

PREVALENCE AND PERCEPTION OF COHABITATION AMONG THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

¹Nnubia, U. I., *Umennuihe, C. L., ¹Okechukwu, F. O., ¹Nnodim, E. J. & ¹Makata, M.C.

¹Department of Home Science and Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

*Correspondence email: chidiogo.ezeonyeche@unn.edu.ng

08100364318

ABSTRACT

Cohabitation which was once considered unwholesome in the African culture is becoming prevalent among students in Nigerian tertiary institution with a vast array of consequences. This study investigated the prevalence, perceived factors and health-related problems of cohabitation among students in University of Nigeria. Five specific objectives guided the study. Multi-stage sampling technique was employed in the selection of 746 students from a population of 26,629. An interview and a standardized questionnaire titled "Students' Cohabitation Questionnaire" were used as instruments for data collection. Findings showed that 74.1% of the students had close friends of the opposite sex. More than half (54.8%) of those who had opposite sex friends visited each other's residence regularly. The result for objective 2, shows that a total of 27% of the respondents were found to be cohabiting. Among this group, 16% were partly cohabiting while eleven percent (11%) were fully cohabiting. Factors responsible for cohabitation as rated by the respondents included financial problem, need for academic assistance, lack of parental training, disregard for African culture and peer pressure. A greater proportion of the respondents disagreed that cohabitation increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, suicidal attempt, unwanted pregnancy and abortion. Strategies for minimizing the incidence of cohabitation among university students as rated by the students included keeping away from bad friends, reduction in school and accommodation fees, proper parental upbringing. Cohabitation is prevalent among undergraduate students in Nigeria. University administration should therefore make accommodations available and affordable for students.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Health, Undergraduate, Students, Culture

INTRODUCTION

In the times past, universities had been able to accommodate most of the undergraduate students in hostels within the campuses. The university authority makes residential rules and regulations governing the hostels, such that there is no room for accommodating both sexes in a single apartment. However, with the current up surge in the student population, most universities find it impossible to cater for the accommodation needs of the students. Majority of the students therefore resort to off-campus apartments, mostly in response to the shortage of hostel accommodations, but also due to personal preferences. In the off-campus apartments, rules are hardly put in place to regulate the activities of the residents. As a result of this, and in addition to the dynamics of individual values and moral standards, cohabitation is gradually permeating the culture of students in higher institutions.

Cohabitation refers to living together of two independent people who are emotionally and sexually involved, without any form of legal marriage (Onoyase, 2020). Unachukwu and Iloakasia, (2018) defined cohabitation as a situation when an adult man and woman live together and engage in non-marital intimate sexual acts. According to Duyilemi, Tunde-Awe and Adekola (2018), cohabitation among undergraduate students is often referred to as campus marriage or campus coupling, in which some student couples are well known among their peers as non-marital sexual partners. Jamison and Ganong (2011) identified two forms of cohabitation among students; part-time cohabitation or stay over relationship, and full-time cohabitation. Stay over partners live apart but spend nights together with their partners while full-time cohabiters maintain one residential unit (Jamison & Ganong, 2011).

Cohabitation is on the rise in various Nigerian tertiary institutions and might not be decreasing in the near future except adequate measures are put in place to stem the tide. A study carried out in Ebonyi state by Imo (2017) found that 11% of the students were cohabiting. Adejumo, Okojide, Adejumo and Bateren (2017) reported 66% prevalence among undergraduates of four public universities in Ogun and Lagos states. In addition, Duyilemi, et al. (2018) reported in their study that 25-50% of students in a university in Ondo state engaged in the act of cohabitation. Most of the cohabiting students do so without the knowledge and approval of their parents. Studies have found various factors associated with cohabitation among students. They include economic factors (Adejumo et al., 2017), freedom from parental control (Imo, 2017) and high cost of school fees (Iyakolo, 2021).

Cohabitation which was once considered an abomination and unwholesome in the African culture is becoming prevalent among youths in Nigerian tertiary institution with a vast array of consequences (Iyakolo, 2021). Ojo (2019) found that cohabitation adversely affected students' academic performance. In a similar study among polytechnic students in Owerri, Imo state, Kalu, Ejiogu, Chukwukadibia and Nleonu (2021) reported sexually transmitted diseases, poor academic performance, dropping out of school, abortion, depression and death as some of the problems associated with cohabitation among students. Ojo (2019) further observed that many of the cohabiting students do not eventually get married, leaving some of the students, heart-broken and emotionally destabilized for the rest of their lives. All these could endanger a student's life, especially female students, and possibly truncate the educational pursuit and life career of the individual. However, it is not yet certain whether undergraduate students actually believe that cohabitation could result in so much health-related problems. There is also scarcity of data on the issue of cohabitation among undergraduates in the universities in Enugu state. This study therefore is aimed at filling this very crucial gap, by investigating the prevalence, perceived factors and opinions of students on the health consequences of cohabitation among undergraduates, using University of Nigeria as a case study.

Objectives of the study:

The specific objectives of the study were to;

1. identify the pattern of opposite-sex relationship among the respondents;
2. determine the prevalence and type of cohabitation among the respondents;
3. identify perceived factors responsible for cohabitation;
4. ascertain the opinion of the respondents on the health-related consequences of cohabitation; and
5. identify important strategies for minimizing cohabitation among undergraduate students.

METHODOLOGY

Study design: The study adopted descriptive cross-sectional research design. This research design was considered appropriate because it has the ability to examine current situation in a given place and to check the extent to which current practices meet required standard (Uzoagulu, 2011).

Study population: The study population involved all 26,629 undergraduate students in University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Enugu campuses within the 2019/20 academic session.

Sample size and sampling technique: Sample for the study was selected in multi-stages. In the first stage, simple random sampling by balloting without replacement was used to select fifty percent of the total faculties from the two campuses. Fifty percent was selected because it is considered to be representative of the population. Thus, five faculties in Nsukka campus and three faculties in Enugu campus were selected for the study. They were Faculties of Biological Sciences, Social Sciences, Agriculture, Pharmaceutical Sciences and Arts from Nsukka campus and Faculties of Law, Health Sciences and Business Administration from Enugu campus. The student population in the selected faculties at Nsukka campus was 17,769 while that of Enugu campus was 8,860.

In stage two, online sample size calculator by Survey Monkey was used to calculate the total sample size for each campus using this formular;

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2} \div \left(1 + \left(\frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2 N} \right) \right)$$

Where; N = Population of the study, n = Sample size, e= Margin error (0.05), z==z- score (level of confidence) and p= baseline levels of indicators (50%).

This gives a total sample size of 746 students; 377 students from Nsukka campus and 369 students from Enugu campus.

Instrument for data collection: An interview and a structured questionnaire titled “Students’ Cohabitation Questionnaire” were used to assess the prevalence, factors and opinion on health-related problems of cohabitation among undergraduates of University of Nigeria. The interview was briefly used to obtain elaborate views of the respondents on the items. The questionnaire was divided into four parts. Part I was used to elicit personal data and opposite sex relationship pattern of the respondents. Part II elicited information on the factors associated with cohabitation among the respondents, while part III elicited information on the opinion the respondents on health-related consequences of cohabitation. Finally, part IV elicited information on strategies that could be adopted to minimize the incidence of cohabitation among undergraduate students. Part II of the questionnaires was assessed on a 5- point Likert scale as follows: Strongly agree (5 point), Agree (4 point), Neither agree nor disagree (3 point), Disagree (2 point), Strongly disagree (1 point), the decision rule was placed at mean score ≥ 3 . Part III which is the respondents’ opinion on health-related consequences of cohabitation was rated on a 3-point scale of 1= agree, 2 = undecided and 3 = disagree. Part IV which is the strategy of minimizing cohabitation was assessed using a 4-point rating scale of 1 = unimportant, 2 = Not so important, 3 = Important and 4 = Very Important type of questionnaire, the decision rule was placed at mean score of ≥ 2.5 .

Validation and reliability of the instrument: The questionnaire was validated by three lecturers from the Department of Home Science and Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their suggestions and observations were used to modify the questionnaire items and approved by the supervisor. Cronbach’s alfa coefficient score of 0.69 was obtained for the factors responsible for cohabitation, 0.65 for health-related problems, 0.81 for the strategies for minimizing the incident of cohabitation. These values fell within the acceptability range of 0.65 and 0.90 as stated by Goforth (2015) showing that the instrument showed moderate internal consistency of the items.

Data analysis: The results were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Frequency and percentage were used to present results on the respondents’ background information, pattern of opposite sex relationship among the respondents, prevalence and types of cohabitation, and opinion of respondents on health-related consequences of cohabitation. Mean and standard deviation were calculated for factors responsible for cohabitation and important strategies for minimizing cohabitation. Tables and pie chart were used for presentation of results.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

More than half (56.7%) of the respondent were females, whereas 43.3% were males. 47% were within the ages of 18-22 years while 3.6% were <18 years. Most (81.5%) of them were Christians, while few (7.4%) were Islam. The table further reveals that more than half (62.7%)

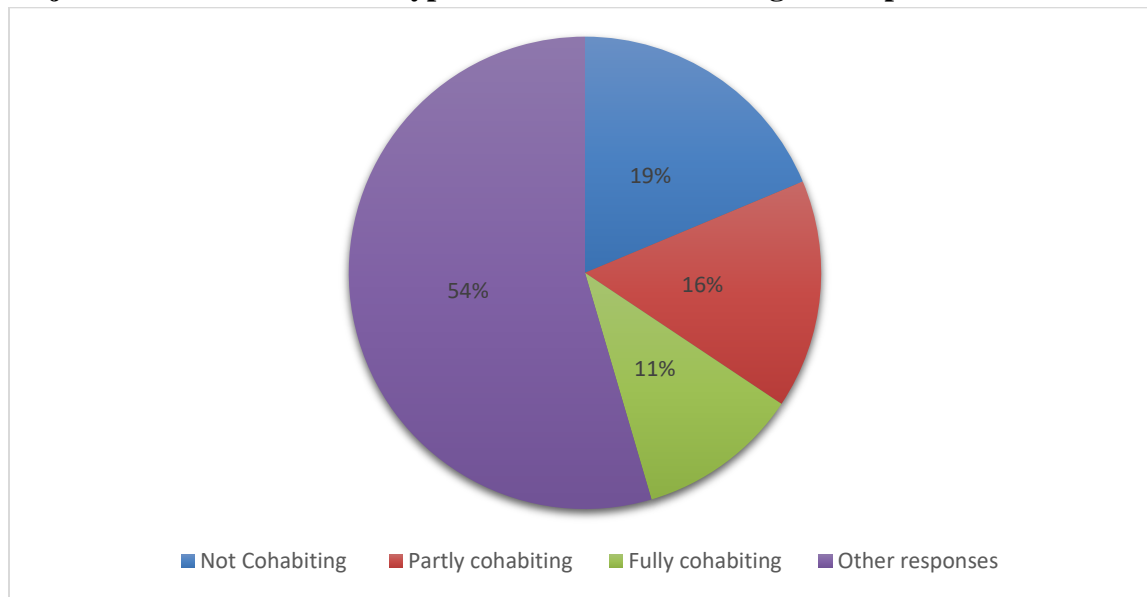
were single, and only 2.4% were widowed. Most (79.8%) of the respondents were Igbo, 12.4% were Yoruba and just a few (7.8%) were Hausa.

Objective 1: Pattern of opposite sex relationship among the respondents

Table I: Pattern of Opposite Sex Relationship among the Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Do you have a close friend of the opposite sex?		
Yes	520	74.1
No	182	25.9
Total responses	702	100
How often do you visit each other's residence?		
Regularly	285	54.8
Occasionally	80	15.4
Never	155	29.8
Total responses	520	100
How long do you stay in each other's residence per visit?		
Few hours in a day	131	41.1
Few days in a week	6	1.9
A week or more in a month	104	32.6
We don't need to visit, we live together	78	24.5
Total responses	319	100.0
How long have you been staying over/living in each other's residence?		
Less than a month	39	20.0
1-3months	5	2.6
4-6months	54	27.7
7-12months	97	49.7
Total responses	195	100.0

Data on Table I showed the opposite sex relationship pattern of the respondents (objective 1). Majority (74.1%) of the respondents had close friends of the opposite sex. More than half (54.8%) of those who had opposite sex friends visited each other's residence regularly, 15.4% visited occasionally while 29.8% never exchanged visits. During each visit, 41.1% (n = 319) reported that they spent few hours in a day, about a third (32.6%) spent a week or more in a month, while 24.5% reported that they lived together, therefore did not need to visit each other. A good number (49.7%) of those who sleep over at opposite sex friend's apartment, have been doing so for 7-12 months, 27.7%; 4-6 months, 20.0%; less than a month and a few (2.6%) have been together for 1-3 months.

Objective 2: Prevalence and types of cohabitation among the respondents**Fig. I: Prevalence of Cohabitation among the Respondents**

The result for objective 2, shows that a total of 27% of the respondents were found to be cohabiting. Among this group, 16% were partly cohabiting indicating respondents who spend few days or weeks together with opposite sex friend. Eleven percent (11%) were fully cohabiting. About 20% were not cohabiting and 54% either did not have opposite sex close friends or never exchanged visits at place of residence.

Objective 3: Factors responsible for cohabitation among the respondents**Table II: Factors Responsible for Cohabitation among the Undergraduates**

Parameter	Mean	Std deviation	Remark
Feeling free and independent from parental control	3.41	1.26	Accepted
Financial problems	3.30	1.05	Accepted
Need for academic assistance	3.26	1.04	Accepted
Lack of parental training	3.19	1.25	Accepted
Disregard for African culture	3.11	1.20	Accepted
Loose morals	3.07	1.02	Accepted
Peer pressure	3.04	1.62	Accepted
Loneliness	3.00	1.63	Accepted
Need for Love and friendship	2.93	1.02	Rejected
Security reasons	2.92	1.76	Rejected
Testing compatibility for marriage	2.85	1.08	Rejected
Health condition that requires assistance	2.81	1.09	Rejected
Desire for sexual satisfaction	2.78	1.42	Rejected
Inadequate hostel facilities in the university	2.78	1.34	Rejected

High cost of renting accommodation	2.56	1.55	Rejected
Newness to the environment	2.56	1.40	Rejected

Findings for objective 3 (Table II) shows the factors responsible for cohabitation as rated by the respondents. Out of the 16 items, 8 were accepted as factors and they include, feeling free and independent from parental control (3.41 ± 1.26), financial problem (3.30 ± 1.05), need for academic assistance (3.26 ± 1.04), lack of parental training (3.19 ± 1.25) disregard for African culture (3.11 ± 1.20), loose moral (3.07 ± 1.02), peer pressure (3.04 ± 1.62) and loneliness (3.00 ± 1.63).

Objective 4: Opinion of the respondents on the health-related consequences of cohabitation

Table III: Opinion of the Respondents on the Health-Related Consequences of Cohabitation

	Agreed F (%)	Undecided F (%)	Disagreed F (%)
Increase in risk of STDs	130 (18.5)	234 (33.3)	338 (48.1)
Drug abuse	111 (15.8)	140 (19.9)	450 (64.1)
Suicidal attempt	104 (14.8)	260 (27.0)	338 (48.2)
Unwanted pregnancy	52 (7.4)	130 (18.5)	520 (74.1)
Abortion and its complication	52 (7.4)	234 (33.4)	416 (59.3)
Emotional stress	52 (7.4)	260 (37.0)	390 (55.6)
Sexual/Physical abuse	34 (3.7)	117 (14.8)	551 (77.8)

Data obtained for objective 4 (Table III) shows the opinion of the respondents on the health-related consequences of cohabitation. Only a few (18.5%) of the respondents agreed that cohabitation increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), 15.8%; drug abuse, 14.8%; suicidal attempt, 7.4%; unwanted pregnancy, 7.4%; abortion and its complications, 7.4%; emotional stress. Very few (3.7%) agreed that it leads to sexual/physical abuse. A greater proportion of the respondents disagreed to all the items.

Objective 5: Important strategies for minimizing cohabitation among undergraduates

Table IV: Important strategies for minimizing cohabitation among undergraduates

Strategies	Mean	Standard deviation	Remark
Promoting African instead of Western moral culture	3.00	0.90	Very important
Provision of school guidance and counselor by each faculty	3.00	0.61	Very important
Keeping away from bad friends	2.93	0.72	Important
Reduction in tuition fees	2.85	1.04	Important
Proper parental upbringing	2.74	0.84	Important
Reduction in hostel fees and students house rents	2.74	0.97	Important

Staying away from erotic films and videos	2.67	0.82	Important
Legal regulation against student cohabitation	2.44	0.92	Not so important
Moral education against cohabitation	2.37	0.82	Not so important
Parent(s) should often visit their wards in school	2.33	0.94	Not so important
Provision of adequate hostel accommodation for students in the school premises	2.19	0.61	Not so important

Table IV provided data on the strategies for minimizing the incidence of cohabitation among university students (objective 5). Two out of eleven items were regarded as very important and they include; promoting African instead of western moral culture (3.00 ± 0.97) and provision of school guidance and counselor by each faculty (3.00 ± 0.61). Five items were regarded as important; keeping away from bad friends (2.93 ± 0.72), reduction in school fees (2.85 ± 1.04), proper parental upbringing (2.74 ± 0.84), reduction in hostel fees (2.74 ± 0.97), and student house rent, staying away from erotic films and videos (2.67 ± 0.82).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Studies have shown that cohabitation is becoming rampant among undergraduate students in Nigerian higher institutions. In this study, more than a quarter (27%) of the students were partly or fully cohabiting with friend of the opposite sex. Among the cohabiting students, almost one out of five students were partially living together; spending few days or more per visit in each other's residence, while 11% were fully cohabiting. This finding showed a similar prevalence to that observed by Imo (2017) among the undergraduate students at Ebonyi state. Conversely, the prevalence was much lower than the 66% reported by Adejumo et al. (2017) among undergraduates in four public universities in Ogun and Lagos states.

Cohabitation has been attributed to some factors in various studies. However, it is surprising to observe that inadequate hostel accommodation was not accepted as a factor among the respondents. Unachukwu and Iloakasia, (2018) made similar findings among undergraduate students in Anambra state. However, this finding is incongruent with the findings of Onoyase (2020) who observed that shortage of in-campus accommodation was one of the major factors encouraging the trend of cohabitation among students. In line with the finding of Imo (2017), the finding of current study showed that the most perceived factor was the sense of freedom of having left home for more independent living, followed by financial problems which could make students to co-depend on each other for financial survival. Furthermore, disregard for African culture loose morals, financial problems, need for academic assistance, lack of parental training, peer pressure and loneliness were the factors responsible for cohabitation among students. These findings corroborate the findings of previous study by Imo (2011) conducted in south-eastern Nigeria.

Opinion of the respondents on health-related consequences of cohabitation among undergraduates

Cohabitation has been found to have various health related problems. However, when students do not agree that such problems were consequences of cohabitation, the knowledge of such problems might not deter them from engaging in cohabitation. The finding of this study showed that majority of the respondents did not agree that cohabitation could lead to increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and its complications as found in previous studies (Duyilemi et al., 2018; Kalu et al., 2021; Unachukwu & Iloakasia, 2018). On a personal enquiry, some of the respondents verbally stated that “cohabiting couples who take adequate precautions do not run any higher risk of all the mentioned problems than their non-cohabiting counterparts who indulge in premarital sex”. Thus, it is unprotected premarital sexual relationship rather than cohabitation that was considered problematic among the youths. Much as this line of argument is valid, it further goes to substantiate the observation that the contemporary youths have adopted the hitherto abominable culture of premarital sexual activities which is usually obtainable with cohabitation (Imo, 2017). The finding also showed that more than half of the respondents do not agree that cohabitation could lead to emotional stress due to incidences of cheating and break-ups, sexual and physical abuse, drug use and abuse. Again, the argument by the respondents is that it depends on the individuals involved in the relationship and cannot be widely asserted for everyone.

Strategies that could be adopted to minimize the incidence of cohabitation among undergraduates

Many researchers have proffered different solutions or strategies that could be adopted to minimize the incidence of this menace called cohabitation among undergraduates. From the finding of current study, seven strategies were identified as ways of minimizing cohabitation. They include; reduction in hostel fees and students house rent, reduction in tuition fees, proper parental upbringing, provision of school guidance and counselor at faculty level, keeping away from bad friends, staying away from erotic films and videos, and promoting African instead of western culture. Other strategies that were suggested by previous studies were not found so important in this study such as enforcing legal regulation against, regular visit by parents (Popoola & Ayandele, 2019). Unexpectedly, providing adequate hostel accommodation was not considered an important strategy for minimizing cohabitation among students as observed by Obikeze, Obi and Mmegbuanaeze (2019). In the verbal opinion of some students, “students who will cohabit will do so, even if there were enough hostel accommodation”.

CONCLUSION

Cohabitation is quite prevalent among undergraduate students of the University of Nigeria mostly in the partial form of it. It appears to have deeper rooted causes than the inadequate hostel accommodation widely observed in previous studies. Factors responsible for cohabitation among the students were traceable to the family and individual students rather than the institution, such

as independence from parents, financial problems, lack of parental training, need for academic assistance, loneliness and disregard for African culture. This indicates that families have indispensable roles to play in curbing the issue of cohabitation among students through adequate financial provision for their children, inculcating good morals and promoting the much-cherished African values of premarital chastity. However, the university can also assist the family by making accommodations more affordable and providing counsellors for students.

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