



Psycho-Social Predictors of Pre-marital Sexual Practices among In-School Adolescents in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Ben N. Ohuruogu¹, Patricia Ebere Nwazonobi², Patrick Eni Eluu³, Ede Francisca Nwakaego⁴, Scholastica Amuchi Orji¹, Abu Sunday⁵, Ogueri Emmanuel obinna⁶, Imakwu Veronica Nkechi⁷, Imakwu, Anyanwu Stellamaris Ngozi⁶, Patrick Nwite Nwajioha⁴, Christian O. Aleke^{1*}

¹Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

²Department of Philosophy, Religion and Peace Studies, Ebonyi State University, Nigeria

³Department of Arts and Social Science Education Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

⁴Department of Educational Foundations, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

⁵*Department of Human Kinetics & Health Education, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria.*

⁶Department of Health Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

⁷Department of Technology and Vocational Education, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Ebonyi State

Correspondence: Christian Okechukwu Aleke Tel: +2347030856506. E-mail: Christian.aleke2020@gmail.com or christian.aleke@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Premarital sexual practices particularly in developing countries have continued to spawn public health threats and concerns yet little or no studies have been conducted to unravel the actual predictors. This study aimed to examine the Psycho-Social Predictors of Pre-marital Sexual Practices among In-School Adolescents in Ebonyi State.

Subjects and Method: This was a cross-sectional survey research design conducted among in-school adolescents' pre-marital sexual practices in Ebonyi State. 400 samples were selected using multi-stage sampling. The dependent variables is psycho-social predictors of sexual practices among in-school adolescents. The independent variables were age, gender, educational class level, self-esteem, peer group, parental involvement, and religious background. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, Psycho-Social Predictors of Pre-Marital Sexual Practices Questionnaire (PSPSPQ). Data collected were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, T-test, and Simple Linear Regression Analysis.

Results: The findings from the bivariate analysis show that age ($p=0.002$), education ($p=0.018$), and gender ($p=0.025$), are significant and high predictors of in-school adolescents' pre-marital Sexual practices in Ebonyi State. Further, the result of the t-test and Simple Linear



Regression Analysis revealed that self-esteem ($\beta = 0.531$; CI 95% = 0.376 to 0.519; $P = 0.001 < 0.05$); peer group ($\beta = 0.443$; CI 95% = 0.359 to 0.542; $P = 0.010 < 0.05$), religious background ($\beta = 0.162$; CI 95% = 0.060 - 0.245; $P = 0.001 < 0.05$); and family background ($\beta = 0.483$; CI 95% = 0.471 - 0.682; $P = 0.020 < 0.05$) are high predictors of in-school adolescents' pre-marital Sexual practices in Ebonyi State.

Conclusions: A significant proportion of in-school adolescents were engaged in pre-marital sexual practices due to psycho-social factors like self-esteem, family factors, peer group, and religious background, age, gender, and educational class level. Thus, public health interventions are required with a special focus on psycho-social factors.

Keywords: Pre-Marital, Sexual Practices, Psycho-Social Predictors, In-School Adolescents, Ebonyi State



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Background

Premarital sexual practices among in-school adolescents particularly in developing countries including Nigeria have continued to spawn public health threats and concerns. Many teenagers and adolescents have been affected thus, some have dropped out of school, while others have either become teenage parents or lost their lives due to early and unintended pregnancy and complications arising from unsafe abortions (Okah et al., 2023). The rate at which adolescents and youth engage in premarital sexual practices and its associated consequences in Nigeria especially in Ebonyi State has become a source of worry and concern thus underscoring the need for research (Scott, 2009). In Ebonyi State, sexual discussion and love in the past were regarded as sacred and limited to adult males and female couples in marriage (Alo and Akinde, 2009; Aleke et al., 2021). Today the positive view about love and sex seems to have disappeared as most young adolescents and teenagers engage in touching, sexting, and exploring each other's physique in places like schools, playgrounds, worship centers, and various homes, with its attendant consequences such as unprotected sexual intercourse leading to unwanted pregnancy, school dropout, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDs, and death (Idang et al., 2015; Aleke et al., 2021).

Studies have documented that most adolescent and teenage children engage in sexual activities such as touching, rubbing, or pinching the nipples or other erogenous zones and viewing pornographic movies to stimulate sexual interest (Bobo, 2012). Research has also revealed that pre-marital sexual practices among adolescents and teenagers can be predicted by some psychological and social factors. For instance, social factors associated with early sexual practices have been reported on family structure, parental education, peer pressure, and sensation-seeking behavior (Caminis et al., 2007). Studies have also shown that children who live with both biological parents are less likely to be sexually active than those from one-parent homes. Again, increased maternal education has been reported to influence the later age of adolescent first intercourse, (Little and Rankin, 2001). Other studies have examined peer influences on sexual initiation and revealed that adolescents' pre-marital sexual practices are



directly related to peer influence (Diclemente 1991; Kinsman et al., 1998; Whitbeck et al., 1993). Regarding age, research has revealed that younger people may initiate sexual relations before the age of 14 years (Epstein et al., 2018). Other studies have further revealed that initiating sexual activity before the age of 14- 16 years increases the likelihood of having an unintended pregnancy, inducing pre-cancerous changes in the cervix, and contracting STDs, including HIV/AIDS (O'Donnell et al., 2001).

The research on sexual behavior among adolescents in some public secondary schools revealed that about 40% of adolescents aged 14 and above have been involved in sexual activities with partners who were classmates, neighbors, teachers, sugar daddies, or strangers (Party mates or prostitutes). It is further revealed that heterosexual, anal, and oral forms of sex were practiced by 78.1%, 13.3%, and 12.4% respectively and about 36% of those sexually active had more than one partner (Bamidele et al., 2009).

Premarital sexual exposure among adolescents is an issue of health concern in many parts of South-Eastern Nigeria, especially Ebonyi State. Research on the in-school adolescents sexual behavior is pivotal due to the increasing number of sexually active adolescents globally (WHO, 2012). Teenagers and young adults may face many sexual and reproductive health risks stemming from unprotected, or unwanted sexual practices among others (WHO 2012). Moronkola and Adio-Moses (2002) stated that 25.9% of in-school female adolescents in Ebonyi have symptoms of syphilis, 35.1% have symptoms of gonorrhea and 24.0% have symptoms of HIV/AIDS.

Adolescents are young people between the ages of 12 and 19 years (WHO 2012). The term is derived from Latin word adolescents which means 'growing up'. It is a period of transition in which the individual transforms from childhood to adulthood. It is also regarded as the physical and mental human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood. The transition involves biological (i.e. puberty), social, and psychological changes (Jenkins, 2007). Adolescence can be seen as a stage in the life span through which an individual passes before adulthood. It can also be seen as a period of great emotional stress (Adegoke, 2013).



Globally, early adolescent sexual debut remains a recurring public health issue (Brown, 2000). Such as sexual risk behaviors like increased risk for infection with HIV and other STIs (Bogale and Seme 2014). Also, psychological factors such as HIV knowledge, attitude towards condom use, peer support for condom use, perceived vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, and condom use of self-efficacy may directly or jointly contribute to high levels of sexual risk behavior among adolescents. Similarly, social factors such as age, number of years of education, number of intercourses in the last three months, and number of sexual partners may have some relationships with sexual risk behavior among adolescents and teenagers. This is evidence as studies have reported that youth who begin early sexual activity are more likely to be exposed to high-risk sex, and having multiple partners increases premarital sexual practices from 11.8% to 23.2% among in-school adolescents (Bogale and Seme 2014).

Conversely, studies have revealed that there are many behavioral problems among adolescents that Nigerian society today has to contend with such problems include truancy, disobedience, drug offenses, assault, insult, stealing, violent demonstrations, vandalism, examination malpractices, robbery, secret-cult activities (Nnachi, 2003). All these behavioral problems and other social and psychological factors have been reported to influence pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Nigeria (Bearinger et al., 2007).

Therefore, it is pivotal to identify psycho-social predictors of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi state. This is to inform the major stakeholders and policymakers to design intervention strategies to avert this ugly menace among in-school adolescents. However, in-school youth premarital sexual practice and its related health effects have not been investigated within the study population. Besides, most youths in secondary education in Ebonyi state are living privately in their hostels far from their parents and in an environment far away from home without the usual parental guidance. The present study on premarital sexual practices and its predictors is a topical issue in Ebonyi State secondary schools and yet little or no studies have been conducted to unravel the predictors. It is against this backdrop that the present study attempts to explore premarital sexual practices and associated



predictors among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State. The study focused on factors such as self-esteem, peer group, family factors, and religious background to determine its predictors on sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

1. Study Design

The research design adopted for the study is a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The study was carried out from the month of April to September 2023 to determine the psycho-social predictors of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi state. Ebonyi State can be found in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. It is bounded to the east and south by the Cross River and Benue state, west and north by Abia and Enugu State, respectively. The major occupations of people in the area are farming, trading, transportation, and stone quarrying including government workers. However, the schools including federal and state schools in Ebonyi State have made the state filled with both male and female adolescents and teenagers. Consequently, being an area clustered with schools, very poor academic performance among the students was observed. Thus, may not be unconnected with some social vices such as pornography, pre-marital sexual practices, sexual promiscuity, and diverse forms of risky sexual activities which have been observed to impact in-school adolescent academic performance. Hence adolescents are very adventurous, ill-informed, and have the zeal to experiment at all times which among others have necessitated this study in this location.

2. Population and Sample

The study population consists of twenty-two state-owned government secondary schools in Ebonyi State with a total number of 24,000 students for the 2022/2023 academic session. From this total number, 12,878 were female while 11,122 were male (SEB, 2023). The inclusion criteria were based on public secondary school adolescents, unmarried students, and those who were available and consented to the study. While exclusion criteria were private secondary schools in the area, none regular and those in public secondary schools who were absent,



seriously ill at the time of the data collection, and those who were present but not willing to participate were all excluded from the study. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select 400 study participants who met our selection criteria. At the first stage, Ebonyi State secondary schools were clustered according to the three (3) zones in the state such as Afikpo zone, Onueke zone, and Abakaliki zone. In stage two, one (1) secondary school were selected from each of the three zones, using a purposive sampling technique. In the third stage, 133 students were purposively selected from each of the secondary schools. In the end, 400 respondents were drawn for the study. The participants were recruited during school hours, thus every male and female student present at the time and possessing the attribute of the study was given the questionnaire to fill.

3. Study Variables

The dependent variables is psycho-social predictors of sexual practices among in-school adolescents. The independent variables were age, gender, educational class level, self-esteem, peer group, parental involvement, and religious background.

4. Definition Operational of Variables

Psychological Factors: This means the elements of adolescent's personalities that limit or enhance their ways of thinking, reasoning, and behavior. The personality of an individual can predispose or render him to risk sexual behaviors. A phobia (illogical and uncontrollable fear) can limit or even control the ways adolescents react to sexual behaviors

Social Factors: This refers to the varied social categories that could affect a person's circumstances, experiences, and social position. For instance, the socioeconomic status of adolescents.

Self-esteem: is how we value and perceive ourselves. It's based on our opinions and beliefs about ourselves, which can feel difficult to change. We might also think of this as self-confidence.



Peer Group: The term peer group refers to a group of individuals or companies that share similar characteristics with one another. These characteristics may be age, education, ethnic background, or size,

Family factors: Household/family factors are those related to the household/family of an individual or parental influence in training a child. These factors have an impact on the individual characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors, either increasing or decreasing their likelihood of experiencing sex, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or abuse.

Religious factors: Religion often involves the beliefs of people, individuals, or communities towards their creator. Religion can influence the culture of an entire community, nation, or region of the world. This goes beyond a person's individual habits to affect much bigger issues, like individual attitudes, beliefs, and practices toward sex.

5. Study Instrument

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, Psycho-Social Predictors of Pre-Marital Sexual Practices Questionnaire (PSPSPQ). The questionnaire was designed to elicit information regarding how self-esteem, peer group, religious background, and parental background predict pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents. Respondents were required to use a four-point scale response options ranging from “Strongly Agree, SA” (4 points), “Agree, A” (3 points), ‘Strongly Disagree SD’ (2 points), and “Disagree D” (1 Point). The instrument was face-validated by three experts from Ebonyi State. Two experts from Health Education and One expert from a science education (measurement and evaluation unit). The drafted copies of the questionnaire were given for both face and content validity. Twenty copies of the questionnaire were administered to 20 respondents from another school who were not part of the study sample. The Cronbach Alpha reliability method was used to determine the internal consistency of the items. A reliability index of $r = 0.923$ was obtained and deemed reliable enough to be used in the study.



6. Data Analysis

All statistical analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) batch system version 20. The data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, t-Test and simple linear regression analysis. The t-test and simple linear regression were used to test the formulated hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The results were presented using tables.

7. Research Ethics

Ethical approval for data collection was obtained from the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Ebonyi State University (EBSU/FOE/KHE/vol.2/023). The clearance permitted the researchers to carry out the study among In-School Adolescents in Ebonyi State. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to data collection

RESULTS

1. Univariate Analysis/Sample Characteristics

Table 1. Sample characteristics (categorical data)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage(%)
Age	9-11 years	121	30.3
	12-14 years	132	33.0
	15 and above	147	36.8
Education	Junior Secondary School I	46	11.5
	Junior Secondary School II	58	14.5
	Junior Secondary School III	69	17.3
	Senior Secondary School I	67	16.8
	Senior Secondary School II	82	20.5
	Senior Secondary School III	78	19.5
Gender	Male	271	67.8
	Female	129	32.3

The findings from the demographic characteristics of the respondents show majority of the participants 15 years and above had the highest percentage (36.8%), followed by the age bracket 12-24 years with a percentage of (33.0%) and 9-11 years (30.3). Regarding educational class



level, those who are in their senior secondary class two (SS2) had the highest percentage of 20.5%, followed by those in senior secondary (19.5%), junior secondary 3 (17.3%), senior secondary one (16.8%), junior secondary two (14.5), and junior secondary one (11.5%). On their sex (gender), the male had the majority (67.8%), whereas the female counterpart had (32.3%).

2. Bivariate Analysis on the associations of Social- demographic Characteristics of the In-School Adolescents and Pre-marital Sexual Practices

Variable	Category	Mean	SD	p
Age	9-11 years	2.92	0.77	0.002
	12-14 years	3.14	0.66	
	15 and above	3.20	0.74	
Education	Junior Secondary School I	2.97	0.74	0.018
	Junior Secondary School II	3.28	0.83	
	Junior Secondary School III	3.17	0.88	
	Senior Secondary School I	2.92	0.77	
	Senior Secondary School II	3.14	0.66	
	Senior Secondary School III	3.20	0.74	
Gender	Male	3.62	0.79	0.025
	Female	3.88	0.88	

Data in Table 2 shows the results of the bivariate analysis that age ($p=0.002$), education ($p=0.018$), and gender ($p=0.025$), were significant. Therefore, age, education, and gender were significant predictors of in-school adolescents' Pre-marital Sexual Practices in Ebonyi State.

Table 3. Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Psycho-Social Predictors and Pre-marital Sexual Practices among In-School Adolescents in Ebonyi State.

Psycho-Social Predictors	R	R ²	β	CI 95%		p
				Upper Limit	Lower Limit	
Self-esteem and sexual practices	0.53	0.28	0.53	0.37	0.51	0.001
Peer group and sexual practices	0.44	0.19	0.44	0.35	0.54	0.010
Religious background and sexual practices	0.16	0.02	0.16	0.06	0.24	0.001



Family background and students' sexual practices	0.48	0.23	0.48	0.47	0.68	0.020
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Data in Table 3 shows a simple linear regression analysis of self-esteem, peer group, religious background, and family factors as predictors of sexual practices among in-school adolescents. Specifically, self-esteem shows an R-value of 0.53 was high. Therefore, Self-esteem ($\beta = 0.53$; CI 95% = 0.376 to 0.519; $p = 0.00$), indicates a significant relationship and high predictors of sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State.

The Table further shows that the simple linear regression computed for the peer group indicated R-value of 0.44 was moderate. Therefore, the peer group ($\beta = 0.44$; CI 95% = 0.35 to 0.54; $p = 0.010$), indicates a moderate relationship and a high predictor of sexual practices among in-school adolescent students in Ebonyi State.

Regarding religious background, the Table shows that the simple linear regression for an R-value of 0.16 was low. Therefore, religious background ($\beta = 0.16$; CI 95% = 0.060 to 0.24; $p = 0.001$), indicates a low relationship and a predictor of sexual practices of in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State.

On the family background, the simple linear regression computed shows an R-value of 0.483 indicating a moderate relationship. Therefore, family background ($\beta = 0.48$; CI 95% = 0.47 to 0.68; $p = 0.020 < 0.05$) indicates a moderate relationship and a high predictor of sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study on the psycho-social predictors of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents were discussed under the following Sub-headings:

1. Self-esteem as a Predictor of Pre-marital Sexual Practices

The study found that Self-esteem is a high predictor of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebonyi State. The findings are expected and thus not a surprise because, it is common knowledge that adolescents in the area feel that having sex is a sign of being



exposed, and those who engage in sex mock those who do not engage in sex, while, those who do not engage feel inferior when they are with those that do engage in pre-marital sex. Moreover, those who practice multiple sexual relationships feel proud of such behavior. These findings were in line with the studies that revealed that adolescent students often feel that sexual indulgence is one of the criteria for social belonging (Enejoh et al., 2016; Aleke et al., 2021). Moreover, this is obvious as one can see from the items that most students feel excluded if they are not engaged in sexual practices. The result further indicated that some students mock those who do not engage in pre-marital sexual activities, and thus the students feel inferior when they are with those who are engaging in premarital sexual activities, while some students often despise those who are still virgins, and those who engage in multiple sexual partners are proud of it even when some are scared of sexual engagement. The findings of the present study support the studies that stated that most adolescents engage in illicit sex to avoid mockery from their colleagues (Potard et al., 2008). The findings are also in line with the study of Anya who reported that most students feel proud to engage in multiple-sex relationships (Maddox et al., 2011).

2. Peer group as one of the predictors of Pre-marital Sexual Practices among in-school Adolescents

The study revealed that peer group is a high predictor of pre-marital sexual practices of in-school adolescents. The findings is expected and not a surprise, thus, the students engage in pre-marital sexual relationships because their peers do. This findings is in line with the study who stated that it is common to see adolescents engaging in sexual activities with their peers (Widman et al., 2016). The findings also lend credence to the study which reported that adolescents do learn unhealthy sexual practices from their peers. These unhealthy sexual practices among adolescents according to the author include masturbation, lesbian, homosexuality, and use of sex toys (Rosenberger et al., 2012).

3. Religious background as a predictor of sexual practices among in-school adolescents



The Findings of religious background revealed that it is one of the high predictors of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebony State. The findings is in disagreement with the study which reported that most religious denominations like Watchman church, Deeper Life Bible Church, and Mountain of Fire Bible church often despise sex education and not to talk of sexual practice (Onyeonoro et al., 2011). The current findings also disagrees with the research that documented that sex is only necessary for procreation (Rahmani et al., 2018). The disagreement in the findings may be attributed to the geographical location and population of the study

4. Family factors as a predictor of Pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents

The study revealed family factors as a high predictor of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents in Ebony State. These findings may be attributed to the fact that most parents do not understand the need for sex education among their children. This result is in line with the study, which reported that because most parents frown at sex education, most of their children engage in pre-marital sexual practices (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2011; Aleke et al., 2021). The findings further revealed that most parents do engage their children in early marriage, most fathers betroth their female children from birth, the only sons are advised to marry on time, and most students learn sexual promiscuity from their parents. These results aligned with the study which stated that most parents force their children into early relationships through betrothal and early sexual relationships (Bhan et al., 2019; Nyangas and Aswile, 2022).

The bivariate analysis shows that age, education, and gender had a significant influence on in-school adolescent's pre-marital sexual practices in Ebony State. The findings are in line with a similar study that reported age, sex, family type, religiosity, and paternal care/protection as predictors of premarital sexual practices among in-school adolescents (Idoko et al., 2015). The current study is also in line with another study that reported that Pre-marital sex was more common among adolescents who perceived low self-educational class level (Oljira et al., 2012). The present study however disagreed with the studies who reported that pre-marital sexual



practices among students is not dependent on age and gender (Oljira et al., 2012; Aleke et al., 2021). This agreement and disagreement could be attributed to difference in the period of the study, which may suggest a changing trend in easiness of reporting sexual matters and rising age at marriage in some study locations (Oljira et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This study concludes that in-school adolescent's pre-marital sexual practices were predicted by psycho-social factors like self-esteem, family factors, peer group, and religious background of the adolescents. Therefore, the study suggest the need for the stakeholders to enhance co-operation between the homes (that is, the parents), the school, the Ministry of education, youths, sports, and culture to ensure effective teaching of sexuality education to students of secondary schools. Also, training of specialist teachers such as guidance counsellors, and health educators to carry out campaign on the risks and consequences of pre-marital sexual practices among in-school adolescents.

The present study is not without some limitation, thus the study focused on in-school adolescents who were present in school during the time of the study. This serve as limitation as it may be difficult to generalize the result to out-of-school and drop-outs that might have different life experiences. Another limitation was the fact that the present study has some sensitivity as it dealt with the personal lives of in-school adolescents and hence may not be willing to divulge personal experiences.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All the authors have contributed significantly both in the designing, commissioning, analysis, and interpretation, as well as in preparing the final manuscript. All the authors have read, agreed, and approved the final manuscript.



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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.



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