

Transactional Sex Relationships and HIV Risk among Female University Students in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT This study explored the psychosocial dynamics of transactional sex relationships and HIV vulnerability among female university students. Using non-probability sampling methods, ten female university students aged 18 to 25 years, who were involved in transactional sex relationships, were recruited from a local medical university. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that complex psychosocial and economic factors drive transactional sex relationships among university female students. Importantly, the female students' inability to negotiate safe sex practices increases their risk of sexually transmitted illnesses, especially HIV, but this is overshadowed by their desire to have their 'wants and needs' satisfied. This study emphasises the importance of recognising that transactional sex relationships are frequent among university students, with serious psychosocial and health consequences. HIV prevention programmes at higher education institutions should directly address the underlying drivers of transactional sex relationships amongst university students.

INTRODUCTION

Transactional sex, or informal sexual exchange, has garnered great attention in public health literature since it is thought to be a major contributor to high HIV infection rates among young women in sub-Saharan Africa (Wamoyi et al. 2019). In research, transactional sexual relationships have been described as a practice through which females can gain access to substantial goods in order to improve their social status (Krisch et al. 2019). It differs from commercial or non-marital sexual relationships in that it is largely motivated by the expectation that sex will be exchanged for material support, such as money or gifts (Pulerwitz et al. 2021).

Transactional sexual relationships are not a foreign concept in Africa (Wamoyi et al. 2019). In fact, studies conducted in east and southern African countries, including Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania, and Mozambique, to mention a few, have suggested that transactional sexual relationships have been an on-going trend, and are prevalent espe-

cially among girls and young women (Wamoyi et al. 2010; Amo-Adjei et al. 2014; Ranganathan 2015). A recent global review of transactional sex among young people found that the lifetime prevalence rates among young women in sub-Saharan Africa ranged from five percent among those aged 12 to 17 years in Cameroon, to eighty-five percent among those aged 15 to 24 years in Uganda (Krisch et al. 2019). In a recent longitudinal follow-up study in Malawi, twenty percent of young women aged 15 to 24 years reported transactional sex over a 12-month period (Gichane et al. 2020).

According to research from across Africa, transactional sexual relationships often take place within age-disparate partnerships, in which men provide money or gifts to women who are often considerably younger than they are (Pulerwitz et al. 2021). This type of gendered unequal partnership is known as a 'blesser and blessee' relationship (Thobejane et al. 2017). A 'blesser/blessee' relationship is a type of transactional sexual relationship in which a 'blesser', usually an older and/or more financially stable male, can provide gifts to young women in the form of money, luxury items, and luxurious trips in exchange for a sexual relationship (Verass 2016). The young women who accept the material gifts are referred to as 'blessees' (Mampane 2018).

The relationship between transactional sex and vulnerability to sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs) and particularly HIV infection in young women

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has also been documented (Kilburn et al. 2018). In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women who participate in transactional sex are fifty percent more likely to be HIV positive than adolescent girls and young women who have never engaged in transactional sex (Wamoyi et al. 2016). The research showed that transactional sex relationships contribute to unsafe and inequitable sexual practices that expose young women to STIs, including HIV (Wamoyi et al. 2019). To varied degrees, transactional sex is connected with HIV risk behaviours such as multiple sexual partners and other HIV risk factors including relationship violence, abuse, alcohol intake, and varying levels of condom usage (Wamoyi et al. 2019). Evidence shows that transactional relationships often involve younger women with older men (mostly high-risk partners), with multiple sexual partners or engaging in sexual relationships with men who concurrently have other partners, all of which elevates their HIV vulnerability (Ranganathan et al. 2020). The evidence suggests that transactional sex may increase HIV risk in specific instances, such as when material gain is the only thing sustaining the relationship or the frequency with which gifts and/or money are received, putting young women in a non-negotiable position owing to their dependency on partners (Okigbo et al. 2014). In fact, the research concluded that transactional sex increases the risk of HIV infection in young women, especially when money and/or gifts are exchanged often (Kilburn et al. 2018) and when the value of the gifts increases (Wamoyi et al. 2010) since it reduces the women's negotiation and bargaining power (Shefer et al. 2012). Ranganathan et al. found similar results when they analysed longitudinal data from a six-year study in South Africa. Their finding showed that the incidence of HIV was higher among young women aged 13 to 20 years who reported transactional sex (Ranganathan et al. 2020). When economic vulnerability intersects with power imbalances, which is common in transactional sex relationships, women's HIV risk is elevated (Krisch et al. 2019).

Transactional sex is also common among university students (Amo-Adjei et al. 2014; Ajayi and Somefun 2019; Gukurume 2021). Some researchers have suggested it may partly be due to the fact that those involved in transactional sex relationships do not necessarily perceive it as the equivalent of prostitution and sex work (Gukurume 2021),

and therefore find it more acceptable (Ranganathan 2015). Others have suggested that university students are ignorant about the inherent risks of transactional sex relationships. What is clear is that transactional sex happens in a variety of economic situations, ranging from poverty and unstable livelihoods to income disparity and consumerist aspirations (Ajayi and Somefun 2019). According to a qualitative study involving 40 university female students in Ghana, the most common motivation for female students to engage in transactional sex relationships was to meet their economic needs and improve their social status (Amo-Adjei et al. 2014). Similarly, Thobejane reported that young women at a South African university engaged in transactional sex relationships with a 'blesser' in order to live comfortably while at university because the men were able to buy food, clothes, and pay for their student housing (Thobejane et al. 2017). Gukurume found that female students at a Zimbabwean university engaged in transactional sex in order to gain access to scarce resources, including books, accommodation, and good academic grades (Gukurume 2021). Peer pressure has also been shown to play a part in transactional sex relationships. According to research, peer pressure among young people, particularly among those who cannot afford or sustain the lifestyles of their wealthier peers, may be a motivating factor for young women at universities to engage in transactional relationships (Stoebenau et al. 2016).

Despite increasing knowledge of the risks of transactional sex, the practice persists, particularly among female students at institutions of higher learning in South Africa (Ranganathan et al. 2020) and other African countries (Ajayi and Somefun 2019). As such, there has been a growing interest in research on transactional sex and relationships within university spaces, making this study a timely contribution to this growing public health issue. Existing research suggests that the practice is driven by both subsistence and consumerism, as well as relational and individual variables such as poverty and gender disparities (Cheng 2013; Ranganathan 2015). According to past studies, the practice is complex and continues to be a challenge for social health researchers, especially considering its link to HIV (Ranganathan et al. 2020). Exploring the context and motivations for transactional sex with older male 'blessers' among female university students can thus contribute to knowledge pro-

duction by assisting in the unpacking of the practice's complexity. This knowledge could be useful in understanding sexually risky behaviour, and in particular, HIV-related vulnerability among female university students.

Objective(s)

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychosocial factors that motivate female university students to engage in transactional sexual relationships as well as the practices that put them at risk for HIV.

Research Question(s)

1. What are the psychosocial factors that promote transactional sexual relationships among female university students?
2. What are the associated practices inherent in transactional sex relationship that increases HIV-related vulnerability of female university students?

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative study approach that used a descriptive and explorative research design, recruited female students at an English-medium, historically Black, medical university, who were actively engaged in a transactional sexual relationship (Kim et al. 2017). Qualitative research enables participants to give form and meaning to their experiences in their own words and thus provide rich descriptive details. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this study, as issues encountered were not only subjective but also very personal and sensitive.

Participants and Sampling

A non-probability sampling procedure was used to select the study participants. Non-probability sampling is a method for selecting participants that is based on the researcher's subjective judgment rather than random selection (Etikan and Bala 2017). Ten female students aged 18 years and above who were involved in transactional sexual relationships at university were recruited to participate in the study using the snowball sampling technique and the theoretical principle of saturation

(Saunders et al. 2018). Recruitment was conducted via campus radio and social media platforms. The university campus radio assisted in advertising the study during one of the health talk shows. Background to the study, including the inclusion criteria for participation, was discussed. Prospective participants could contact the researcher via email, short message services (SMS) or WhatsApp. In addition, the social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook, were also utilised. Three female students, who self-identified as being in transactional sexual relationships, contacted the researcher, who then requested that they pass on the researcher's contact details to other potential participants. The same process was repeated. Data saturation was reached after conducting interviews with ten participants, which indicated that no new information was being collected to further understand the phenomena (Saunders et al. 2018).

Data Collection Process

Guided by an unstructured interview schedule (Jamshed 2014), in-depth individual interviews were conducted with each participant, exploring issues about the nature and dynamics of their transactional sexual relationships on campus, relationship norms, gendered power, and sexual decision-making. The interview schedule comprised of open-ended questions that were specifically designed to probe the female students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, which is in line with the ethos of subjectivity inherent in an explorative paradigm. Individual interviews lasted for 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in English, Setswana, and/or Sepedi, depending on the participants' preferences and the researcher's fluency in those languages. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of each participant. The interviews were conducted at a venue that was both private and convenient for the participants. All interviews were conducted by a registered intern clinical psychologist with experience dealing with sensitive subjects. The interviews were conducted over the 6-month study period from January 2019 to June 2019.

Ethical Consideration

The study was reviewed and approved by Se-fako Makgatho University Research Ethics Committee (SMUREC/M/205/2018) and was conducted

ed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA 2013). All the participants provided written informed consent. All the data was anonymised to ensure that the identity of each of the participants was protected.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in the study, Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were upheld (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To ensure credibility (Moon et al. 2016), the researchers conducted in-depth interviews in the language that the participants were fluent in, to improve the quality of the data. Second, during the interview procedure, an audio recorder was used, as well as field notes, to precisely capture each participant's narratives. The audio-recorder feature also served as a double-check to guarantee that the qualitative data is accurate. The data was collected until it was saturated in order to keep the data's dependability. The first author did reconfirmation of the transcribed transcripts verbatim by going back to the respective participants to verify the meaning interpreted. Confirmability was maintained by ensuring the meaning of relevancy during the process of transcription, and results were discussed with a validated research supervisor before the final interpretation. Purposive sampling was used to maximise the information that could be uncovered from a small number of participants, and thick descriptions of the female students' experiences, along with quotes, were used to achieve transferability (Nowell et al. 2017).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the individual interviews were transcribed verbatim into the original language, reviewed by the researcher for fidelity to the interview, and all non-English interviews were translated into English by the researcher. Transcripts were imported into NVIVO 12 software for analysis. Following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), a cyclic approach was followed, involving a deductive and inductive process. In order to analyse the transcripts, the following five steps were followed:

1. Data management and familiarisation
2. Coding framework identification
3. Display of themes and sub-themes

4. Data reduction

5. Interpretation

Through repeated readings of transcripts, pattern finding, and noting reflective and theoretical thoughts, the first author engaged in a process of immersion and familiarisation with the data. From this process, the initial deductive coding framework was constructed based on the topic as defined in the interview guide. Simultaneously, codes underwent inductive refinement as both authors engaged in the data. Comparisons were made between transcripts. To enhance the internal validity, the coding and analysis were augmented with frequent discussions between the first and second authors. Preliminary themes were constructed and discussed with the second author to further refine the final themes, which provide an overall thematic description of the female students' experiences in transactional sexual relationships.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the ten female students. The participants' ages ranged between 21 to 25 years, with a mean age of 23 years. Half of the participants were completing an undergraduate degree. Regardless of the participants' age, the transactional sexual partners were usually older men between 32 to 50 years (mean age of 41 years), and were married, cohabiting or divorced. The average age difference between the female students and the male transactional partners was 18 years, with the largest age difference of 27 years between participant one and her transactional partner and the lowest age difference of 8 years between participant eight and her transactional partner.

Findings are presented as key thematic areas as they emerged during the analysis and are presented with illustrative direct excerpts from participant interviews. The overall themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis are summarised in Table 2.

Theme 1: Motivations for Engaging in Transactional Sexual Relationships

Emerging from the narratives of the participants is that the motivations for engaging in transactional relationships are often complex and influenced by a multifaceted set of sociocultural-emo-

Table 1: Socio-demographics of the participants

<i>Female university students</i>			<i>Male transactional sex partners</i>		
<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age in years</i>	<i>Field of study and level</i>	<i>Place of origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Relationship status</i>
Participant 1	21	BSc Physiotherapy IV	Kwamashu (KZN)	42	Married
Participant 2	23	MSc in Medical Science	Durban (KZN)	50	Divorced
Participant 3	23	BSc Physical Science III	Soshanguve (Gauteng)	36	Engaged to be married
Participant 4	24	BSc Dietetics IV	Badplaas (Mpumalanga)	38	Married
Participant 5	24	MBCHB II (completed BSc degree)	Mhlabayalingana (KZN)	42	Married
Participant 6	23	BSc Hon Virology	Empangeni (KZN)	43	Married
Participant 7	23	BSc III	Welkom (FS)	39	Cohabiting
Participant 8	24	MBCHB I (completed BSc degree)	Chantelle (Gauteng)	32	Cohabiting
Participant 9	22	BSc Hon Biology	Soshanguve (Gauteng)	40	Cohabiting
Participant 10	25	MBCHB IV	Soweto (Gauteng)	47	Married but separated

Source: Authors

Table 2: Overarching themes and subthemes that emerged from the data

<i>Overarching themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
<i>Motivations for Engaging in Transactional Sexual Relationships</i>	Transactional Sex for Basic Needs
<i>Power Dynamics And Transactional Sex Relationships</i>	Transactional Sex for Subsistence
	Peer Social Acceptance
	Pressure for Social Prestige
	Lack of Independence to Negotiate Safe Sex Practices
	Control and Physical Violence
	Age Disparate Sexual Relationships
	Cultural Dynamics (Gender Customs)
<i>Nexus: Perceived Agency and Potential Sexual Risks (HIV, STIs)</i>	Inconsistent Condom Usage
	Pseudo Trust
	Multiple Sexual Partners
	Body/Sexual Access As a Bargaining Commodity
	Changes in Sexual Behaviour

Source: Authors

tional and structural factors that appear to be difficult to delineate. For example, they may be motivated to meet basic needs, subsistence, need for acceptance amongst peers, or maintain a certain lifestyle.

Transactional Sex for Basic Needs

For some participants, the motivating factors for being in transactional sex relationships were 'survival' and 'to meet their basic needs'. This is seen in the following excerpts:

"Money that I sometimes use to buy my siblings some clothes if they struggling at home, in-

cluding school shoes. I do not have stress anymore and I get to help my family." (Participant 1)

"It's good, I mean I am a mother too sometimes I need to send money home so that my baby is taken care of, so it's a good thing I guess cos not having cash if maybe I would fall sick or I need something serious." (Participant 3)

"I don't even have stress over academic things or res fees because he takes care of them and I focus on my books." (Participant 5)

Transactional Sex for Subsistence

Clearly, not all female students who engage in transactional sex relationships do so out of des-

peration or a desire for necessities. Some participants' motives were purely to fulfil 'wants'. The participants expressed the following remarks:

"Obvious yes, he gets me expensive cell phones, jewellery and sometimes during events, he will just sponsor everything from expensive weaves, clothes as well as shoes." (Participant 1)

"These things that I mentioned they're wants and not necessarily needs, but if I want something then I have access to cash that makes it easier than being broke." (Participant 3)

"A lady needs some pampering and to be financially secure." (Participant 7)

Peer Social Acceptance

Peer acceptance amongst university students is something that seems to be valued by most of the participants in the study. They reported engaging in transactional sex relationships with older men due to their friends' influence, as reflected in the following excerpts:

"Yeah, that's how it all started because she is working and she is quite older than me so she introduced me to her male friends who are quite older and that's how I got into this." (Participant 5)

"At first, I did not like this thing but looking at my friends; they had everything they needed, vacations, money while I am sitting then I gave in." (Participant 6)

"Sometimes it gets to be quite a competition, like look what I got this weekend? So, you end up telling yourself that if I can get this person to do the same for me." (Participant 9)

"Yes, I do feel the pressure to be like my friends. That is why I started having male friends, cos I couldn't afford those, and going out to fancy places." (Participant 10)

Pressure for Social Prestige

The pressure to have a lifestyle similar to that of their peers was a motivating factor. Being envious of the lifestyle that their friends were living led some of the participants to desire it as well, especially the ones coming from struggling backgrounds. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

"Yes, I have to maintain the lifestyle." (Participant 1)

"Eish is difficult to say now that I have tasted some nice life problems [laughs]. I mean if the guy doesn't mind spending on me why not... I am able to keep up with my friends without having to worry about where the money is coming from." (Participant 5)

"No, never, this is only for survival and to maintain a lifestyle that is similar to my friend's or even better." (Participant 6)

"I am a trendy person, so I follow fashion, always want to have the latest trend. Plus, I hang out with a lot of celebrities so I have to have my A-game on." (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Power Dynamics in Transactional Sex Relationships

Reflected through the participants' narratives is their ability to exercise agency in choosing to engage in transactional sex relationships. However, these relationships are inscribed with unequal power dynamics and age-disparate partnerships. The narratives of the participants speak to the dynamics of inequitable and unsafe sexual practices in the context of transactional sexual relationships at university. This is reflected in the following subthemes.

Lack of Independence to Negotiate Safe Sex Practices

The complexity of the relationship highlights the inability of the female students to negotiate safe sex practices, as the men are providing for them financially. By virtue of the men being older than the young women and providing money and gifts for those women, a certain shift of the power dynamics in the relationship emerged. These are reflected in the following participant remarks:

"Because he provides financially, sometimes when you ask him to use condoms, he refuses and starts asking you if you do not trust him, and mentioning that he does a lot for me. So, I don't have a choice because he is providing for me." (Participant 1)

"No, how do you do that when the person is doing a lot for you, why would I deny him something that he wants whereas when I want something, he does it wholeheartedly without complaining." (Participant 2)

“Yes, but he persuades me that no I will withdraw, you will not fall pregnant, you are the only one I am having sex with without protection.” (Participant 9)

Control and Physical Violence

While on the one hand, the participants were able to secure a certain lifestyle and social acceptance from their peers, some of the participants reported that central to the lifestyle and social acceptance was the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV), including both physical and sexual violence. This was the control that some male partners had over some of the participants. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

“No, the other time he locked me the room and left for work without buying me food, so I was starving the whole day until he got back.” (Participant 1)

“Yes, he is a violent man. Every time he raises his voice, I become scared and always stay down so that I don’t become a victim of an assault.” (Participant 5)

“He is jealous of me and has started controlling me, like not to go to certain places, not to befriend certain people. I remember this other time we were at Brooklyn hotel, we booked there and we got into a fight, he left me there for the night and came back in the morning to fetch me.” (Participant 10)

Age-disparate Sexual Relationships

An emerging narrative highlights the association between transactional relationships and age disparity between partners. There was notable age disparity between female students and their male sexual partners, who were on average 18 years older in this study.

“We started dating last year in March, he is 42.” (Participant 5)

“He is 50 and is a businessman.” (Participant 7)

“He is 39, he is from Pretoria, and he works as an accountant.” (Participant 8)

“My partner is 32 and he stays at Soshanguve.” (Participant 8)

“I have a boyfriend, and he is 38.” (Participant 10)

The intergenerational age gap exacerbated power and economic imbalances between partners. It appears from the narratives of the young fe-

males that it is almost impossible to contemplate assertiveness in a sexual relationship with the men, and this reduced their ability to negotiate safe sex practices.

“In all honesty, I don’t because other than him doing a lot for me, he is way older than me. So it’s difficult to engage him especially when it becomes to using condoms.” (Participant 5)

“Growing up I was taught to respect people older than me, so they are certain things I am scared to even bring them up with him because of his age but if it was my peer I wouldn’t. Like sometimes I don’t want to have sex with him but I get scared to tell him.” (Participant 8)

Theme 3: Nexus-Perceived Agency and Potential Sexual Risks (HIV, STIs)

Inconsistent Condom Usage

The finding suggests that for most of the participants, on-going safe sexual practices were not the norm. It emerged from the participants’ narratives that most participants were more likely to engage in inconsistent safe sexual practices, which seemed to be fuelled by various belief systems around the nature of their relationship.

“We have stopped using protection and I do not have a problem with that because he does a lot for me.” (Participant 2)

“Like we’ve been in a relationship for so long so we trust each other, so yeah the only time we use a condom is mostly during ovulation.” (Participant 4)

“A condom is the last thing on the mind at that time... [when] we in a club, both drunk.” (Participant 5)

“We don’t use condoms unless I am on my periods.” (Participant 6)

“We don’t use protection but honestly, I don’t have a problem how we have sex (laughs).” (Participant 10)

As far as when they practice safer sex or take “precautions” it is to avoid pregnancy rather than disease. This irony emerged in most of the participants’ narratives, where they reported having had unprotected sex but found ways of preventing the exchange of “sperm to avoid pregnancies”. These participants were able to navigate this aspect, as reflected the following excerpts:

“Like we’ve been in a relationship for so long so we trust each other, so yeah the only time we use a condom is mostly during ovulation.” (Participant 4)

“With pregnancy, he usually pulls out before coming [smiles] well not always if I am being honest and we would get morning-after pill the next day.” (Participant 5)

“I am on contraceptives so pregnancy is not an issue.” (Participant 10)

Perceived (Pseudo) Trust

The participants have ‘pseudo’ trust towards these men or they have convinced themselves that they can trust them, and therefore cannot be at risk for sexually transmitted illness or HIV.

“Not really, well sometimes you see, but I trust him.” (Participant 2)

“Like I said we trust each other and test, so that is not really a concern.” (Participant 4)

“We talk about our statuses, so we are safe.” (Participant 5)

“Yes, I am even though I do get tested now and then. But we have been together for two years so I kinda trust him.” (Participant 7)

“He puts me at ease that he would never bring me any harm.” (Participant 10)

Multiple Sexual Partners

Either the participants have multiple partners or the men with whom they engage in transactional sex relationships have other partners other than the participants. Many of them were aware of this, but this was not a concern for them as long as the ‘blessers’ (men) were able to take care of their financial needs and wants. The following excerpts reflect this.

“There are so many other girls and I don’t know how many we are.” (Participant 3)

“He has a family, he is married” (Participant 5)

“Yeah, because he is married.” (Participant 6)

“He has someone else that he is dating.” (Participant 9)

“He lives with his wife and children.” (Participant 10)

Notably, it was not uncommon for the participants to also have other sexual partners. Some of them, despite being involved in transactional sex-

ual relationships, had steady boyfriends or had regular random sexual encounters with other men, as reflected in the following reports.

“Some are those that I am in a relationship with and maybe is not working out and some are just those that I hook up with.” (Participant 1)

“I wouldn’t say there is but if it happens it happens, it once happened with a random guy I knew.” (Participant 5)

“Actually, I do have a boyfriend other than him.” (Participant 6)

Body/Sexual Access as a Bargaining Commodity

From the narratives, it appears that the participants were able to use their body/sexuality as ‘bargaining commodity’ in their sexual relationships to gain financial access.

“At first, I was conscious but you end up getting used to it, you look at the things you are able to get and all you have to do is have sex with the guy. I mean that is a small price to pay.” (Participant 5)

“Yes definitely, he must entice me and spoil me rotten. You can choose to have sex for nothing or get all the things I get while doing it.” (Participant 7)

Some participants were more likely to exercise agency through their body and/or sexuality by deciding whether they would grant sex, as demonstrated in the following excerpts.

“No ways I cannot, I will move to the next person... What would we be doing if I stay, I would not sleep with you if you not giving me money or buying me gifts, why waste my time and energy.” (Participant 1)

“Well I think a woman can do whatever she wants with her body. Uhm if she wants to sleep with someone to get something in return then it should be done.” (Participant 4)

Change in Sexual Behaviour

The participants reported that by rewarding the men with sex, they were also more likely to ultimately improve their bargaining position in their sexual relationship. The more the men spend on the female students, the more it changes their sexual behaviour, and in turn, strengthens their perceived bargaining power over the men.

“Yes, it does, when I get something, it just gets me excited and more in the mood more than when I don’t get anything. Like if he transfers money into my account, I just want to show him my appreciation by having sex with him.” (Participant 7)

The negotiation, bargaining, and ‘rewarding’ in terms of sexual exchange is not something made explicit in the relationships. In fact, it appears to be more likely to unfold as the encounters happen or the nature of the relationship evolves.

“Yes, he gives me something, it just gets me excited and puts me more in the mood more than when I don’t get anything.” (Participant 9)

“Yes definitely, the more he spends on me the more I also want to just reward him, not using a condom is my way of doing that.” (Participant 10)

“Well, sometimes I do get worried, but as I said, the more, he spends on me, the more I also have to up my game. That means not using condoms at times.” (Participant 3)

Another way these participants also demonstrate their agency is through their ability to navigate multiple partners and their ability choose the ones they want to be with.

“Other than him, I am still involved with the father of my son.” (Participant 4)

“Actually, I do have a boyfriend other than him.” (Participant 6)

“Yes, it is a younger person my age and we are in love.” (Participant 9)

While it appears that the female students express agency when using their bodies as bargaining commodities, it comes with them downplaying potential risk. In fact, it reflects their limited choices. The female students in the study seem willing to please their partners, hence compromising their own needs (to use condoms), especially when the partners are willing to spend more on them.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study contributes to the increasing body of knowledge about the complex dynamics of transactional sexual relationships within the university context and provides insight into how these sexual relationships expose female students at university to risky sexual behaviour. The finding of this study shows that female students’ motivation to engage in transactional sexual relationships was mostly financial, as they desired to

meet basic subsistence needs. This finding is consistent with studies previously conducted among young women in sub-Saharan Africa (Stoebenau et al. 2016). There is enough evidence to suggest that a lack of alternative means of income and insufficient financial support from families motivate young women to engage in sex for money (Ranganathan 2015; Ranganathan et al. 2017; Thobejane et al. 2017; Gukurume 2021). Gukurume (2021) found that due to the extended economic crisis and the high expense of attending university, Zimbabwean students, and particularly female students, become vulnerable to transactional sex in the context of limited finances. Female students used transactional sex, or the ‘sexual economy’ on campus to gain access to scarce resources like books, accommodation, and so on. Ajayi and Somefun (2019) found that the lack of family support made Nigerian university students vulnerable to transactional sex. Transactional sex becomes a way for Nigerian students to meet their needs in the context of limited resources and financial support from home (Ajayi and Somefun 2019).

The findings of this study illustrate that some female students also engage in transactional sex relationships to satisfy their wants. The relationships were primarily for material gain, a finding that aligns with research in Tanzania (Wamoyi et al. 2010), South Africa (Ranganathan 2015), Lesotho and Madagascar (Stoebenau et al. 2016) that demonstrates that the exchange of money and material support takes on the primary motivation for the relationship. Consistent with Amo-Adjei et al. (2014), in this study, transactional sex relationships enabled female students to afford affluent perks, such as fashionable clothing, hairstyles, hair weaves, smartphones, and expensive trips, while continuing their studies without any financial concerns (Amo-Adjei et al. 2014). Ranganathan et al. (2017) found that most young women are poor and appreciate the material and financial benefits of having sexual relationships. In this study, the money and gifts that female students received through sexual exchanges helped them deal with peer pressure on university campuses. The female students in this study reported that transactional sex relationships provided them with the opportunity to be socially compatible with and accepted by their peers on campus, a finding echoed by Ajayi and Somefun (2019).

The finding highlights power dynamics as central to transactional sex relationships in that the relationships are inherently unequal (Stern and Buikema 2013). Based on the narratives, it is evident that the female students were able to express some level of agency as far as their choice of partner, but their agency appears to weaken once they are in the relationships (Barnett et al. 2011; Jewkes and Dunkle 2012). This appears to manifest in their inability to talk about the nature of their relationship, the nature of intimacy, especially about protective sexual behaviour, sexual activities, and the number of sexual partners. Because the female students see their partners as providers and depend on them for monetary assistance, they are cautious about bargaining for safer sexual practices for fear of losing them or violence. Previous research has found that young women have difficulty negotiating the terms of sexual relationships with the men who offer those material goods and money (Pulerwitz et al. 2021).

The use of violence was another way in which power dynamics were upheld in the partnerships. The female students reported experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) from their transactional sex partners. This finding lends support to existing research showing there is an association between IPV and transactional sex. For example, Stoebenau et al. (2016) found that the females' economic dependence on their male partners might add to the risk of violence. The research suggests that IPV in these relationships may also be a way of men asserting and cementing their masculinities (Jewkes et al. 2012). The link between transactional sex and IPV is likely to be complex since it may be rooted in dynamic socioeconomic-cultural and relational factors (Fielding-Miller and Dunkle 2017). From the female students' narratives, their sense of agency did not extend into protective strategies against the harmful aspects of transactional sex, including violence and sexual risk behaviour. Fielding-Miller and Dunkle found women's constrained relationship agency was the single largest predictor of IPV in the transactional sex relationship (Fielding-Miller and Dunkle 2017). Likewise, in this study, constrained relationship agency translated into women agreeing to have sex with the partner because of money, poverty or fear that he would leave, or forced sex.

In this study, female students were able to use their body/sexuality as a 'bargaining commodity'

in the sexual relationship to obtain financial access, but this ironically led to a reduced bargaining capacity for safe sexual practices. For instance, the majority of the participants highlighted the inconsistent and lack of condom use that was usually dictated by the greater amounts of gifts and money exchanged. As far as the participants practiced safe sex, it was to avoid pregnancy rather than STI's or HIV. This finding reflects previous research that show that the value of gifts and money tend to increase the bargaining power of the male partner in transactional sex relationships (Ranganathan et al. 2017). In this study because money, gifts or material gain accrued from the transactional sex, many female students find it difficult to insist on condom use or did not mind having unsafe sex with the full knowledge of risk for STI or HIV, a finding echoed by Ranganathan et al. (2017).

The female students in this study perceived 'trust' in the partners because of the duration of the relationship, which was also a predominate reason for being inconsistent or not using condoms. This reflects findings from previous studies (Cheng 2013; Ranganathan 2015) on youth and condom use, which highlight that young females are aware of the consequences of not using condoms, but they submit to their partner's demands to not use protection because of their reliance on partners. This study's findings support previous research in sub-Saharan Africa (Stoebenau et al. 2016), including South Africa (Ranganathan et al., 2017), Zimbabwe (Masvawure 2010), and Tanzania (Wamoyi et al. 2010), illuminating how young women actively used their sexuality as an economic resource while downplaying the sexual risk that provided a possible avenue for contracting HIV. As the findings suggest, female students often have multiple older male partners (mean age of 18 years) who may be part of a network of high-risk men that increases their exposure to HIV (Wamoyi et al. 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study showed that transactional sexual relationships with older men are common and provide a widely available means for female university students to gain materially, reinforce their self-worth, and improve their socioeconomic circumstances at university. However, this has major psychosocial and health implications that are often

undermined. Despite the educational background of these female student participants, they continue to expose themselves to risky behaviours, including HIV, in exchange for money and gifts. Higher education institutions need to directly address transactional sex on campuses, and do more about HIV-prevention education among students in order to equip young people, especially young female students, with the tools, skills, and knowledge to more successfully navigate safer sexual practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that higher institutions of learning acknowledge the existence and wide practice of transactional sexual relationships on campuses through their inclusion in health and education policies and psychosocial health educational campaigns. University management, in consultation with relevant health specialists, is to develop programmes that are designed to empower young women to successfully navigate relationships and improve their negotiating skills to better assert their agency in making healthy life decisions. Given the gendered and complex dynamic of transactional relationships, it is critical that the institution implement a part-time job scheme for poor students, with female students receiving special consideration.

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study cannot be taken as a general representation of all South African university female students' experiences and realities. Furthermore, considering the sensitive nature of the study topic, participants may have somewhat presented themselves in a socially desirable manner, which could have led to underreporting and may have to some extent not reported some issues, such as the extent of violence.

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