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PERCEPTION OF CONDOM USE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: ITS PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS IN RIVERS STATE NIGERIA

Justina Ozoemena-Emetuche¹, Benjamin Osarolaka Osaro²,

*Correspondence: Justina Ozoemena-Emetuche; Email: justinaozoemena39@gmail.com

Abstract

Objective

The use of condom, a cost-effective strategy for the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV among adolescents is low. The adolescent's perception on condom is key in their decision to use it. This study looked at the perception of adolescents and young people on condom use in Rivers State Nigeria.

Methodology

This descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out among 440 undergraduate students in Rivers State Nigeria selected through multistage sampling. Respondents provided information on their socio-demography, perceptions on condom use, use and reasons for non-use. Descriptive statistics was done using SPSS version 29 and results presented on frequency tables and figure.

Result

Respondents who have positive perception on condom use were 365 (83%). All respondents agree that condom is effective in preventing unwanted pregnancy and STIs and 426 (96.8%) that having the right knowledge is required to use condom. Perception however differed among male (n = 186; 51.0%) and female (n=179; 49.0%) and with increasing level of study; 74 (20.3%) among level 100 students and 101 (27.7%) among level 400 students. Partners' distrust and preferences were the commonest reason for non-use among non-users.

Conclusion

Positive perception of condoms among undergraduate students in Rivers State is high. The commonest reasons for not using condoms have public health implications on attainment of sexual and reproductive health rights of adolescent. Strengthening of youth-friendly healthcare services, school health services and public awareness programmes facilitated by managers of reproductive health programmes is recommended to correct wrong perceptions on condom.

Keywords: *Perception; reproductive health; condom; adolescents; young people; Rivers State Nigeria*

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Introduction

Condom is a cost-effective strategy for the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Young people are involved in risky sexual practices, especially those out of school. This predispose them to sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancies which end in clandestine abortions that contribute significantly to their poor sexual health.¹⁻⁶ It has been reported that among adolescents and young people in Nigeria, pregnancy rate is high at 15.9% and the incidence rate of HIV more than 50% especially among females^{7,8}. These disease burdens are fueled by risky sexual behaviours like unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners and transactional sex with socioeconomic factors acting as drivers.⁸

Although studies show that the awareness and knowledge of condom is very high among adolescents and young people, its use and consistent use are low, despite the knowledge of the benefits of its use.^{3,8} For instance, the prevalence rate of condom use was 66.1% among sexually active Ethiopian College students,⁹ 50.2% and 49.8% respectively among male and female undergraduate students in Uganda,⁴ and 27.1% among Malawian youths.¹⁰ In Nigeria 38.6% of sexually active university students consistently used condom.⁸ However studies in parts of Nigeria show that 33.4% of sexually active adolescents in Nassarawa State¹¹ and 27.6% among adolescents in Plateau State used condom consistently¹ while in South-West Nigeria where 35.5% of sexually active rural youths have ever used condoms, only 10.7% of them use it consistently.

Furthermore, studies in Rivers State Nigeria reported that 61.7% of sexually active adolescents, and 62.2% of female secondary school adolescents in a rural town use condom,^{3,12} while among undergraduate students, 77.6% have ever used a male condom with 58.5% were them using it consistently.¹³

Despite the widespread awareness of the protective benefits of condoms, many young people do not use condom consistently during high-risk sexual activities.⁹ Studies have reported reasons for non-use of contraceptives among this population as misconceptions and myths on condom use, dislike for condom use, poor social support, partners' distrust, low self-efficacy, unavailability, peer pressure, stigma, reduction of sexual pleasure, as well as socioeconomic, psychological, and health system barriers.^{4,5,13-15}

The perception of undergraduate students towards the use of condoms is a vital predictor of intentions to their actual use.⁹ According to the theory of Planned Behaviour, an individual's attitude, subjective norm (perception) interacting with behavioural control predicts the intention to adopt a behaviour.¹⁶ Misconceptions, beliefs and opinions held by adolescents and young people on contraceptive methods influence their decision to use or not use contraception. Studies have documented these negative perceptions on condom and other contraceptives. Adolescents believe in the use of substances of unproven efficacy in the prevention of pregnancy. For instance, that Andrews Liver salt a laxative, and 'white chlorine' or boiled stout beer an alcoholic beverage, used as emergency contraceptives, is believed to have the ability to flush out ejaculated sperm from the vagina through urination.¹⁴

Again, condoms can break and penetrate the body of the girl and cause death. While the boys prefer sex ‘flesh to flesh’ without condom because it is believed to reduce sexual pleasure, the girls on the other hand, have pleasurable sex with condom because of the belief in its protection from pregnancy and STI. Condom is also believed to cause loss of sperms which reduces the fertility of a boy later when married.¹⁴ Furthermore, social approval from family members and peers which shape attitude, has also been reported to influence condom use by adolescents.² A study reported that adolescents and young people are more likely to use a contraceptive method if they perceive that their peers or important other person is using a method.¹⁷

Positive attitude towards condom use is low. Studies show that 53.4% of Ethiopian youths had positive attitude towards condom use with 49.2% of them believing that “condoms are an effective method of preventing pregnancy,” 42.2% that condom reduces sexual pleasure,” and 46.8% that they “feel protected while using a condom⁹. In a study among adolescents in Ebonyi South Nigeria it was reported that 58.8% and 45.8% of male and female respondents had positive perception on condom use. Positive perception of condom use was associated with sex, level of schooling and whether the adolescent works for a pay.⁶ Similar findings have been reported that males, older adolescents and employment status influence perception on condom and condom use. For instance, female adolescents were found to hold more conservative opinions on condom and its use. Gender norms and expectations were also reported to influence adolescents’ perceptions on condom especially with respect to demanding and purchasing condoms. Girls feel embarrassed accessing condoms more than boys but are

more likely than boys to accept that condom is an effective method for the prevention of pregnancy and STIs.¹⁸

Although studies have looked at knowledge, sexual risk perceptions and use of condom among adolescents, research focusing on their perception of condom and condom use, a vital predictor of intention to actual use, is scarce in Rivers State. This study therefore assessed the perceptions of undergraduate students in Rivers State towards condom and the use of condoms and the reasons associated with its use or non-use.

Methodology

Study Area

This study was carried out in Rivers State which is situated in the southern region of Nigeria. Due to its oil-rich status, the State is cosmopolitan with a vibrant economy and home to a large population of youths, many of whom are pursuing higher education in the seven higher institutions in State: Rivers State University Port Harcourt, University of Port Harcourt, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, PAMO University of Medical Sciences, Port Harcourt, Madonna University Elele, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic Port Harcourt and Kenele-Beeson Tsaro-Wiwa Polytechnic Bori. Rivers State has an estimated population of 7,183,473 with an estimated 61% consisting of young people between 15 to 24 years.¹⁹

Study design

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional study design.

Study population

The population for this study were undergraduate students enrolled in institutions of higher learning in Rivers State.

Inclusion criteria

Respondents must be undergraduate students aged 18 years and older, currently enrolled for any of the programs in the higher institutions in Rivers State and must have engaged in sexual activity at least once in the past. However, undergraduate students on part time programs and those with strong cultural or religious beliefs against the use of condoms or who do not have an Android phone were excluded.

Sample size determination

This was estimated using the Cochran formula for single population²¹ $n = z^2 p (1 - p) / d^2$ where n = sample size; z = the standard normal deviate corresponding to 95% level of significance (1.96); p = Perception of condom use among adolescents in Ebonyi State Nigeria, given as 58.8%⁶ and e = margin of error, set at 0.05. A minimum sample size of 372 was estimated, however this was increased to 410 to accommodate for ten percent non-response.

Sampling technique

Respondents were recruited through a multistage sampling process. Stage One: Two out of the seven higher institutions in Rivers State were selected by simple random sampling (simple balloting): Rivers State University Port Harcourt and University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt. Stage Two: Six Faculties were selected by simple random sampling method in each of the two selected institutions. Stage Three: Two Departments were further selected from each selected Faculty by simple balloting. Stage Four: Five students per level of study were selected from four levels in each Department by simple random sampling. Consequently, a total of 480 respondents were selected for the study.

Study data collection

The data was collected online through a self-administered pretested structured questionnaire on Google Forms whose link was sent to respondent's phone numbers or email addresses provided by them. Respondents provided information on their socio-demographic characteristics, perceptions towards use of condom, its use and reasons for non-use. To enhance the quality and completeness of data collected, key questions were made mandatory and duplicate submissions were prevented by limiting each respondent to only one entry. Responses were received real-time, and follow-up reminders were sent to respondents whose responses were not received after two weeks.

Data Analysis

Data was entered into a spread sheet in Microsoft Excel 2022 and later exported to the IBM Statistical Package and Service Solution (SPSS) statistical software version 29.0 for analysis. Descriptive statistics was conducted and reported as means and standard deviation for continuous variables, and percentages for categorical variables. These were presented on frequency tables and charts

Outcome Variables

Perception of use of condom: Each question on the Likert scale was scored and summed up to obtain the perception score for each respondent. Respondents whose perception score were less than fifty percent of the total score were rated as having poor perception.⁶

Results

A total of 480 questionnaires were distributed, and 440 responses were received, giving a non-response rate of 8.3%

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Frequency (n = 440)	%
Age (Years):		
10 – 19	143	32.5
20 – 29	282	64.1
30 – 39	15	3.4
Sex		
Male	232	52.7
Female	208	47.3
Religion		
Christian	438	99.5
Islam	2	0.5
Marital status		
Single	422	95.9
Married	18	4.1
Faculty		
Agriculture	40	9.1
Applied science	60	13.6
Basic Med. Sci.	40	9.1
Engineering	60	13.6
Environmental Studies	60	13.6
Humanities	40	9.1
Management Sciences	100	22.8
Science	40	9.1
Class Level		
100 level	110	25
200 level	110	25
300 level	110	25
400 level	110	25

Table1 shows that more than half of the participants were aged 20 – 29 years (n = 282; 64.1%), nearly half of them were females (n = 208, 47.3%), almost all of them were Christians (n =438, 99.5%) or single (n = 422, 95.9%).

**Table 2: Perception of respondents on use of condom**

Variables	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Having the right knowledge of condoms is important for its effective use	426 (96.8%)	14 (3.2%)	-	-	-
The use of condom is effective in preventing STIs	440 (100%)	-	-	-	-
Condom is effective in preventing pregnancy	440 (100%)	-	-	-	-
Condom is effective in enhancing sexual pleasure	421 (95.7%)	10 (2.3%)	9 (2.0%)	-	-
The use of condoms makes someone unfaithful	7 (1.6%)	6 (1.4%)	16 (3.6%)	5 (1.1%)	406 (92.3%)
Condoms causes discomfort or irritation	9 (2.0%)	9 (2.0%)	11 (2.5%)	6 (1.4%)	405 (92.0%)
My mum forbids the use of condom	8 (1.8%)	7 (1.6%)	11 (2.5%)	9 (2.0%)	405 (92.0%)
Partner's refusal influences the use of condom	420 (95.5%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (0.5%)	9 (2.0%)	9 (2.0%)
Condom is the appropriate contraceptive for a sexually active young person	440 (100.0%)	-	-	-	-
The use of condom affects trust in a relationship	6 (1.4%)	6 (1.4%)	6 (1.4%)	4 (0.9%)	418 (95.0%)
I can recommend condom use to my friends	437 (99.3%)	3 (0.7%)	-	-	-
The use of condom does not require supervision	427 (97.0%)	8 (1.8%)	5 (1.1%)	-	-
I feel comfortable discussing condom use with a partner	424 (96.4%)	6 (1.4%)	10 (2.3%)	-	-
Women think men who use condoms play around	9 (2.0%)	6 (1.4%)	8 (1.8%)	2 (0.5%)	415 (94.3%)
Condoms look messy after use	-	-	6 (1.4%)	10 (2.3%)	424 (96.4%)

Nearly all ($n = 426$; 96.8%) of the participants strongly agree that having the right knowledge of condom is important for its effective use and can recommend condom use to their friends ($n = 437$; 99.3%). Furthermore, all of them strongly agree that the use of condom is effective in preventing STIs and pregnancies (Table 2).

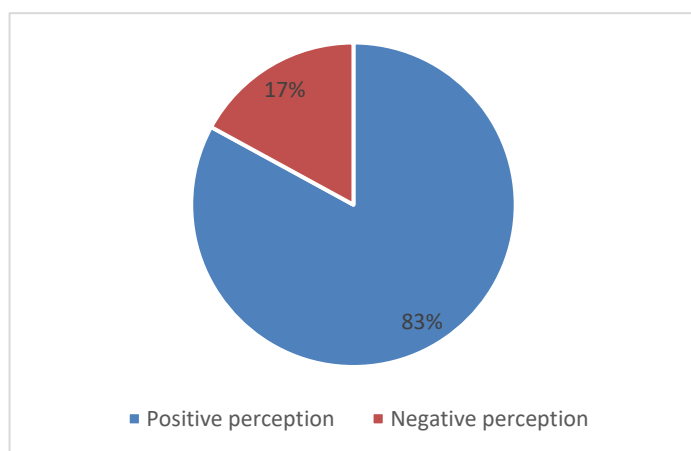


Figure 1: Perception of condom use among undergraduate students

Figure 1 shows that 365 (83%) respondents have positive perception of use of condom.

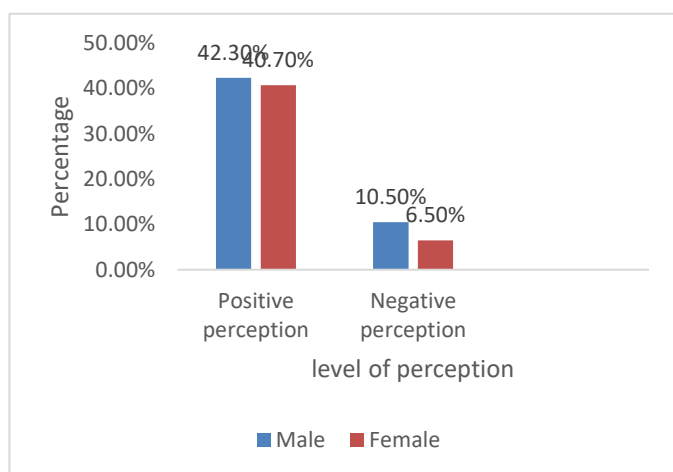


Figure 2: Perception of use of condom based on sex distribution of respondents

Figures 2 showed that positive perception was slightly higher among males ($n = 186$; 42.3%) compared to females ($n=179$; 40.7%).

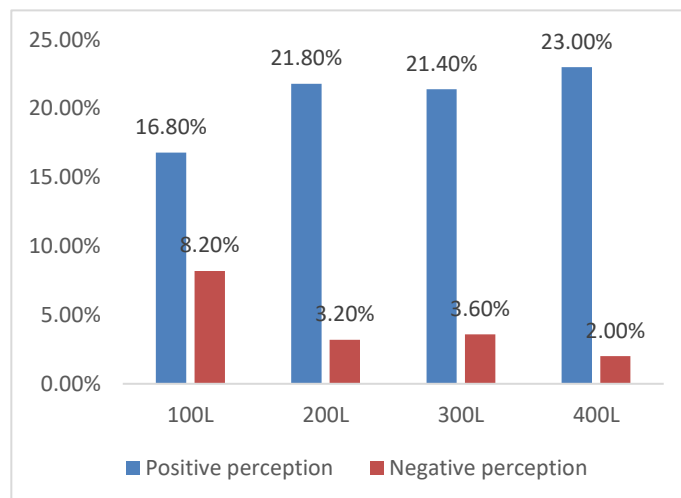


Figure 3: Perception of use of condom based on academic level of study of respondents.

Fig. 3 shows that respondents who have positive perception of condom use progressively increased from 74 (16.8%) among level 100 students to 101 (23.0%) among those at level 400.

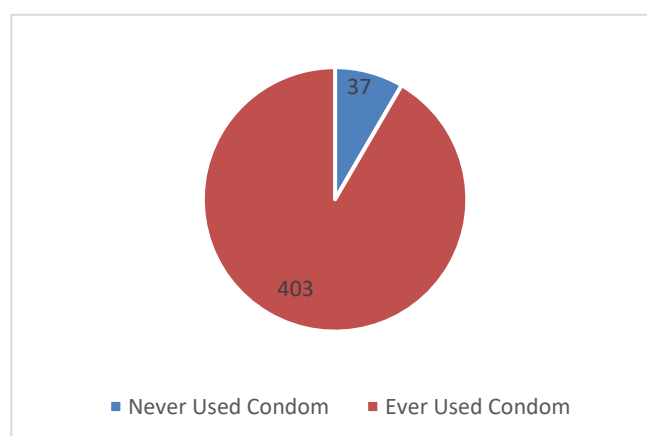


Figure 4: Frequency distribution of respondents who have ever used a condom

Figure 4 shows that 37 (8.4%) of the respondents reported having never used condoms, while 403 (91.6%) reported having ever used condoms

Table 3: Reasons for the non-use of condoms among respondents who have never used condoms

Variable	Frequency * (n = 37)	Percent (%)
Partner's distrust	36	97.3
Partner's preference	18	48.6
Reduced sexual pleasure	10	27.0
Peer influence	9	24.3
Stigmatization	9	24.3
Feeling embarrassed about buying, carrying or using condoms	7	18.9
Non-availability of condoms	6	16.2
Alcohol or drug influence	4	10.8
Planning to conceive	3	8.1

***Multiple option**

Table 3 shows that nearly all the respondents who have never used condom gave partner's distrust as reason for non-use (n = 36; 97.3%) followed by partner's preferences (n = 18; 48.6%).

Discussion

The consistent use of condom for the prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections is essential to attainment of sexual health and reproductive rights of adolescents and young people and also the Sustainable Development Goal 3, target 7. This study assessed the perception of use of condom among undergraduate students in Rivers State Nigeria.

The study found that 83% of the respondents had a positive perception on condom use. All the respondents strongly agree that condom is appropriate for use by sexually active adolescents and young people. This level of positive perception on condom use is consistent with the findings of another related studies that reported a high level of awareness and knowledge of condom among university undergraduates in Port Harcourt.¹³ however, a lower prevalence of positive perception was reported among adolescents in Ebonyi State, Eastern Nigeria, where males were more likely to have positive perception on condom use than females.⁶ Gender differences in perception of condom was also reported in a study which found that more males perceived that condom is effective in preventing STIs whereas females felt more that procuring condom was embarrassing.¹⁸

Positive perception on condom use as reported among college students in Cameroon and South-West Ethiopia, was also lower than in our population even though respondents similarly felt protected when using condom in risky sexual intercourse because of their positive perception on the effectiveness of condom in preventing unwanted pregnancy and its fitness for use during casual sex.⁹

Negative perception on condom was reported in another qualitative study in Congo. Respondents believed that condoms have small holes and are therefore undependable and cannot guarantee protection from unwanted pregnancy and STIs including HIV, thus preferring 'skin to skin' sexual intercourse. The respondents in this study were however, rural secondary school students with possible poor knowledge of contraceptives and strong cultural disinclination towards fertility control.²⁰

We found that positive perception on condom use was more among males than females and this increased progressively from 20.3% among the level 100 students to 27.7% among the 400 level students. This observed gender differences in the perception of condom use in this study may suggest that male dominance in decision making on reproductive health issues still exist among adolescents and young people in Rivers State Nigeria. Furthermore, the progressive improvement in the perception of condom with increasing level of study may also suggest that as students advance in their academic levels, they may gain better exposure to sexual health education or develop a heightened sense of responsibility toward their sexual health with the increasing exposure on sex and sex related matters expected as their level of study increased. Also, this study further showed that all adolescents had strong perception on the effectiveness of condom in the prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Respondents believe that having the right knowledge of condom is important for condom use and that condom enhances pleasure during sexual intercourse. In another study however, the perceptions of the effect of condom on sexual pleasure differed among males and females. While the males believe that condom use decreases sexual pleasure, females believe that it enhances the pleasure derivable from sexual intercourse.^{18,21}

Social and cultural norms which view sexual behaviour of females demanding for condom as sexually promiscuous, may lead to their stigmatization, and acting as barriers may restrict females' access to condom compared to males. This study found partner's distrust and reduced sexual pleasure, stigmatization and embarrassment as reasons for non-use of

condom as has been previously reported among Nigerian female students in other studies.²²⁻²⁴ The fact that some adolescents and young people still have these as reasons for non-use of condoms may mean that some of them still hold on to unrealistic ideas and myths on condom which may affect their self-efficacy and restrict their acceptance of condoms. This may explain why partner preferences and peer influences still play significant roles in the social dynamics which influence sexual decision-making and choices especially among females. Studies have noted that although participants generally condemned sexual risk-taking behaviours, sexual freedom, peer influence, poverty, ignorance, lack of sex education, civilization and promiscuity, the need to satisfy their sexual urges were the reasons for the persistent risky sexual behaviour and non-use of condoms among university students.^{22,25}

The perceptions of adolescents on condom and the reasons for non-use as found in this study brings to fore key public health implications which has dire consequences on the reproductive health and rights of adolescents in Rivers State Nigeria. The reasons for non-use of condom among adolescents in this study and other related studies include distrust and preference by partner, reduction in pleasure derivable from sexual intercourse, feeling stigmatized and embarrassed demanding or acquiring condom, cost and availability constraint, etc.⁵ These reasons have the potential to influence self-efficacy and the intention to use condom during risky sexual practices. Consequently, adolescents in their bid to experiment on sex become vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies,³ clandestine abortions, poor maternal outcomes and sexually transmitted infections whose increased incidence worsens the burden of diseases

especially in rural communities and in low resource countries like Nigeria. Furthermore, adolescents with poor reproductive health from unwanted pregnancy and STIs, are more likely to drop out of school, experience social and mental health challenges arising from cultural barriers especially against the female adolescent. There is need therefore for strengthening of adolescent sexual and reproductive healthcare services particularly counseling to correct misconceptions on condom and to achieve the SDG goal 3 target 7. This can be achieved through scaling up of youth-friendly healthcare services and the introduction of age-appropriate sexuality education in school health services especially in the rural communities where majority of adolescents reside.⁵

Limitations of study

The generalization of the findings in this study to other populations may be limited by social desirability bias which may lead to over-reporting because of sociocultural norms on sexual issues and recall bias due to memory recall. Since data were collected through self-administered survey questionnaires with no identifiers, we believe that bias is minimal. However, its interpretations should be with caution.

Conclusion

The positive perception of condoms among undergraduate students in Rivers State is high. The commonest reasons for not using condoms were partners' distrust, reduced sexual pleasure, stigmatization and embarrassment. These reasons have implications on attainment of sexual and reproductive health rights of adolescents. Strengthening of youth-friendly healthcare services, school health services and public

awareness programmes facilitated by managers of reproductive health programmes is recommended to correct wrong perceptions on condom.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

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Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Rivers State University Teaching Hospital Ethical Review Committee. An informed consent section was embedded at the beginning of the Google Form. The consent form provided details about the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of responses, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Respondents read and agreed to the terms of the study and gave informed consent before proceeding to participate.

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Author Affiliations and ORCIDs:

¹Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt. Rivers State, Nigeria;

²Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, College of Medical Sciences, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8595-0184>