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‘MOVING BEYOND DATING TO SHARING DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES’: EXPLAINING COHABITATION PRACTICES AMONG STUDENTS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes and practices of cohabitation among students in a selected University in South West Nigeria. The study was motivated by the increasing prevalence of cohabitation on university campuses despite strong cultural, religious, and moral prohibitions against the practice. Anchored on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Symbolic Interactionist Theory (SIT), the design was exploratory involving the conduct of in-depth interviews with 22 purposively selected students who were cohabiting at the time of the study or had cohabited in the past. Data were content analysed. The findings indicated an awareness of cohabitation among students, with emotional companionship, economic convenience, and proximity to campus emerging as dominant motivations. Cultural and religious beliefs continued to shape negative perceptions, especially among female students, who experienced greater stigma and moral judgement. While respondents agreed that cohabitation offers emotional and academic convenience, some also maintained that it undermines the sanctity of marriage. Cohabitation was also perceived to have implications for students' sexual and reproductive health (SRH), including increased likelihood of sexual activity, risk of unintended pregnancy, and exposure to sexually transmitted infections. The study concluded that cohabitation among students is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by socio-economic pressures, relational needs, and the gradual re-negotiation of traditional norms. Although students increasingly normalize the practice, moral ambivalence and gendered inequalities persist. The research recommended that the University management should expand affordable hostel facilities, strengthen youth-friendly SRH services, and introduce counselling programs that address relationship management and reproductive health education.

Keywords: Cohabitation, University students, Attitudes and practices, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Economic hardship.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the trend of cohabitation, defined as an arrangement where two people in an intimate relationship live together without being legally married, has attracted significant academic attention across the globe. Traditionally viewed as a Western lifestyle practice, cohabitation has become progressively prevalent in African societies, including Nigeria, albeit under varied cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts. While historically stigmatized, particularly in societies with strong religious and moral frameworks, cohabitation is increasingly perceived by younger populations as a normative relationship option, particularly among university students (Saheed and Seedat-Khan, 2024; Idris-Iyekolo, 2021). This shifting pattern in relationship and living arrangements reflects broader changes in societal values, youth culture, economic realities, and institutional norms.

Universities are established for career, personal and societal development. Despite these three purposes, University education in Nigeria is full of maladaptive behaviour (Oladejo, 2022). This is due to that fact that most students, especially undergraduates are primarily youths, between 18-21 years upon their entrance into different universities Nigeria (Onayose, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that these undergraduates engage in social vices such as prostitution, abortion, cultism, examination malpractice, stealing, killings, cohabitation (Adeniyi, 2019). One of the common social behaviour among students in Nigeria's tertiary institutions is cohabitation.

Cohabitation is commonly referred to as ‘ Campus Marriage’, ‘Couples life’ ‘Campus Coupling’, ‘marrying for marriage’ etc., a nomenclature invented to give this act an acceptable norm amongst youths in Nigeria tertiary institutions (Adeniyi, 2019; Augustinah et al., 2018).

Cohabitation is becoming rampant on university campuses in Nigeria (Kalu, Ejiogu, Chukwukadibia & Nleoma, 2021). The incidence of cohabitation among university students in recent times is alarming. According to Fareo and Moses (2018), not less than 45 percent of undergraduates live as couples on campus.

It is observed that most students feel it is right to cohabit with opposite sex because they feel it makes them know their future partner very well. They also feel that sharing the same room with the supposed fiancé would reduce the cost of living. The perception and attitude of students to co-habitation may be influenced by gender and family income. It is observed that female prefer to live couple's life on campus than male. Hence, the females have more tendencies to engage in cohabitation than male undergraduates (Onayose, 2020).

Cohabitation also has implications for sexual behaviour. It may lead to unwanted pregnancies which may affect their completion of education. Female students go for abortion which exposes them to risk of death or damaged uterus. Another problem is the threat of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS etc. and use of oral contraceptive by female students in order to avoid pregnancy can lead to health issues that shortened the educational aspiration.

Bello (2022) opined that students indulge in cohabitation for pragmatic considerations to save money on rent and other living expenses. That is, they cohabit with those whom they perceive are capable of solving their financial problems.

Despite growing awareness of cohabitation practices among Nigerian university students, a significant knowledge gap persists in understanding how this phenomenon manifests within the University system. Available literature often addresses general trends across institutions, but fails to provide a focused, contextualized analysis of students' attitudes and behaviours toward cohabitation. Moreover, while studies have documented reasons such as financial pressure, academics, emotional stress, and social engagement and relationship testing as motivations for cohabitation (Toryuh, Kolapo, Ibraheem and Lawal, 2023; Chen, Bian and Zhu, 2023, Fareo & Moses, 2018; Duyilemi et al., 2018), they have not critically examined its prevalence and practice in specific university settings. There is also a paucity of research on the sexual and reproductive health implications of cohabitation from the students' perspective.

Furthermore, the current economic crisis and housing shortages in Nigeria may have altered students' decisions regarding cohabitation, but existing studies largely ignore these current realities. This study, therefore, investigated the prevalence and nature of cohabitation among students in a selected Nigerian University, and explored students' perceptions, motivations, and attitudes toward cohabitation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The phenomenon of cohabitation among university students is a multifaceted social practice shaped by individual choices, interpersonal dynamics, socio-cultural norms, and economic circumstances. To adequately explain the attitudes and behaviours of students toward cohabitation, this study draws upon two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Symbolic Interactionist Theory. These frameworks offer distinct yet intersecting perspectives on how individuals make decisions regarding intimate partnerships and shared living arrangements within the university context.

Social Exchange Theory, rooted in the works of George Homans (1961), posits that human interactions are based on a rational evaluation of rewards and costs. According to SET, individuals enter and maintain relationships when the perceived benefits outweigh the associated costs. Rewards may include emotional support, financial gain, companionship, sexual gratification, or academic assistance, while costs may involve emotional distress, loss of autonomy, or societal disapproval.

Rooted in utilitarian principles, SET assumes that relationships are maintained based on perceived benefits such as emotional support, companionship, sexual access, financial sharing, and convenience, while minimizing burdens like conflict, social disapproval, or dependency.

In the context of student cohabitation, SET explains why many undergraduates particularly in economically constrained environments like Nigerian public universities, engage in cohabitation as a rational choice.

In the context of cohabitation among university students, SET explains why students may choose to cohabit despite cultural or moral opposition.

SET also helps to explain the limitations of cohabitation. When the costs such as emotional turmoil, jealousy, academic distraction, or exposure to sexually transmitted infections, begin to outweigh the benefits, students may terminate such arrangements. Therefore, SET captures the dynamic process of decision-making, negotiation, and exit strategies involved in cohabiting relationships.

Symbolic Interactionism, attributed to George Herbert Mead (1934), focuses on the meanings individuals assign to symbols, actions, and social interactions. The theory asserts that human behaviour is constructed through ongoing social interaction and interpretation. Individuals derive meanings from social norms, peer interactions, and personal experiences, which in turn shape their identities and choices.

Symbolic Interactionism offers insight into the construction of meaning within cohabiting relationships. According to this theory, people act based on the meanings things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interactions and modified through interpretation.

Among university students, cohabitation may carry different symbolic meanings—from an expression of romantic commitment to a rebellion against parental norms, or even as a survival tactic in a challenging university economy. Phrases like “school wife”, “campus couple”, or “living together” are not merely descriptive but are loaded with social and cultural significance.

This theory explains how students develop attitudes toward cohabitation through peer discourse, campus subculture, and media portrayals. The normalization or stigmatization of cohabitation among students is shaped through ongoing interaction with their environment, which in turn affects their willingness to participate in or resist cohabitation practices.

This theory is relevant for understanding how students perceive and define cohabitation in their own terms such as “campus marriage,” “living with bae,” or “test-running marriage.” These expressions reflect how students symbolically normalize or reframe cohabitation as a socially acceptable behaviour within peer cultures. Through repeated interactions, students may develop shared meanings that justify or validate cohabitation as practical, progressive, or necessary.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism explains the variation in attitudes toward cohabitation based on socio-demographic factors such as gender, cultural background, and religious affiliation. For instance, female students may interpret cohabitation as a pathway to emotional security or future commitment, while male students might view it as a less binding arrangement. Thus, meaning-making is central to how students engage in and rationalize cohabitation. Yamkela, et al. (2024) leveraged the social exchange theory in their investigation of the impact of cohabitation on tertiary students in a province in South Africa. Kgadima (2024) also employed symbolic interactionism to explore how cohabitees construct and express commitment in their relationship. Using symbolic interactionism, Žilinčiková and Hiekel (2018) also examined the role of marital attitudes in the

transition from cohabitation to marriage and compared the strength of this association between Western and Eastern Europe.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a selected University in South West Nigeria. The study population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University who were cohabiting at the time of the study or had cohabited in the past. The study adopted an exploratory design, involving the use of qualitative method. The qualitative method involved in-depth interviews with selected students, allowing for a deeper exploration of symbolic meanings, personal narratives, and motivations.

Twenty-two students of the University who were cohabiting at the time of the study or who had cohabited in the past were selected purposively. The content analysis approach was utilized for data analysis, employing a narrative method with verbatim quotations. This study implemented strict measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, addressing any aspects that might compromise these ethical standards. Participants were accorded the right to withdraw from the study at any point they felt that sharing their information may endanger their lives, and this choice was fully respected. All collected data was treated with the highest confidentiality and anonymised to protect participants from harm. These ethical guideline was rigorously followed throughout the research process to uphold the rights and well-being of the participants. The study was approved by the institution's ethical committee.

FINDINGS

This section is dedicated to the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the data collected for this study. The socio-demographic profile of participants reveal a complex interplay between age, gender, level of study, faculty, and accommodation type in shaping students' experiences, attitudes, and motivations. The gender distribution among the twenty-two participants was almost even, with twelve male and ten female respondents. This balanced representation is crucial as it highlights distinct gendered perspectives on cohabitation. Female participants, often emphasized issues of privacy invasion, social stigma, and the heightened consequences for women, particularly in the event of a breakup or unplanned pregnancy. In contrast, male respondents, frequently expressed more neutral or pragmatic views, focusing on economic benefits and convenience. This underscores that gender is a significant lens through which the risks and benefits of cohabitation are perceived and experienced.

Practice and Experience of Cohabitation

Cohabitation among university students represents a significant shift in relationship dynamics, moving away from traditional courtship patterns towards more pragmatic and fluid living arrangements. This phenomenon is influenced by a complex interplay of economic pressures, evolving social norms, and the unique environment of academic life. Respondents reveal motivations of financial pragmatism, emotional support, and academic convenience as drivers of cohabitation practices. Respondents consistently echoed this, framing it not as a luxury but as a necessary economic strategy. As one student bluntly stated:

I choose to cohabit primarily for economic reasons; splitting rent and bills makes life in Ibadan much more affordable. The post-COVID economic downturn has definitely made it more of a necessity for some; it's a survival strategy now, not just a romantic one.

[IDI/Male/23 years/Arts]

Another participant currently in a cohabiting relationship confirmed this dual motivation, stating:

Our decision was 50% economic and 50% emotional. The cost of living is no joke, and sharing rent and food costs relieves a huge burden.

[IDI/Female/25 years /Education]

The most cited motivation, emotional companionship, was described by students as a crucial support system against the pressures of university life. A student highlighted its functional value, noting:

In my faculty, the motivation is largely practical: having a partner who understands the immense stress and can provide 24/7 emotional and academic support. **[IDI/Male/22 years /Clinical Sciences]**

A postgraduate student offered a more mature perspective, viewing it as:

A mature step in a relationship, moving beyond dating to sharing domestic responsibilities. **[IDI/Male/26 years /Public Health]**

Respondents also showed that academic convenience and proximity to school were significant factors. They explained how cohabitation streamlines the academic journey. A student with past experience explained:

We were both in the same department and it made studying and project work easier, at least initially.

[IDI/Male/24 years /Technology]

Another interviewee pointed to a more subtle form of convenience, noting:

From my experience, convenience was a huge factor; we didn't have to sneak around or spend money on hotels.

[IDI/Female/21 years /Social Sciences]

The strong influence of religious and cultural values was a dominant theme in the interviews. Students from conservative backgrounds expressed strong reservations. One student firmly stated:

I did it before but had to stop because it goes against my religious beliefs which emphasize marriage before such a union. I believe cultural and family values are the biggest influence. **[IDI/Female/20 years /Sciences]**

Perceived Prevalence of Cohabitation among Students

The perception of how widespread cohabitation is within a student community can be as influential as the practice itself, shaping social norms and individual decisions. Respondents perceive cohabitation to be a common, growing, and economically-driven phenomenon within their campus culture, regardless of their personal participation in it. A recurring theme across nearly all interviews is the awareness and visibility of the practice. The study's strongest consensus was on the link between economic pressure and cohabitation. This perception is deeply ingrained in the students' understanding of the phenomenon, as illustrated in the interviews. Students consistently framed cohabitation as a strategic response to financial hardship.

An interviewee currently cohabiting confirmed this, directly linking their decision to economic pressures:

The economic downturn absolutely accelerated our decision to move in together.
[IDI/Female/25 years /Education]

The interview data suggest that students view cohabitation not just as a romantic choice, but often as a necessary economic strategy for navigating university life. The data also indicated that cohabitation has increased significantly over the past years, often linking this increase to broader societal shifts, most notably the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent connected the trend to recent economic history:

The post-COVID economic downturn has definitely made it more of a necessity for some; it's a survival strategy now, not just a romantic one.

[IDI/Male/23 years /Arts]

A postgraduate student offered a more nuanced view on this growth, suggesting a maturation of reasons among older students:

Postgraduate students often cohabit for more settled reasons: established relationships, financial efficiency, and avoiding the often-noisy hostel life. **[IDI/Male/26 years /Public Health]**

This perception of growth correlates with national data on rising inflation and cost of living in Nigeria, which have been shown to precipitate changes in household formation patterns, including an increase in multi-family households and other cost-sharing arrangements among young adults.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Implications of Cohabitation

The shift towards cohabitation among university students carries significant implications for their sexual and reproductive health (SRH), presenting a complex interplay of potential risks and benefits. Findings reveal a strong consensus on the elevated risks of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), a nuanced view on communication, and a critical gap in perceived adequacy of SRH services for this population.

Respondents highlighted how the comfort and perceived security of a cohabiting relationship can lead to complacency in contraceptive practices. One female respondent who had cohabited in the past expressed this concern starkly:

It impacts sexual health negatively; the comfort can lead to lax contraceptive use, thinking 'we're together anyway,' which is risky.

[IDI/Female/21 years /Social Sciences]

The perceived normality of the relationship can inadvertently become a risk factor. The study's link between cohabitation and STI risk is nuanced by the responses, which reveal a duality in perception. Some interviewees saw the potential for healthier practices within a committed, cohabiting partnership. A currently cohabiting student argued:

For sexual health, I believe it can be positive if it encourages responsible, committed partners to access contraception and STI testing together without stigma. **[IDI/Female/25 years /Education]**

This positive view was countered by a more serious public health concern raised by another student who had cohabited in the past:

A negative consequence is the potential for intimate partner violence in a space that's hard to escape. The impact on sexual health is double-edged; it can encourage safer practices within a monogamous relationship but also lead to complacency.

[IDI/Male/26/Public Health/ 2025]

Findings indicated that students believe cohabitation fosters better sexual communication, framing it as a benefit born of necessity and intimacy. A student with cohabitation experience reflected on the learning process:

The benefits are profound: you learn communication, conflict resolution, and truly get to know your partner's habits.

[IDI/Male/24/Technology/ 2025]

This perceived benefit aligns with research on relational communication, which finds that shared living arrangements can accelerate the development of communication patterns and intimacy, potentially leading to more open discussions about sexual health and boundaries (Mirzaei Damabi , 2025). The interviews provide context for this, suggesting a silence or lack of targeted outreach. None of the interviewees mentioned utilizing or being aware of specific university services tailored to cohabiting students. This perception of institutional neglect is a critical finding, as it suggests that students engaging in a high-risk behaviour perceive themselves to be navigating its consequences without formal support. This aligns with studies on youth SRH in Nigeria, which frequently identify a gap between service provision and the actual, often hidden, needs of the student population (Arije, Hlungwani and Madan, 2022).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the major findings of the study through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Symbolic Interactionism (SIT), the two theoretical frameworks guiding this research. The integration of these perspectives provides a more comprehensive explanation of the attitudes and practices of cohabitation among University students.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that human relationships are guided by a rational evaluation of costs and rewards, with individuals seeking to maximize benefits and minimize burdens. This logic resonates strongly with the findings of this study. First, the results demonstrate that financial and practical benefits are central drivers of cohabitation. These findings align with SET, which recognizes both material and socio-emotional gratifications as rewards within relationships.

From a SET perspective, this statement illustrates how students calculate their living arrangements as rational strategies to share costs and cushion economic hardship. The widespread perception that cohabitation is more common among low-income students aligns with studies on student behaviour in Nigeria, which note that rising inflation and the high cost of off-campus housing have led students to seek innovative coping mechanisms, with cohabitation being a primary one (Adeyemi & Ogunwale, 2022; Ikiyei and Amatari, 2025). It also aligns with the assertion that in times of economic uncertainty, individuals are more likely to form unions based on practical cost-benefit calculations rather than purely romantic ideals (Palumbo, Berrington and Eibich, 2025).

Second, the prevalence of cohabitation reveals how students “slide” into such arrangements when rewards appear to outweigh costs, only to dissolve the union once the balance shifts. This pattern is consistent with SET’s understanding of relationships as dynamic exchanges, sustained only as long as perceived benefits surpass potential costs. For example, respondents highlighted risks of

pregnancy and academic distraction as deterrents that raised the “cost” of cohabitation, often leading to its termination.

Third, the sexual and reproductive health findings fit within SET’s cost–benefit logic. Data suggested that the emotional rewards of closeness and trust sometimes outweighed the costs of consistent contraceptive use, leading to complacency. The finding is also consistent with psychological research on young adults, which indicates that cohabitation can fulfil core needs for intimacy, belonging, and mutual support, especially during periods of high stress like tertiary education (Cherlin, 2020). Overall, SET explains the instrumental logic of students’ choices: cohabitation persists because the immediate rewards are often judged to outweigh the longer-term costs, including stigma, health risks, and potential academic consequences. This pragmatic approach to relationships reflects a global trend among millennial and Gen Z, who often prioritize practical benefits and efficiency in their personal arrangements (Manning & Payne, 2021).

While SET explains the material and emotional rewards behind cohabitation, Symbolic Interactionism (SIT) provides insight into how students construct and negotiate the meanings attached to the practice within their everyday interactions. SIT holds that individuals act based on the meanings they attach to situations, and these meanings are shaped and reshaped through social interaction. The data reveal that cohabitation is increasingly viewed as a normal and common practice on campus. From a SIT perspective, these perceptions are critical: the more visible a practice becomes, the more its symbolic meaning shifts from “deviant” to “ordinary.” Students frequently referred to cohabitation in everyday terms such as “campus marriage” or “school husband/wife,” indicating that new social labels are emerging to frame the practice as a legitimate lifestyle choice. This process of normalization was clearly reflected in interview narratives.

Finally, SIT captures the symbolic functions of cohabitation beyond economics. Several respondents described it as a trial for marriage or a stage of personal growth, where students learned communication, compromise, and conflict resolution. These narratives highlight how everyday interaction rituals within cohabitation create new definitions of maturity and adulthood among students. This perspective aligns with the assertion that couples may slide into cohabitation for practical reasons rather than making a deliberate decision about their relationship future (Chapman, Liu, Stanley and Rhoades (2025).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cohabitation among University students is a complex phenomenon situated at the intersection of economic rationality and cultural symbolism. On one hand, the practice is driven by pragmatic considerations such as cost-sharing, emotional companionship, and convenience (as explained by Social Exchange Theory). On the other hand, it remains a morally contested practice, deeply shaped by cultural scripts, religious values, and peer interpretations (as explained by Symbolic Interactionism Theory). The findings reveal a duality: even as cohabitation becomes normalized among students, it continues to attract ambivalence and stigma. Importantly, the study highlights gendered consequences, where women disproportionately bear the brunt of negative labelling and risks associated with sexual and reproductive health.

Cohabitation among students is not simply an outcome of individual choice, but a practice shaped by broader structural, cultural, and symbolic forces. The study concludes that students’ cohabitation is best understood through the dual lens of Social Exchange Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. While the former highlights the cost–benefit logic underpinning the decision to cohabit, the latter reveals how meanings, labels, and cultural scripts shape both the opportunities

and the risks associated with the practice. Cohabitation is therefore not merely a private arrangement but a phenomenon that reflects wider structural inequalities, cultural negotiations, and generational change within Nigerian society.

In light of this study's findings, the following recommendations are made:

The University should prioritize the expansion and improvement of student housing facilities. Many respondents highlighted economic hardship and lack of affordable accommodation as key reasons for cohabitation. By providing affordable and decent on-campus hostels, or entering into public–private partnerships to subsidize off-campus housing, the University can reduce the structural pressures that drive students into cohabiting arrangements.

Findings indicate that students perceive current SRH services as inadequate, particularly for those in cohabiting relationships. The University Health Services should provide youth-friendly SRH programs, including access to contraception, STI testing, counselling, and peer-led awareness initiatives. Confidentiality and non-judgmental service delivery are essential to encourage uptake. Partnerships with NGOs and public health agencies could also be leveraged to bridge service gaps.

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