
PATTERNS AND PREDICTORS OF ONLINE SEXUAL PRACTICES AMONG STUDENTS IN FEDERAL COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of digital communication technology has influenced how young people form and maintain sexual and social relationships. Sexting, which is the sharing of sexually explicit photographs, videos, or messages over digital devices, has become a common practice in contemporary communication (Commeey et al., 2024). A recent scoping review of African college students found that sexting typically involves sending or receiving nude images and explicit messages, or posting explicit content on social media; prevalence estimates vary widely, from 9.9 % to 74.4 % (Commeey et al., 2024). Although sexting may facilitate condom negotiation and sexual communication, it is linked to high-risk behaviors such as having multiple sexual partners and disclosing private information without consent (Commeey et al., 2024). Moreover, the uncertainty about where sexually explicit content might end up increases vulnerability to privacy breaches and exploitation (Commeey et al., 2024).

Teenagers and young adults are exposed to different types of online sexual behaviours outside of sexting through the larger digital environment. Social media platforms influence adolescents' sexual choices and behaviour; however, evidence about these impacts remains scarce. A cross-sectional study among Ghanaian adolescents showed that those who used at least one social-media platform were more than twice as likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour compared with non-users (adjusted odds ratio [AOR] = 2.3, 95 % CI: 1.20–4.46) (Gyane et al., 2025). Social media can expose users to abuse, pornography, and multiple partners in addition to promoting safer sexual practices (Gyane et al., 2025). Such concerns are supported by empirical data from Nigeria, where 67% of respondents acknowledged that

watching porn increases a young person's sexual drive (Inimiesi & Robert, 2023). Such heightened drive is associated with behaviours like objectification of women and rape culture (Inimiesi & Robert, 2023). These findings show the complexity of online sexual experiences, which can foster empowerment and connection but also create environments for exploitation. The West African context is characterised by rapid growth in digital connectivity. Sub-Saharan

The highest number of young people in the world resides in Africa. With more than 200 million young people, according to the 2024 African Union Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy, approximately 40 % of youth aged 15–24 in Africa now have access to the internet (Oguine et al., 2025). While this connectivity opens new opportunities for education and socialisation, it also increases exposure to cyberbullying, sexual risks, and privacy violations. However, much research on adolescent online experiences has focused on regions outside West Africa, leaving a dearth of empirical studies capturing Nigerian youths' perspectives (Oguine et al., 2025). The few Nigerian studies available report a high prevalence of online sexual activity: a study among final-year university students in Osun State found that **58.7 %** had engaged in online sexual activity. Men, students who were dating, and those exposed to pornography from childhood or involved in substance use were more likely to participate (Omisore et al., 2023). These factors suggest that both individual and environmental influences shape online sexual practices.

Federal Colleges of Education (FCEs) are pivotal in producing future educators who will influence generations of learners. If online sexual practices are prevalent among these students, they may affect their well-being, professional conduct, and the messages they later convey to pupils. Also, with its youthful population and comparatively high internet penetration, the South West of Nigeria could show unique trends that have not been thoroughly recorded. Policymakers and educators cannot create interventions that address harmful online behaviors while using the educational potential of digital platforms due to the lack of context-specific data.

While digital connectivity offers opportunities for learning and social connection, it simultaneously facilitates the sharing of sexually explicit content and exposure to harmful material. There is an urgent need to understand the patterns and predictors of online sexual practices among FCE students in South-West Nigeria, given the potential consequences for mental health, sexual risk behaviours, privacy, and professional ethics. Without evidence on the prevalence of sexting, pornographic consumption, use of dating applications, or participation in sexual forums among this population, interventions may overlook key

determinants such as peer pressure, curiosity, anonymity, financial incentives, or lack of sexual health education.

Aim and objectives. This study aims to investigate the patterns and predictors of online sexual practices among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria. Its specific objectives are to:

1. Determine prevalence and types of online sexual practices among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria.
2. Evaluate how exposure to sexual content across various social-media platforms relates to engagement in online sexual practices among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria.
3. Examine socio-demographic and internet-use correlates among South West Nigeria Federal Colleges of Education students.
4. Identify psychosocial factors influencing online sexual engagement among Federal Colleges of Education students in South-West Nigeria.

Research questions

1. What is the prevalence and what are the types of online sexual practices among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria?
2. How does exposure to sexual content on various social media platforms relate to students' engagement in online sexual practices in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria?
3. What socio-demographic and internet-use factors are associated with online sexual practices among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria?
4. What psychosocial factors influence the engagement in online sexual activities among students in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria?

Material and Methods

Study Design and Setting

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among Federal Colleges of Education students in South-West Nigeria. The study focused on young adults enrolled in various programmes within these institutions.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised undergraduate students. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. First, Federal Colleges of Education in the South-West were identified, after

which participants were selected proportionately across faculties and departments. Eligible respondents were those who consented to participate voluntarily.

Sample Size Determination

The minimum sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula for cross-sectional studies, assuming a prevalence of 50% for online sexual practices (since no prior local data were available), a 5% margin of error, and a 95% confidence interval. After adjusting for non-response, a final sample of 300 participants was targeted.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed on Google Forms. The instrument was adapted from validated tools used in previous studies on online sexual behaviour, with modifications to suit the study context. It consisted of sections on socio-demographic characteristics, internet use patterns, types of online sexual practices, and psychosocial factors influencing engagement. The link to the questionnaire was shared electronically with eligible students through institutional WhatsApp and email groups, and responses were collected over an eight-week period.

Validity and Reliability

Expert reviews in public health and behavioural science ensured the instrument's validity. A pilot test involving 30 students outside the study area was conducted to assess clarity, and the feedback was used to refine the questionnaire. The internal consistency of multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a coefficient of 0.78 indicating acceptable reliability.

Data Management and Analysis

Completed responses were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were computed for socio-demographic characteristics and online practices. Binary logistic regression was used to identify factors associated with engagement in online sexual practices. Adjusted odds ratios (AOR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI) were reported, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (REF.NO:). Informed consent was embedded in the Google Form, and only participants who provided consent could proceed to complete the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was maintained, and responses were kept confidential.

RESULT

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age ± S.D	24.71 ± 7.21	
≤19	36	12
20-24	225	75
25-29	21	7
30-34	12	4
34-39	6	2
Gender		
Male	98	32.7
Female	202	67.3
Marital Status		
Single	253	84.3
Married	44	14.7
Previously Married	3	1.0

A total of 300 respondents participated in the study. The mean age of respondents was 24.7 ± 7.2 years; most (75%) were aged 20–24 years. Females predominated (67.3%), and the majority were single (84.3%) (Table 1)

Table 2: Online sexual practices among young adults in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria.

Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Primary Device for Internet		
Desktop	4	1.3
Laptop	8	2.7
Smartphone	285	95
Tablet	3	1.0
Hours spent per day on the Internet		
Less than 1 hour	35	11.7
1-3 hours	86	28.7
4-6 hours	84	28
More than 6 hours	95	31.7
Sending or receiving sexually explicit texts (sexting)		
Never	201	67
Rarely	51	17
Sometimes	34	11.3
Often	11	3.7
Very Often	3	1
Sending/receiving sexually explicit images/ videos		
Never	211	70.3
Rarely	47	15.7
Sometimes	31	10.3
Often	6	2

Very Often	5	1.7
Using dating apps to meet new people		
Never	258	86
Rarely	18	6
Sometimes	18	6
Often	5	1.7
Very Often	1	0.3
Watching pornography online		
Never	213	71
Rarely	42	14
Sometimes	35	11.7
Often	7	2.3
Very Often	3	1.0
Participating in sexual video chat or live streams		
Never	275	91.7
Rarely	11	3.7
Sometimes	13	4.3
Often	1	0.3
Engaging in sexual discussions in online forums or chat rooms		
Never	228	76
Rarely	35	11.7
Sometimes	30	10
Often	5	1.7
Very Often	2	0.7
Encounter sexual content on WhatsApp.		
Never	141	47
Rarely	81	27
Sometimes	60	20
Often	9	3
Very Often	9	3
Encounter sexual content on Instagram.		
Never	193	64.3
Rarely	44	14.7
Sometimes	41	13.7
Often	19	6.3
Very Often	3	1.0
Encounter sexual content on Facebook.		
Never	155	51.7
Rarely	51	17
Sometimes	63	21
Often	24	8
Very Often	7	2.3
Encounter sexual content on X (Twitter)		
Never	205	68.3
Rarely	36	12
Sometimes	37	12.3
Often	16	5.3
Very Often	6	2.0
Encounter sexual content on TikTok.		

Never	161	53.7
Rarely	50	16.7
Sometimes	47	15.7
Often	25	8.3
Very Often	17	5.7
Encounter sexual content on YouTube.		
Never	172	57.3
Rarely	59	19.7
Sometimes	42	14
Often	17	5.7
Very Often	10	3.3

Almost all respondents (95%) reported using a smartphone as their primary device for internet access, while laptops (2.7%), desktops (1.3%), and tablets (1.0%) were less common. About one-third (31.7%) spent more than six hours daily online, with 28.7% spending 1–3 hours and 28% spending 4–6 hours.

Regarding online sexual practices, 67% had never engaged in sexting, though 17% did so rarely and 11.3% sometimes. Similarly, 70.3% had never exchanged sexually explicit images or videos, while 15.7% did so rarely and 10.3% sometimes. The use of dating apps was generally low, with 86% reporting never using them. Watching pornography online was common, as 29% reported some level of engagement, though 71% had never done so. Only a small proportion reported participating in sexual video chats (8.3%) or engaging in sexual discussions in online forums (24%).

Exposure to sexual content on social media platforms was frequent: 53% on TikTok, 48% on WhatsApp, 48.3% on Facebook, 36% on Instagram, 31.7% on X (Twitter), and 42.7% on YouTube.(Table 2)

Table 3: Prevalence of online sexual practices .

Online sexual practices	Frequency	Percent (%)
Never	129	43
Involved	171	57

Overall, 57% of respondents reported involvement in online sexual practices, while 43% had never engaged in them. (Table 3)

Table 4: Factors Influencing Engagement in Online Sexual Practices.

Factors	AOR	P value
Age		
≤19	0.126(0.009,1.739)	0.863
20-24	0.217(0.019,2.432)	0.381
25-29	0.266(0.024,2.923)	0.638

30-34	0.028(0.002,4.74)	0.060
34-39	Ref	
Gender		
Male	0.760(0.377,1.532)	0.023
Female	Ref	
Marital Status		
Single	0.091(0.002,3.801)	0.946
Married	0.065(0.002,2.386)	0.762
Previously Married	Ref	
Primary device for the internet		
Laptop	0.253(0.011,5.725)	0.750
Smartphone	0.399(0.028,5.679)	0.438
Tablet	Ref	
Hours spent per day on the internet		
Less than 1 hour	4.751(1.659,13.610)	0.002
1-3 hours	2.207(1.023,4.762)	0.004
4-6 hours	2.070(0.962,4.453)	0.195
More than 6 hours	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on WhatsApp.		
Yes	4.938(2.548,9.567)	0.000
No	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on Instagram.		
Yes	0.563(0.254,1.248)	0.028
No	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on Facebook.		
Yes	1.443(0.691,3.015)	0.000
No	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on X(Twitter)		
Yes	1.28(0.599,2.738)	0.001
No	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on (TikTok)		
Yes	1.162(0.530,2.544)	0.001
No	Ref	
Encounter sexual content on (YouTube)		
Yes	0.850(0.393,1.839)	0.009
No	Ref	
Peer pressure encourages me to engage in online sexual activities		
Yes	1.039(0.360,3.005)	0.001
No	Ref	
Online platforms provide anonymity that makes me feel safe to explore sexual content.		
Yes	2.311(0.880,6.066)	0.000
No	Ref	
Financial incentives (e.g., gifts, money) influence my participation in online sexual activities.		
Yes	0.761(0.259,2.237)	0.004
No	Ref	
Social media trends normalize risky sexual behaviours		
Yes	1.660(0.858,3.212)	0.000

No	Ref	
Lack of sexual health education motivates me to seek sexual information online.		
Yes	1.488(0.717,3.088)	0.002
No	Ref	
Curiosity about sex motivates me to engage in online sexual activities		
Yes	0.980(0.331,2.898)	0.000
No	Ref	
Engage in online sexual activities to prevent boredom		
Yes	1.939(0.552,6.810)	0.001
No	Ref	
Engage in online sexual activities to feel connected to others		
Yes	0.583(0.082,4.157)	0.013
No	Ref	
Engage in online sexual activities as a self-soothing mechanism to facilitate sleep initiation.		
Yes	4.146(0.846,20.321)	0.001
No	Ref	

Students who spent ≤ 1 hour online daily were over four times more likely to engage in online sexual practices compared with those who spent more than six hours (AOR = 4.75, 95% CI: 1.66–13.61, $p = 0.002$). Similarly, spending 1–3 hours online increased the odds two-fold (AOR = 2.21, 95% CI: 1.02–4.76, $p = 0.004$).

Exposure to sexual content on WhatsApp markedly increased the odds of engagement (AOR = 4.94, 95% CI: 2.55–9.57, $p < 0.001$). Significant associations were also observed for Facebook (AOR = 1.44, 95% CI: 0.69–3.02, $p < 0.001$), X/Twitter (AOR = 1.28, 95% CI: 0.60–2.74, $p = 0.001$), TikTok (AOR = 1.16, 95% CI: 0.53–2.54, $p = 0.001$), and YouTube (AOR = 0.85, 95% CI: 0.39–1.84, $p = 0.009$). Interestingly, Instagram exposure appeared protective (AOR = 0.56, 95% CI: 0.25–1.25, $p = 0.028$).

Psychosocial factors were significant predictors: peer pressure ($p = 0.001$), anonymity provided by online platforms (AOR = 2.31, 95% CI: 0.88–6.07, $p < 0.001$), financial incentives (AOR = 0.76, 95% CI: 0.26–2.24, $p = 0.004$), social media trends (AOR = 1.66, 95% CI: 0.86–3.21, $p < 0.001$), lack of sexual health education (AOR = 1.49, 95% CI: 0.72–3.09, $p = 0.002$), curiosity ($p < 0.001$), boredom (AOR = 1.94, 95% CI: 0.55–6.81, $p = 0.001$), and self-soothing for sleep (AOR = 4.15, 95% CI: 0.85–20.32, $p = 0.001$).

Gender, marital status, primary device used, and most age categories did not show significant associations. (Table 4)

DISCUSSION

This study examined the prevalence, patterns, and determinants of online sexual practices among young adults in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria. The findings revealed a high level of engagement in online sexual activities, with more than half of the respondents reporting involvement. This aligns with global evidence that young people are increasingly using digital platforms for sexual exploration, intimacy, and socialization (Gyane et al., 2025; Bhana et al., 2024). The predominance of smartphones as the primary device for internet access shows the pervasive influence of mobile technology on young adults' sexual behaviours, similar to a study that shows that nearly half of the participants expressed a preference for smartphone usage over offline sexual activity. (Gosztonyi 2024).

Students who reported spending fewer hours online were more likely to engage in online sexual practices. While this finding appears counterintuitive, those who log in for shorter, targeted sessions may use the internet more purposefully to seek out sexual content. In contrast, heavier internet users may engage in broader, less sexually focused online activities. Similar patterns were reported in a paper, where structured and intentional use of digital media was linked to higher engagement in sexual networking (Ashata & Extension, 2024). This suggests that not only the quantity, but also the quality and intentionality of internet use, matter in shaping online sexual behaviours.

Exposure to sexual content on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter (X), TikTok, and YouTube was strongly associated with engagement in online sexual practices. This finding is consistent with studies from the United States and Europe, which show that repeated exposure to sexualized media increases the likelihood of sexting, online pornography use, and cybersex among adolescents and young adults (Rousseau et al., 2023; Widman et al., 2021). In the Nigerian context, social media serves as both a social networking tool and a conduit for sharing explicit content, reflecting its role as the most widely used communication app among young people. The protective effect of Instagram observed in this study is noteworthy. It may reflect differences in platform use patterns, where Instagram is more often curated for lifestyle and social image, compared with more interactive platforms that facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges of sexual content (Are 2025; Agbasimelo et al., 2024).

The psychosocial correlates identified in this study show the complex motivations underlying online sexual practices. Peer pressure, curiosity, boredom, and the perception of anonymity were significant drivers. These findings resonate with social learning theory, which posits that behaviours are influenced by observation, peer modelling, and perceived norms (Bandura &

Walters, 1977). In environments where peers normalize risky online sexual behaviours, students may feel compelled to participate to maintain social belonging. Furthermore, the anonymity of online platforms provides a perceived shield from judgment, thereby lowering barriers to experimentation. This is consistent with prior research, where young adults reported anonymity and reduced fear of stigma as key reasons for online sexual exploration (Keipi & Oksanen, 2014).

The role of financial incentives and social media trends in encouraging engagement cannot be overlooked. The finding that monetary or material rewards influence participation reflects a troubling intersection of online sexual behaviour and transactional relationships, which have been documented in offline contexts across sub-Saharan Africa (Konlan & Ganle, 2025; Jewkes et al., 2012). This raises concerns about vulnerability to exploitation, online grooming, and sextortion. Likewise, the normalization of risky sexual behaviours through viral challenges, memes, and influencer content on social media reinforces unhealthy sexual scripts. These cultural and structural drivers highlight the need for policy interventions beyond individual-level education.

Notably, gender and marital status were not significantly associated with online sexual practices in this study, contrary to some earlier reports where males were more likely to engage (Van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017). This may suggest a narrowing gender gap in online sexual behaviour, reflecting broader shifts in digital access and changing social norms among Nigerian youths. The non-significance of age, except in targeted internet use patterns, also indicates that online sexual engagement is widespread across different age strata of young adulthood.

The implications of these findings are substantial. On one hand, online sexual practices may provide opportunities for sexual expression, exploration, and connection, which can contribute to identity formation and intimacy development. On the other hand, unregulated engagement exposes students to risks such as cyberbullying, revenge porn, addiction, academic distraction, and vulnerability to predators. Balancing these dual realities is critical for educators, policymakers, and health professionals. Interventions should not merely attempt to suppress online sexual behaviour but should instead focus on equipping students with digital literacy, critical thinking, and resilience to navigate online risks safely.

Strengths and Limitations

This study's emphasis on an understudied group in Nigeria, which offers empirical support for a developing phenomenon, is one of its major strengths. Anonymity was made easier, and

reporting bias might have been lessened using a web-based survey (Google Forms), promoting candid disclosure. However, limitations include reliance on self-reported data, which is subject to recall and social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference. Additionally, the study was limited to Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria and may not be generalizable to other populations or regions.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine causal pathways between exposure, psychosocial drivers, and online sexual practices. Qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the subjective meanings and experiences of online sexual engagement among Nigerian youths. Comparative studies across regions and educational settings would further illuminate contextual influences.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed a high prevalence of online sexual practices among young adults in Federal Colleges of Education in South-West Nigeria, with smartphones and social media platforms serving as the main avenues. Engagement was strongly influenced by exposure to sexual content, peer and psychosocial factors, and patterns of internet use. These findings show the need for targeted sexual health education, digital literacy programs, and psychosocial interventions to promote safe online behaviour and reduce potential risks associated with online sexual practices.

Recommendations

Interventions should focus on enhancing college students' digital literacy and sexual health education in order to close the gaps that have been discovered. Institutions must incorporate thorough sexuality education within their curricula, stressing the importance of media and peer trends, safe online conduct, and the dangers of sexting. Counseling and peer mentorship are two examples of psychosocial support services that are crucial for addressing the emotional triggers, boredom, and curiosity that lead to harmful internet behavior. Collaboration with social media platforms and student unions is recommended to promote responsible content sharing and regulate exposure to explicit material. Finally, policymakers should develop guidelines that safeguard young adults from harmful online sexual experiences while fostering healthy digital engagement.

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