

## Research Article

# Transactional Sex amongst University Students at A Selected University in South Africa

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## Abstract

**Background:** Transactional sex is the exchange of money or gift for sexual relationship. It is considered a risky sexual behaviour worldwide; It continues to pose sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies risks amongst people engaging into this type of relationships.

**Purpose:** To explore the perceptions of students regarding transactional sex at a selected university in Limpopo province, South Africa.

**Methods:** The study utilized a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to understand the perceptions of students regarding transactional sex. The populations were registered students at the University of Venda. Purposive technique was used to recruit 18 participants. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and analyzed using Tesch's thematic analysis

**Results:** The study revealed that students at the University of Venda perceive transactional sex as a material based relationship, prostitution, immoral behavior and abusive relationship. Socio-economic causes to be a driving factors pushing students to engage in transactional sex.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:** Transactional sex is common among University community and has far reaching public health consequences as well as social effects. Students at this selected University of Limpopo, South Africa perceive transactional sex as a bad behavior and this calls for the University to ensure enough extra mural activities and students to engage in activities that could generate the pocket money, awareness's. to educate student not to engage into transactional sex and also provide health talks through printing of pamphlets with communicating messages. HIV/AIDS education to be included in the university curriculum for every school.

**Keywords:** HIV, sex, sexually-transmitted infections, transactional sex.

## Introduction and Background

The exchange of money or gifts for sexual relationships, also called transactional sex, is considered a sexual risky behaviour worldwide; and continues to pose sexually-transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Transactional sex is having heterosexual intercourse in exchange for money and/or material goods. Transactional sex occurs in different types of sexual relationships.

Transactional sex involves the exchange of sex for money, gifts, services or other favours. Transactional sex, also known as "sugar daddy" (Adjei and Kyereme, 2014) relationships in sub-Saharan Africa, refers to sexual relationships between older (usually richer male) partners and younger (usually socially and/or economically lower status female) partners, including adolescents. However transactional sex differs from the generic view of prostitution, which is non-marital and multiple-partnered and usually involves the exchange of sex for cash only. Transactional sex or the exchange of sex for money, goods, or services has long been identified as a key factor influencing the spread of HIV, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa [1].

Transactional sex appeared to be common and more prevalent among female's students in a study conducted by Wusu (2008) among Lagos State University in Nigeria. The findings also revealed that heterosexual activities thrive more among undergraduates. Other findings from the same study indicated that poverty, broken homes and desire to make easy money account for the high prevalence of risky sexual health behaviour. Measures of protection such as condoms were rarely used in transactional sex and it hard to insist on condom use in the relationship.

Choudry [2] conducted a study in Mbarara University of Science and Technology in Uganda and reported that more females (15.2%) than males (10.1%) students were involved in transactional sex. Greater proportion of males reported to have been paying for sex in exchange for sex. However, students at Ghanaian university reported that they were not simple victims, these relationships were the result of complex and conscious choices. They did not want to marry their partners as were short-term relationships primarily for material gain, which they kept secret from family and most friends for fear of stigma, particularly in ruining their future marriage prospects (Adjei et al, 2014). Similar study was conducted among Great Zimbabwe University students by Gukurume (2011) where most students enter into transactional relationships in order to have food or clothes as well as luxuries such as jewellery and cosmetics. This study also revealed that money, gifts and other material benefits place young students at a higher risk of being infected with HIV as well as unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions by lowering their likelihood of using protection in such sexual relationships.

A study conducted by Govender and Mutinta (2013) at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa among university students reported that 36% of the students engaged in transactional

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sex in the previous three months.

Studies conducted in African countries have shown that young people, particularly women, practice transactional sex with older men for economic survival and to support their basic needs [3,4] (Chatterji et al., 2005, Dunkle et al., 2004, Kaufman and Stavrou, 2004, Luke, 2005, Luke, 2003, Maganja et al., 2007). Furthermore older men, prefer young women in the mistaken belief that young women are unlikely to be infected with HIV and other STIs and it is therefore safe to have unprotected sex with (Nyanzi et al., 2001). There is limited evidence at the South African Universities documenting the perceptions of students regarding transactional sex. However, the purpose of the study was to explore the perception of transactional sex amongst students and its effect on health at the selected university in South Africa.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design and Method

Qualitative exploratory research design was adopted.

The population were all post graduate registered full-time students at the University of Venda of the Limpopo province in South Africa. Non-probability purposive sampling method was used to consciously recruit participants who are registered post graduate students at the University of Venda, who resides in one of the six of the campus residence

### Sampling Procedure

Post-graduate's students were selected because most of them had attended the University of Venda since their undergraduate years and they are familiar with campus dynamics. The researcher used the residence list from the hostel wardens to select the participants until the saturation point was reached. The saturation was reached after 18 participants were interviewed.

### Data Collection Method

The researcher utilized an in-depth individual interview in order to allow the participants to freely explain their perceptions regarding transactional sex and its effects on health at the University of Venda.

In this study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to get more information on the perceptions of university students regarding transactional sex and its effects on health. The participants were able to express their perceptions regarding transactional sex and the effects on health freely without the restrictions. The researcher and the participants were involved in interviews in which they were co-participants. The interview took about 45 minutes to 55 minutes each. The central question that was asked enabled the researcher to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the students regarding transactional sex. Probing questions were asked to allow for deeper and more thoughtful responses from participants.

Field notes were used to record the nonverbal cues that were observed during the interview. This was done in the presence of the participants after the purpose was explained to them. An audiotape recorder was used to record the interviews and the data was later transcribed verbatim for the analysis purposes.

Data sets were analysed using Tesch's eight steps coding in which raw data was organised into one theme, categories and subcategories [5].

### Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness

The model of Lincoln and Guba (Devos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2007) was used to ensure that the study is a true reflection of human experience. The four criteria for establishing

trustworthiness were used, namely credibility (truth value), transfereability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and conformability (neutrality). The strategy of credibility was used to ensure that the findings of the study reflect the perceptions of students with regards to transactional sex and its effect on health. The following methods were used to confirm credibility.

- Prolonged engagement: The researcher was engaged in a prolonged interaction with the students. The researcher took two weeks to collect the data from the participants.
- Member checking: follow up interviews were conducted with some participants for validation of data that was already gathered.
- Peer review: Several meetings were held with supervisors who is experienced in research methods. Audio recorded interviews were played back to peers for their comments.
- The transferability strategy was used to ensure applicability. Transferability was enhanced by giving a dense description of university students regarding the perceptions of transactional sex and its effect on health.
- The strategy of dependability was used to ensure consistency which was enhanced by coding and re-coding of data by an independent coder who has a doctoral qualifications and experience in qualitative research methods.
- The strategy of conformability was used to ensure neutrality. Audiotapes, transcriptions and field notes were made available to supervisors to confirm the findings.

### Ethical Considerations

In order to do what was right and good without violating the rights of the participants, the following ethical measures were considered: Ethical clearance (SHS/16/PH/07/2706) was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. The following ethical measures were considered throughout the process of the research to protect the rights of participants [5,6]: permission to conduct the research was sought from University Student Affairs and the participants. The researcher developed an informed consent for participants to sign before engaging in the research to ensure that participants' rights were protected throughout the process of the study. Participants were informed that participation in this study is voluntary and they should feel free to withdraw from participation at any time if they felt like doing so. Codes instead of names were used to ensure anonymity of participants and raw data was not exposed to anyone except to the supervisors of the study. Participants were assured that the information they have provided would not be used against them.

### Results

The following table gives a summary of the research findings according to themes and subcategories.

The study revealed that to a larger extent transactional sex is happening at the University of Venda between students and outsiders particularly wherein the female students being the first victims, however few male students are as well participating in a slim number of homosexuals. One of the main probing questions of the study was to examine the perceptions of the participants towards "transactional sex". The respondents perceived transactional sex in four sub-themes namely.

#### Sub theme A: Transactional sex perceived as a relationship based on material benefits.

In this study the majority of the participants perceived transactional sex as a relationship based on materials benefits. Ten

**Table 1:**

Themes	Sub-themes
Students' perceptions regarding transactional sex	Transactional sex is perceived as a relationship of material benefits.
	Transactional sex is perceived as an immoral relationship.
	Transactional sex is perceived as prostitution.
	Transactional sex is perceived as an abusive relationship.

participants alluded that transactional sex is common in campus, and they perceive it as a relationship based on materials such as money to buy meals, clothes and expensive cosmetics.

Participant 2 said: *"In this relationships the older men provides material stuff, gifts and money where as the girl gives back the favors by sex and other related romantic activities, and in our own language as students these man who practice transactional sex are called "blessers" because they have resources to win money loving girls"*.

Participant 18 also said that: *"In transactional sex exchanging items is the norm in the act, like there is exchange of money, others buy each other clothes, phones, cars sometimes and others engages out of the need of funny and enjoyment only"*.

Two participants (4 and 7) said: *"If I don't get an allowance from my partner I won't be able to buy all the things like lingerie that are needed to impress him. He should pay for that"* The above utterances clearly indicates that transactional sex is traded for material, financial and pleasure therefore the relationship is based exchange of gift, clothes and money in return of sex. In a related study transactional sex was perceived similarly as occurring were the relationship is motivated by the provision and expectation of food, cosmetics, clothes, transportation, items for children or family, school fees, somewhere to sleep or a fun out [7]. Another participant (10) said *"It is of no use to date a person who will not even be able to take you out for a weekend, assist with school fees or even paying my rent, and I couldn't date anyone who doesn't assist me financially"*.

This study revealed that students at the University of Venda could not date anyone who could not afford to financially support the sexual partner hence they would be sexual connected with the partner provided they can financially be able to support them. In the study done by Shefer. et al. (2012) transactional relationships were represented by participants as exchanges built around a variety of currencies

**Subtheme B: Transactional sex as an immoral relationship.**

Participants (2,5&9) brought a new perception on transactional sex as they said that, *"Transactional sex is one of the concern that is challenging the world of Christianity, I see it as an act of immorality, how can someone have sex just because they want favors or any benefit? So I think transactional sex is ignoring moral conscience by engaging in sex for material reward, but the bottom line is that it is culturally unacceptable sexual activity, a first class example of immorality"*.

With Christians being the majority of students at the University of Venda, in this study transactional sex was perceived as an immoral act.

Participant 15 said: *"As Christians we know that sex before marriage is a sin, what do you think will happen if you just have sex to have gifts? You end up committing adultery on top of just sex before marriage"*

This study revealed that Christians perceived transactional sex as a sexual immorality based on their religious believes.

With participant 10 saying: *"These relationships are not accepted in my culture. But, nowadays, you do whatever you want because there*

*is freedom, you do what you want. But in our culture, it is not accepted"*.

One of the participants(9) spoke of others' practices of transactional sex, and outlined these relationships as culturally immoral. *"She's now dating older man, like old man. They give her money. So this year she started her master's degree here at the University. She was my friend, my best friend. But now I am starting to hate being her friend since she started to date old guy, sugar daddies and that's against my culture"*.

Although acquiring fashionable clothing and material goods indicating wealth was perceived as a positive marker for young women, respondents generally scorned the method of using sugar daddies to achieve these means based on their cultural beliefs.

**Subtheme C: Transactional sex as prostitution.**

Participant (11) perceived transactional sex as prostitution by saying, *"Mr. Researcher I don't think there is any different between transactional and prostitution, because in prostitution people exchange money for sex, so transactional sex is prostitution the only difference is that the girls can't stand on the road like the usual prostitutes, but that cannot separate the two acts, they acts are more the same"*.

The present study revealed and perceived transactional sex as prostitution. The perception of transactional sex in the present study has revealed confusion about the meaning of transactional sex and prostitution. However, clarity was provided in a study conducted by Mc Phail [8] where in transactional sex was explained to be having a number of similarities to prostitution wherein in both cases, non-marital sexual relationships, often with multiple partners, are underscored by the giving of gifts or cash. Transactional sex differs from prostitution in important ways, participants are constructed as girlfriends and boyfriends and not prostitutes and clients, and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment.

Wamoyi, Wight, Plummer, Mashana and Ross [9] further distinguished transactional sex from prostitution saying that women in prostitution (or sex work) may actively soliciting sex in a public area, brothel or embrace an identity as a prostitute or sex worker. In transactional sex there is generally an absence of prior negotiation of price, but price may be agreed. In transactional sex, a wide range of goods or services, such as transport or accommodation, may be received in exchange for sex, but most commonly cash is given in prostitution. In a unique perspective transactional sex was a synonymy term used as sexual exploitation, a term widely accepted by professional society in labelling and interpreting young women's actions when engaging in sexual interaction for the exchange of goods and services [10].

**Subtheme D: Abusive transactional relationship**

The participants (12,10) perceived transactional sex as an abusive relationship by saying, *"lecturers uses their positions of being in control of our academic success in terms of marking and setting exams, so students tend to submit themselves for sex in return of academic favor in terms of higher marks in exams and tests. Even student in governing bodies such as Student Represented Council (SRC) uses their positions to sexually abuse first entering students, as it is a common knowledge that first entering students suffers problems in accommodation during registration, so these SRC member give them rooms in return of sex"*.

This study revealed that the perpetrators in this relationship are in control of the relationships and are abusive to the victim. Concurring with the findings, a study conducted in Kenya by Njue [11] revealed that young girls in Kenya are pushed into sexual activities with older men for survival and to access material goods and has no power in the relationship and the one with money/power will want everything to be done his way [12-18].

A study in Uganda has indicated similarities wherein it was attested that in Sub-Saharan Africa, transactional sex is abusive necessarily abusive or exploitative because adolescents are unable to fully comprehend the potential consequences and risks involved [19-27]. In the same study shown that, while transactional relationships are consensual, they may lead to rape or to physical violence if girls are seen as not keeping their side of the bargain, for example withholding sex after expensive gifts have been made. Furthermore, girls have very little power to negotiate condom use in such relationships, putting them at significant risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

In this study transactional sex is perceived as a relationship perpetrated by people in influential position and this can also extend to outside of varsity where people with power uses their power of their authority and have sex with students in return of their services.

## Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of students' transactional sex and its effects on health. The study revealed that transactional sex is a common practice at this selected University of South Africa and students perceived it in interchanging meanings such as a relationship based on material benefit, prostitution and immoral sexual relationship.

The engagement of students into transactional sexual activities is practiced by both males and female students, despite having female contributing the highest rate.

## Recommendations

The following are the recommendations that were described based on the findings of the study to find solution to curb the problem associated with the perception of transactional sex amongst university students.

### Behavior Change Communication Campaigns

Behavior change communication campaigns that are sensitive to strong social and cultural norms supporting the relationship between parent and child in Africa may make parents more aware of the risks of transactional sex and encourage them to be more involved in their children's decisions. Parents should teach their children from an early age the disadvantage of transactional sex.

### Health Education Meetings

Even if they are unwilling or unable to cease involvement in transactional sexual relationships, young women and young men may be willing to take measures that reduce the health risk of engaging in this behavior, by using condoms. However, because young girls are less likely to be able to negotiate the use of condoms when there is transaction of money or gifts involved in the relationship, programs should target men involved in transactional sex to persuade them to use condoms. Programs should be designed to build up self-esteem and empower young women and young men to make healthy life decisions. Furthermore, being in varsity does not appear to provide protection against engaging in transactional sex. Therefore, campaigns to discourage transactional sex must be targeted to in-school and out-of-school young people alike.

### Limitation of The Study

The study was exclusively conducted in one selected University in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Therefore, a generalization of findings is not possible. However, there is both a possibility and a need for the research to be replicated in other universities.

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