

# **Sexual self-esteem and adolescents' sexual dispositions—Insights from a survey of university adolescents for sex education and counselling**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the effect of sexual self-esteem on adolescent students' sexuality. The researchers utilized the *ex post facto* survey design to explore how sexual self-worth influences sexual dispositions among adolescents in universities. The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria and involved 1,580 randomly sampled adolescents in public universities. The research data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to answer the research question: How does sexual self-esteem influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities? The outcome showed that students with low sexual self-esteem manifested inordinate sex-esteem and permissive sexual dispositions whereas adolescents with high sexual self-esteem manifested positive sexual dispositions. The researchers thus concluded that sexual self-esteem has a significant effect on the sexuality of adolescent university students. Based on this, it was recommended that sexuality education programs should, *inter alia*, focus on grooming adolescents on how to conduct themselves as human beings with sentience that transcends sexuality.

## **Keywords**

Sexual Self-Esteem, Sex Education, Counseling, University, Adolescents

## **1. Introduction**

Self-esteem, conceptualized in its triadic structure subsumes beliefs about the self as they relate to competence and ability, valence associated with these beliefs, and attributions of value or worthiness according to some pre-established social standard (Goodson, Buhi & Dunsmore, 2006). This conceptualization portrays self-esteem as fundamentally determined by relations of power within social groups, with very little individual choice or agency over such determination. Following the implications of this conceptualization, it would be understandable why youths in public universities seem to confuse proper self-esteem with what the researchers would describe as “sex-esteem”.

Sexual self-esteem describes one's valuation of his/her self-worth as a sexual being. On the other hand, sex-esteem describes inordinate flaunting of one's sexual attributes.

Following the triadic structure of self-esteem presented earlier, sex-esteem may thus subsume one's beliefs about his/her self in relation to his/her ability to have sex, the degree of attractiveness (valence) of exuding sex appeal, and the desirability of being sexy within one's social sphere.

It has been commonly observed that showing off one's “sex-worth” has become a way of campus life in Nigerian public universities. Students reach extremes flaunting their sexuality in a bid to garner attributions of worthiness to boost their sense of self. It would not be hasty to suppose that these students actually mistake sex-esteem for self-esteem; substituting as it were, regard for one's self as a sexual being with personality and sentience that transcends sexuality with being desired for sex.

Arguably, sexuality plays an important role in the lives of

students. However, the researchers have observed that students embark on sexual escapades for varied reasons: to compensate for past emotional neglect by significant others, utilizing sexual expressions to feel like they are needed, desired, and useful; to relive past abuse situations; as a show of independence/rebellion to parents and significant others; to garner such external validations as good grades from lecturers, attention from the opposite sex, financial security from wealthy partners, and so on—using sex as an operant behavior.

Furthering on the foregone, sex may become an outlet for a struggling student's frustrations, much in the same way drugs and alcohol serve as an outlet. In this way, sex becomes a drug, a weapon to fight unpleasant feelings and emotions. However, as with any drug, there is always a backlash. Students who are acting out sexually are observed to eventually start feeling a diminished sense of self-worth. Taken together, the fight to command peer acceptance, love, admiration, and improve one's value in the peer group and the perception that such can be attained by flaunting one's sexuality has resulted in students adopting and displaying sexual attitudes and behavior that deviate significantly from moral prescriptions on human sexual behavior. Generally, these are supposedly rooted in negative or low sexual self-esteem.

In view of the prevailing situation presented above, there is an urgent need to revisit existing efforts in helping youths develop healthy pro-social heterosexual lives. Sexuality education and professional counseling on sex has, in recent times, been among the most efficient instruments in this direction. To be effective at correcting this trend, however, there is an urgent need to explore underlies of sex life on campus. This study examined the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities. Sexual disposition here describes attitudes towards sexuality and is examined from two related perspectives: liberal and conservative. Liberal sexual dispositions encompass sexual dispositions that are permissive, loose and immoral. Conservative sexual dispositions on the other hand encompass attitudes towards sexuality that fall within morally acceptable boundaries. It is assumed that such sexual dispositions are fundamental to adolescents' sexual adjustment and thus needful to study in order to provide insights for sex education and counseling of these adolescents.

### 1.1. Research Question

This paper aims to provide an empirical answer the research question: How does sexual self-esteem influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities?

### 1.2. Hypothesis

To guide the outcome of this survey, the researchers hypothesized thus:

Sexual self-esteem does not significantly influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

Sex is generally believed to be beneficial for one's self-esteem when it is consciously done to affirm one's values and needs such as intimacy, desirability, connection, and pleasure. However, Dattani (2012) opines that individuals who have sex because they thought they would be accused of being frigid or scared if they did not; those who have sex because they thought that having sex with someone would mean they would like them more; those who have sex so as to appear more popular, desirable, or cooler to their friends; and those in a sexual relationship with someone who does not treat them right merely because they thought they could not do any better, or were scared of being alone are all very likely suffering from low sexual self-esteem. According to Dattani (2012), low self-esteem can be caused by many different factors: feelings of loneliness, feeling unattractive or even emotional trauma resulting from being bullied or neglected. Oftentimes, these lead to a vicious circle of bad decisions on sexual expressions and behavior including promiscuity and eventual sex addiction.

Supporting the argument on how people develop low sexual self-esteem that result in sexual liberality, Mason (2013) opines that if a man (for example) has had turbulent, unfulfilling or traumatic experiences with his mother or other significant women in his past, he will need a great amount of sexual validation to compensate for his feeling of unworthiness or inadequacy with intimacy and relationships. Instead of a girlfriend and maybe a fling or two being sufficient for his self-esteem, this man feels a need to prove himself over and over, in a variety of situations, to overcome and disprove all of the emotional baggage he has been carrying around from the women in his life for all of these years.

However, sex becomes unhealthy when it passes the point of affirmation and connection and becomes another form of escapism and objectification. Mason (2013) argues that the person's sexual encounters, having solved one of his emotional issues, bump up against another: his fear and resentment of intimacy. The relationships with the few women he was capable of getting close to expose his inability to accept unconditional affection and soon sabotaged. To protect himself he rationalizes and reinforces misogynistic beliefs, thus allowing him to pursue a series of casual sexual encounters without ever running the risk of actually becoming vulnerable. Promiscuity, the solution to his original emotional issues, has now become the anesthetic to his deeper, underlying problems. But it does not stop there. Sex and promiscuity can have addictive qualities as well. Mason (2013) explains that biologically, particularly in men, new sexual encounters have been shown to release a surge of dopamine into the brain, giving the person a feel of euphoria, not dissimilar to cocaine. The problem with these dopamine rushes is that they have a propensity to become addictive. Generally, behavior becomes addictive when they are unpredictable and provide physiological rewards. In this case, a likely neurotic fixation on affection from women may likely

be at the root of sexual addiction and promiscuity (Mason, 2013).

The other addictive quality of promiscuity is the resultant external validation the promiscuous usually receives (Cohen, 2009; Kafka, 2010; Wise & Schmidt, 1997). For men, there is a lot of social conditioning to be a “player” or “stud” or to have sexual relations with as many “hot girls” as possible (The Rawness, 2007). But it is worse with women, especially with contemporary issues with female objectification and the “hot complex” personality maladjustment. Females in public university milieus have been commonly observed struggling to live out a sexual ideology rather than pursuing their personal and academic needs and values. External validation can become addictive and it can erode at one’s sense of self-worth. These students may have relations with partners they are not otherwise interested in, exaggerate their experiences or otherwise pursue sexual experiences they do not agree with or value, all in order to garner the attention and appreciation of those around them (external validation).

This, according to Mason (2013), is classic low self-esteem behavior and only reinforces the feeling of low self-worth. Re-orienting one’s self on the beliefs and standards of others rather than one’s emotional needs is always a one-way ticket to low self-esteem. The stimuli thus sent to the sub-conscious is that one’s ideas, values and beliefs are not as important as those of others around him/her, thus one’s identity and values are given up in order to cash in on the validation from others. After this belief is internalized, and eventually the satisfaction of external validation runs out, the individual will always crave for more external validation. This craving for more external validation is believed to be the linkage between low self-esteem and sexual liberality and general sexual maladjustment.

In a systematic review of literature on the influence of self-esteem with specific focus on the nature of the relationship between self-esteem and various behavior/attitude/intention variables, Goodson, Buhi and Dunsmore (2006), found that 60% of the findings reviewed yielded no statistically significant association, 26% indicated an inverse relationship, and 14% rendered a positive association. When examining the nature of these relationships by specific categories, a similar pattern emerged: 62% of behavior findings and 72% of the attitudinal findings exhibited no statistically significant association. All of the intention-related findings exhibited some type of relationship (either positive or inverse).

In 2003, a synthesis of literature focusing on self-esteem and numerous outcomes (health, sexual behavior, financial status, grades, intelligence, job performance, job satisfaction, and interpersonal relations) revealed that self-esteem does not have the protective effect touted by health promotion professionals (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, et al. 2003). Instead, high self-esteem may promote experimentation in the case of sexual activity or drinking, while its general protective effects are “negligible”. A similar review by Baumeister, Smart, and Boden, (1996) examined whether low self-esteem led to various types of violence and aggression, and found no

evidence supporting a causal relationship. In contrast, the researchers concluded that violence may, in fact, result from threatened egotism or ‘highly favorable views of the self that are disputed by some person or circumstance’.

Ethier, Kershaw, Lewis, Milan, Niccolai, and Ickovics (2006) in an attempt to clarify the relationship between psychological factors and sexual behavior designed and tested a model examining relationships between sexual history (age at initiation, partner history) and self-esteem and emotional distress (depression, anxiety, stress, hostility) and their impact on future sexual risk behavior (unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners). Their study analyzed 155 sexually active adolescent females, aged 14-19 years, who participated in the first two waves of a longitudinal study of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/sexually transmitted disease (STD) and pregnancy risk. The Rosenberg Self-esteem scale, the Perceived Stress Scale, and three subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory (depression, anxiety, hostility) and a variety of self-report measures of sexual history and sexual behavior were administered. Structural equation modeling using LISREL 8.51 was used to assess the proposed model. Their model exhibited adequate fit and demonstrated that sexual history reported retrospectively at baseline was related to self-esteem and emotional distress also measured at baseline. These variables predicted sexual risk behavior measured 6 months later. Adolescents who had lower self-esteem at baseline reported initiating sex earlier and having had risky partners. Alternatively, adolescents with more emotional distress at baseline were less likely to have had a previous STD, had more partners per year of sexual activity and a history of risky partners. Self-esteem influenced subsequent unprotected sex and emotional distress influenced subsequent multiple partners. The researchers thus concluded that self-esteem and emotional distress have contrasting relationships with sexual behavior and demonstrates the importance of the temporal nature of these variables.

Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, and Anderman (2008) examined the associations between sexual self-concept (sexual esteem and sexual anxiety) and sexual self-efficacy (situational and resistive) in a sample of 388 high school students (59% Caucasian, 28% African American). Males reported lower sexual esteem and lower sexual self-efficacy than females. Males and African Americans reported higher levels of sexual anxiety and lower levels of resistive self-efficacy than females and Caucasians. In regression models, higher sexual self-esteem uniquely predicted higher sexual self-efficacy scores, even after controlling for demographic variables, knowledge of sexual risk, and previous coital experience. In post hoc analyses, sexual self-esteem mediated the relation between knowledge of sexual risk and both types of sexual self-efficacy. Results suggest the need for interventions to promote male sexual self-efficacy and sexual esteem and the need for longitudinal research that explicates models of sexual health in adolescence. Similarly, Beverly (1995) found a positive correlation between low self-esteem and negative sexual orientations with such factors as sexual abuse, internalized negative messages about sex, and traumatic first

sexual encounters as explanatory variables.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1. Design

This study is a part of a larger survey on psychosocial variables and the sexuality of public university students in Akwa Ibom State. The ex post facto survey design used was considered most suitable because the variables of research interest were already operative in the population and the researchers did not administer any form of experimental control or treatment on the sample to induce them. Furthermore, the survey design allowed the researchers to have a comprehensive coverage of the population and ensured an even representation of all the elements of the population in the randomized sample.

#### 3.2. Population

The population of the study comprised fulltime adolescent undergraduate students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State. There were 15,803 fulltime undergraduate students in the two public Universities in Akwa Ibom State (University of Uyo, Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University, Mkpato Enin) as at when this study was conducted. The choice of public Universities in Akwa Ibom State for this study was informed by the multicultural, religious and socio-economic diversity of the populace. In the researchers' opinion, this translates into having a sample that adequately mirrors the wider society in various ways; enhancing the generalizability of the findings of this study on other diverse populations.

#### 3.3. Sample/Sampling

Using the stratified and random sampling techniques, 10% of the student population was sampled for the study. This added up to a sample size of 1,580 students. The stratified random sampling technique allowed for evenness in the selection of students based on age (adolescents were targeted) and school population. It also ensured a comprehensive coverage of all relevant elements of the population in the sample thus eliminating biases due to sampling error.

#### 3.4. Instrumentation

The instrument used for this study was the Tertiary Institution Students' Sexuality Questionnaire (TISSEXQ) developed by the researchers. The items on the instruments were carefully constructed based on the variables under investigation and the purpose of the study to ensure content validity. Furthermore, the items were subjected to expert analyses by psychologists and measurement experts. Their expert contributions were well integrated in the final copy of the instrument which was used for the field survey. The instrument had a reliability index of .86 for the sexual attitude scale and .84 for sexual self-esteem scale. These were considered to be valid indicators of internal consistency.

### 3.5. Scoring of Instrument/ Data Analysis

Scoring of the instrument was done on a 4-point scale. The scale had four (4) response categories of SA (Strongly Agree) with 4 points weight, A (Agree) with 3 points weight, D (Disagree) with 2 points weight, and SD (Strongly Disagree) with 1 point weight. Positively worded items were weighted in this manner whereas negatively worded items had the weights reversed on the scale thus: SA=1 point, A=2 points, D=3 points and SD=4 points. Once the scores were collated, they were analyzed using descriptive statistics and student t-test for the research question and hypothesis respectively.

### 4. Results

The question raised for this study was: How does sexual self-esteem influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities? To answer the research question, the sample was split in two based on their sexual self-esteem (high sexual self-esteem and low sexual self-esteem). The sexual attitude mean scores obtained for students with high sexual self-esteem and that of those with low sexual self-esteem on the sexual attitude scale are presented on Figure 1 for ease of comparison.

The chart in Figure 1 shows that students with high self-esteem scored higher on the Sexual Attitude Scale than those with low self-esteem. It was observed that students with high self-esteem had a mean score of 27.32 whereas those with low self-esteem had a mean score of 20.51. Based on this, the answer to the second research question was given that students' sexual self-esteem has an influence on students' sexual attitudes such that students with high sexual self-esteem developed positive sexual dispositions whereas those with low sexual self-esteem developed negative sexual dispositions.

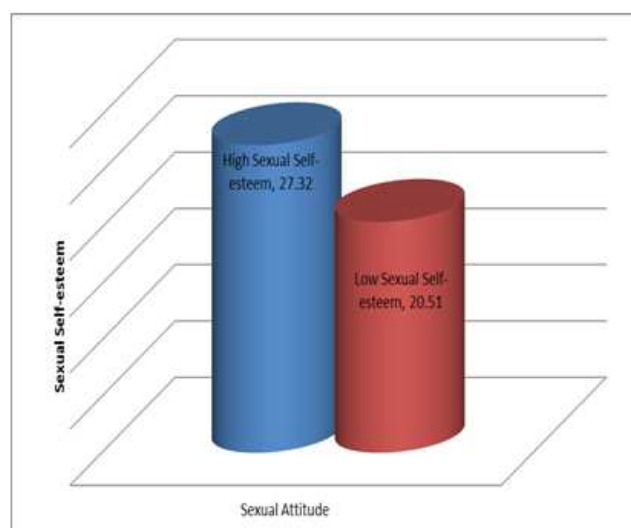


Fig. 1. Students' Sexual Attitude by Self-esteem

To examine the significance of the observed influence of sexual self-esteem on students' sexual dispositions, a null hypothesis predicting that *sexual self-esteem does not*

significantly influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities was tested using student t-test as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** t-test analysis of sexual self-esteem and students' sexual attitude

	Sexual Self-esteem	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	t-calc.	df	t-crit.
Sexual	High	842	27.32	5.946	25.07*	1578	1.96
Attitudes	Low	738	20.51	4.696			

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

It would be observed in the analysis presented in Table 1 that the calculated t-value (25.07) is greater than the critical value of the t-statistic (1.96) at .05 level of significance and 1578 degree of freedom. Therefore, the hypothesis which predicted that sexual self-esteem does not significantly influence the sexual dispositions of adolescent students in public universities was rejected. The analysis showed that students with high sexual self-esteem have significantly more positive sexual dispositions (with a mean score of 27.32) than those with low sexual self-esteem who rather manifested significantly negative sexual dispositions (with a mean score of 20.51). The analysis indicated that sexual self-esteem has a significant influence on the sexual dispositions of adolescents in public universities.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The test result of the research hypothesis showed that there is a significant difference in the sexual dispositions of adolescent students with high sexual self-esteem and that of those with low sexual self-esteem. This result is in consonance with the results obtained by Walsh (1995), Giugliano (2003) and McLeish *et al* (2010) and in their separate studies. These researchers reported a significant relationship between low self-esteem and liberal sexual dispositions. McLeish and colleagues for instance found that low self-esteem resulted in anxiety and insecurity. Therefore by being liberal sexually, individuals with low self-esteem strive to gain some form of social acceptance and a sense of belonging (security). This is similar to the finding of the current study. Adolescent students in public universities who scored low on the sexual self-esteem scale reported variously that being sexually attractive improves self-esteem; that they feel inferior if people are not sexually attracted to them; and that sex appeal is an easy way to get the acceptance of others. Therefore, in a bid to gain the widest social acceptance possible, these students develop liberal sexual dispositions. This disposition underscores the liberal sexual behaviour often decried on campuses across the study region (cf. Johnson, 2011).

The result of this study further showed that the observed influence of adolescents' sexual self-esteem on their sexual dispositions is significant and thus worthy of intervention. The implication of this outcome for sexuality education is that such programmes must be designed to include information on how to carry oneself as a sexual being to boost one's sense of self, sexually speaking. Media hype on sex appeal, body

image, and attractiveness may be counteracted by a balanced education on the realities and morality of exuding sex appeal and attention seeking behaviour. Media portrayals of modelled virtual sexuality had been found to result in the sexual objectification of females in particular (cf. Fredrickson & Roberts, 2008; Fredrickson & Harrison, 2005; Hewstone & Brewer, 2004; and LeMoncheck, 1997). Where youths and young adults begin to feel that they are not measuring up fully to the virtual realities, they have been found to develop body image anxieties and ultimately, a low sense of "sex-worth" (cf. Beverly, 1995). Against this backdrop, sexuality education may strive to promote sexual self-efficacy and sexual esteem (cf. Rostosky *et al*, 2008). Students should especially be helped through such programmes of sexuality education to see themselves, not as sexual objects as portrayed by popular media but, as human beings with sentience and a general self-worth that transcends sexual stereotypes, sex, and body image. The bottom line here is that sexuality education may aim to help students develop positive sexual self-esteem, helping them to distinguish between proper self-esteem and "sex-esteem" as commonly touted by popular media; helping them to see sex from a healthy sociological perspective and not as something that can be traded for some fleeting sense of self-esteem.

## 6. Conclusion/Recommendations

The findings of this study led the researchers to conclude that public university students with low sexual self-esteem manifest negative sexual dispositions whereas public university students with high sexual self-esteem manifest positive sexual dispositions. Based on this conclusion, the researchers here recommend that sex education programmes should include within its purview helpful instruction and guidance on how to develop a healthy and positive sense of oneself as a sexual being.

Counsellors and Guidance Professionals (especially those who specialise in psychology of adolescence) should be involved in the development of sex education programmes. These experts will thus be able to make meaningful and expert contributions to the content of such sex education programmes. The aim would be to design a programme of sex education that will cognitively re-orientate students to see themselves as valuable not merely because they are sexually appealing but more importantly because they are not morally appalling. Such education will help these students to develop a positive sense of sexual self-worth.

Parents and guardians should of necessity inculcate very early in the lives of their children a positive sense of sexual self-worth. This highlights the relevance of sex education at home. By talking with their children about sex at home, educating them about sex roles, sexual norms, sexual ills, sexual stereotypes and attitudes to avoid and sexual ideals to imbibe, parents and guardians will thus assist their wards to place a high value on themselves for the manifestation of positive sexual dispositions or attitudes at sexual maturation.

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