks, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or attempts, aggression, and low self-esteem (Bulsa, 2012). These negative sexual experiences can generate intense emotional reactions such as fear, shame, or regret and interfere with the ability to form healthy emotional bonds. Such experiences may contribute to chronic emotional distress or even the development of neurotic attitudes toward sexuality (Lewczuk, et.al., 2021).

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to date on the relationship between emotional stability and sexual risk behaviors. However, empirical evidence shows that individuals endowed with higher emotional capacities are less likely to engage in behaviors that threaten their mental health and well-being. Emotional intelligence is inversely associated with, among other things, the use of psychoactive substances, addictions, and actions that violate social norms or criminality. Such behaviors can be considered risky. This shows that there is great concern regarding the prevalence and global trend of risky sexual behaviours which has become the focus of discussion including its attendant health implications. It is believed that students in higher institutions are assets of a nation and potential agents to address the gap in the past and on whom the future national development and the entire generation is based. This fraction of society is on the way to transforming into adulthood with great ambition. Unless appropriate age and institution targeted interventions exist, certain behaviours and acts of the students can place them at greater risk of STI including HIV and unwanted pregnancy (CDC, 2021). It recorded that the significance of the association between socio-demographic (age, sex, marital status, ever fathered/mothered, awareness of AIDS, ethnicity, residence, and region), economic factors (employment status and wealth index), and risky sexual behaviour differ by the category of risky sexual behaviour. In all, psychological factor (satisfaction with life) was a significant correlation of the lifetime number of sexual partners. Their study concludes that socio-demographic, economic, and psychological factors were predictive of risky sexual behaviour among young people in Nigeria. However, the significance of these predictors differs by type of risky sexual behaviour.

Emotional regulation theory by Gross, J. J. (2014) provides a framework for understanding how individuals manage their emotional responses to stimuli and experiences. The theory holds that emerging adults (aged 18-25) often experience heightened emotional fluctuations due to developmental transitions, such as identity formation, academic/career pressures, and relationship challenges. Those with effective emotional regulation strategies are more likely to maintain emotional stability, handle stress better, and avoid impulsive or harmful behaviors. Individuals who struggle with emotional regulation may experience emotional dysregulation, which can lead to heightened sensitivity to emotional stimuli, poor coping mechanisms, and impulsivity which is associated with risky sexual behaviors, such as unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, or engaging in sexual activities without considering the consequences. These behaviors may arise from attempts to cope with negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, sadness, or anger) or to seek pleasure and instant gratification to escape emotional discomfort.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was carried out using a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component involved the use of a structured questionnaire to collect data from students, while the qualitative component employed in-depth interviews (IDIs) with selected students and lecturers in Federal University Otuoke, a government-owned institution located in Otuoke town, within Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, in Southern Nigeria. This study was carried out among 385 students randomly selected across six faculties in the institution. Purposive sampling was used to select 6 lecturers and 6 students for the in-depth interviews, focusing on those with relevant experience in student welfare, counselling, or direct teaching engagement with undergraduates. The IDI guide contained open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions in detail, with opportunities for probing to elicit richer responses. Interviews lasted between 30–45 minutes and were recorded (with participants' consent) for accurate transcription. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from IDIs were analysed thematically to provide richer insights into the patterns observed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	**Category**	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Age	18–20	142	36.9
	21–23	158	41.0
	24–26	63	16.4
	27 and above	22	5.7
Total		385	100.0
Gender	Male	197	51.2
	Female	185	48.1
	Other	3	0.8
Total		385	100.0
Faculty	Science	78	20.3
	Social Sciences & Humanities	92	23.9
	Management Sciences	64	16.6
	Education	56	14.5
	Engineering	53	13.8
	Nursing Science	42	10.9
Total		385	100.0
Year of Study	100 Level	106	27.5
	200 Level	98	25.5
	300 Level	82	21.3
	400 Level	69	17.9
	500 Level	30	7.8
Total		385	100.0
Relationship Status	Single	243	63.1
	In a relationship	112	29.1
	Married	24	6.2
	Other	6	1.6
Total		385	100.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The demographic characteristics of the respondents provide a foundational understanding of the social profile of the study participants and help contextualize the subsequent analysis of emotional stability and risky sexual behaviour. The analysis considers the age distribution, gender composition, faculty representation, year of study, and relationship status of the 385 respondents surveyed in this study.

The age analysis revealed that a significant proportion of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 23 years, accounting for 158 participants or 41.0% of the total sample. This was closely followed by the 18–20 age category, which included 142 respondents, representing 36.9% of the participants. The 24–26 age group comprised 63 respondents (16.4%), while those aged 27 years and above accounted for only 22 participants (5.7%). This distribution reflects the typical age range of undergraduate students in Nigerian higher institutions, where the majority fall within the early adulthood stage. The dominance of the 18–23 age bracket is significant because it coincides with the period of emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration, emotional development, and experimentation in relationships factors directly relevant to the study's focus on emotional stability and sexual risk behaviour.

In terms of gender, the study achieved a near-balanced distribution between males and females, with males constituting 197 respondents (51.2%) and females accounting for 185 respondents (48.1%). Only a small fraction of respondents (3 participants or 0.8%) identified as 'Other'. The relatively equal gender representation ensures that the perspectives of both male and female students are adequately captured in the study. This balance is crucial for drawing comparisons in emotional stability and sexual risk behaviour across genders, as past studies have highlighted potential gender-based differences in emotional regulation and sexual decision-making.

The distribution of respondents by faculty shows notable variation, with the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities recording the highest number of participants (92 respondents / 23.9%). This was followed by the Faculty of Science with 78 respondents (20.3%) and the Faculty of Management Sciences with 64 respondents (16.6%). The Faculty of Education accounted for 56 respondents (14.5%), while the Faculty of Engineering had 53 respondents (13.8%). The Faculty of Nursing Science was the least represented, with 42 respondents (10.9%). This pattern mirrors enrolment trends in many Nigerian universities, where Social Sciences and Science faculties tend to attract higher student numbers.

The analysis of year-level distribution indicates that the highest proportion of respondents were in 100 Level (106 respondents /27.5%), followed by those in 200 Level (98 respondents / 25.5%). Students in 300 Level constituted 82 respondents (21.3%), while those in 400 Level numbered 69 (17.9%). The smallest group was from 500 Level, with only 30 respondents (7.8%). The predominance of lower-level students may be attributed to the higher enrolment numbers in earlier years of study before attrition or graduation reduces class sizes. This is relevant to the study, as younger students may exhibit different patterns of emotional stability and sexual behaviour compared to older students, possibly due to differences in maturity, exposure, and life experience.

Regarding relationship status, majority of respondents (243/ 63.1%) reported being single at the time of the survey. A substantial minority (112 respondents /29.1%) indicated they were in a relationship, while 24 respondents (6.2%) were married. The smallest category, 'Other' (including divorced, separated, or unspecified statuses), accounted for just 6 respondents (1.6%). The predominance of single respondents reflects the age profile of the sample and the focus on undergraduate students, most of whom have not yet entered into formal marital relationships. However, the proportion in relationships (nearly one-third) is still significant, as relationship involvement is a factor that could influence sexual behaviour patterns and the role of emotional stability in such decisions.

Emotional stability impacted risky sexual behaviour among emerging adults in higher institutions in Nigeria?

Impact of Emotional Stability on Risky Sexual Behaviour

Statements	**SA**	**A**	**D**	**SD**
My emotional state influences the sexual decisions I make.	145	112	86	42
When emotionally stable, I make more responsible choices in relationships.	162	120	63	40
Emotional instability can lead to risky sexual behaviour.	180	121	50	34
I am aware of the sexual health risks associated with emotional stress and poor decision-making.	172	133	48	32

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Findings revealed that 145 respondents (37.7%) strongly agreed and 112 (29.1%) who agreed, representing a cumulative 66.8% positive response. This indicates that over two-thirds of the participants consciously recognize the link between their emotional condition and the sexual choices they make. In contrast, 86 respondents (22.3%) disagreed and 42 (10.9%) strongly disagreed, suggesting that while the majority acknowledge this link, a minority perceive their sexual decisions as independent of their emotional state.

For the second statement *"When emotionally stable, I make more responsible choices in relationships"* 162 respondents (42.1%) strongly agreed and 120 (31.2%) agreed, resulting in a cumulative 73.3% agreement rate. This demonstrates that the majority of respondents believe emotional stability enhances their capacity to make mature, responsible, and safety-conscious relationship decisions. Only 63 respondents (16.4%) disagreed and 40 (10.4%) strongly disagreed, indicating that disagreement was minimal. These results align with literature suggesting that emotional balance promotes better judgment, impulse control, and risk assessment in intimate relationships.

The third statement *"Emotional instability can lead to risky sexual behaviour" yielded* the highest level of agreement, with 180 respondents (46.8%) strongly agreeing and 121 (31.4%) agreeing. This 78.2% cumulative agreement highlights the perceived vulnerability of students to engage in unsafe sexual practices during periods of emotional distress. Such risky behaviours may include unprotected intercourse, multiple sexual partnerships, or sexual activity under the influence of substances. The relatively low combined disagreement rate (21.8%) further reinforces the consensus that emotional instability is a significant risk factor.

Finally, for the statement *"I am aware of the sexual health risks associated with emotional stress and poor decision-making"* 172 respondents (44.7%) strongly agreed and 133 (34.5%) agreed, giving a total of 79.2% agreement. This finding shows a high level of awareness among respondents about the potential negative outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies that can result from engaging in sexual activity during periods of poor emotional regulation. The 48 (12.5%) who disagreed and 32 (8.3%) who strongly disagreed likely represent those who either underestimate these risks or feel confident in their ability to avoid them despite emotional challenges.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Theme 1: Relationship Between Emotional Stability and Risky Sexual Behaviour among Emerging Adults in Federal University Otuoke

This theme addresses the first research objective: to investigate the relationship between emotional stability and risky sexual behaviour among emerging adults in Federal University Otuoke (FUO). Emotional stability, in this context, refers to the ability to regulate emotions, maintain self-control under stress, and make decisions based on reason rather than impulse. The integration of survey findings and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with both students and lecturers shows a strong relationship between emotional stability and sexual decision-making, with clear protective benefits for students who are emotionally resilient. Conversely, emotional instability emerged as a risk factor for unsafe sexual behaviours, particularly in contexts of peer pressure, stress, and relationship dynamics.

Theme 2: High Emotional Stability Promotes Safe Sexual Decisions

Survey results indicate that 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that emotional stability helps them make safer sexual decisions. These students reported consistent condom use, avoidance of casual sexual encounters, and the ability to resist peer pressure. IDIs confirmed that emotional stability fosters reflective thinking, risk assessment, and a focus on long-term consequences rather than immediate gratification. According to the respondent's response

> *"When you are in control of yourself, you won't just jump into sex because friends are doing it. You think of the consequences first."* IDI, 300-Level Female Student, Sociology
>
> *"If I am feeling down, I don't let it push me into doing something I will regret, like sleeping with someone without protection."* IDI, 400-Level Male Student, Political Science

> *"Students who have emotional maturity tend to take their health seriously. They are less likely to engage in unsafe sexual practices, and they plan ahead."* IDI, Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science

These findings align with African Union (2016), that established that emotional regulation significantly reduces sexual risk-taking in African university contexts that emphasized self-control in youth correlates with consistent use of protection and refusal of unsafe encounters.

Theme 3: **Low Emotional Stability Increases Vulnerability to Risky Sexual Behaviour**

The survey revealed that 72% of respondents agreed that students who are easily overwhelmed by emotions are more likely to engage in risky sexual practices. Common behaviours included inconsistent condom use, multiple sexual partners, and sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Students and lecturers alike noted that emotional instability often leads to sexual activity as a coping mechanism for stress, loneliness, or low self-esteem. According to the respondent's response

> *"When I'm stressed or heartbroken, I just want to be around someone who makes me feel better, even if it means having sex without thinking much."* IDI, 200-Level Female Student, Sociology
>
> *"Some guys here use sex as a way to escape from problems. That's why they don't think about condoms sometimes."* IDI, 300-Level Male Student, Economics
>
> *"Some students use relationships and sex to mask deeper issues. Without emotional balance, they make impulsive decisions that put them at risk."* IDI, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

These patterns are consistent with Paul (2019), who linked emotional instability with higher engagement in unprotected sex among Nigerian undergraduates.

Theme 4: Peer Influence Moderated by Emotional Stability

Approximately 69% of respondents indicated that emotionally stable students are better at resisting peer pressure related to sexual activities. Survey trends suggest that emotionally stable students have greater self-confidence and a stronger sense of personal boundaries. Lecturers observed that such students often set personal rules and refuse to compromise under peer influence. According to the respondent's response

> *"Friends might tell you to try something risky, but if you are strong-minded, you can say no without feeling bad."* IDI, 400-Level Female Student, Sociology
>
> *"It's not that I don't get invited to parties where things happen, but I know my limits and I stick to them."* IDI, 300-Level Male Student, Political Science
>
> *"Peer pressure is a major factor, but emotionally balanced students can decline without feeling the need to prove themselves."* IDI, Lecturer, Department of Sociology

This mirrors Osafo, et.al., (2022), who found that emotionally stable individuals have reduced susceptibility to peer-induced risky behaviours due to stronger self-regulation.

Theme 5: Emotional Stability and Condom Use Consistency

Survey findings showed that 74% of respondents with high emotional stability reported always using condoms, compared to 48% among those with lower stability. Emotional stability was associated with proactive sexual health planning, including carrying condoms and initiating discussions about protection with partners. Lecturers noted that emotionally mature students tend to link condom use with self-respect and personal responsibility. According to the respondent's response

> *"If I know there's a chance of having sex, I make sure I have protection. That's just part of being responsible."* IDI, 200-Level Male Student, Sociology
>
> *"Condom use is not negotiable for me. My peace of mind is more important than pleasing someone."* IDI, 300-Level Female Student, Political Science
>
> *"In my counselling sessions, I see that students with emotional maturity are more likely to initiate safe sex conversations and insist on protection."* IDI, Senior Lecturer, Department of History Education

This supports Adebayo and Omisore (2023) and Melesse, et.al., (2021), who both linked emotional stability with consistent contraceptive use in university populations.

Theme 6: Emotional Stability as a Long-Term Protective Factor

Both survey and IDI data indicate that emotional stability has a cumulative, long-term protective effect, shaping not only immediate sexual decisions but also overall relationship patterns. Students with higher emotional stability reported being more selective about partners, avoiding high-risk relationships, and prioritizing academic and personal goals over transient sexual gratification.

According to the respondent's response

> *"I don't just enter relationships anyhow. If the person is not aligned with my goals, I walk away."* IDI, 400-Level Female Student, Sociology
>
> *"Being stable means, you can delay gratification and think about the future, not just the moment."* IDI, 300-Level Male Student, Sociology
>
> *"Those who can control their emotions in their 20s are less likely to carry risky patterns into adulthood. This is why emotional education is important in universities."* IDI, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

Melesse, et.al., (2021) similarly found that emotional resilience in emerging adulthood significantly reduces the likelihood of developing high-risk sexual patterns later in life.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that emotional stability is a critical determinant of sexual decision-making among emerging adults in higher institutions. Students with higher levels of emotional regulation and resilience tend to adopt safer sexual practices, whereas those experiencing emotional instability are more likely to engage in risky behaviours, often driven by impulsivity, peer influence, and stress-related coping mechanisms. Given the above, the implication is that unless appropriate higher institution-based interventions are established to curb the practice, certain behaviors and acts of emerging adults can place them at greater risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections/Reproductive tract infection STIs (bacterial vaginosis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, chancroid, granuloma inguinale, lymphogranuloma venereum, yeast infection, HIV infection, Hepatitis B and C infections etc.), including HIV and unwanted pregnancy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The university should establish comprehensive mental health support services by creating confidential, student-friendly counselling centres. Trained psychologists and counsellors should be available to help students build resilience, regulate emotions, and adopt coping strategies that reduce impulsive sexual decision-making and other risky sexual behaviours amongst students.
2) Institutional collaboration with non-governmental organizations to establish and scale up Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) programs in tertiary institutions of Nigeria.
3) There is need for Peer mentorship and faculty guidance programs for emerging adults in higher institutions.

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