**Original Research Article**

**Sociological Examination of Survival Sex and Disguised Prostitution among University Students: A Cross-sectional Study.**

**Abstract**

**Background:** The study explores the sociological aspects of survival sex and disguised prostitution among university students, emphasizing the influence of economic, cultural, and peer pressures, to inform policies that promote student welfare and protection.

**Methods:** This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design using a qualitative approach to examine survival sex and disguised prostitution among female undergraduate students at the University of Delta, Agbor. A multi-stage random proportionate sampling technique was used to select 384 participants across faculties. Data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires and interviews, covering socio-demographic details, knowledge of survival sex and disguised prostitution, contributing factors, motivations, and possible solutions. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25.

**Results:** The study found that female university students are highly aware of survival sex and disguised prostitution, viewing them as common and closely linked aspects of campus life. Financial hardship, peer pressure, rising living costs, and lack of parental support were identified as main causes of survival sex, while disguised prostitution was driven by the pursuit of luxury, financial instability, social media influence, and desire for social status. Students emphasized the need for targeted solutions, including financial aid, awareness programs, campus jobs, stricter rules, and affordable housing, highlighting the seriousness of the issue and the urgent need for action from institutions and policymakers.

**Conclusion:** Addressing survival sex and disguised prostitution among university students requires urgent, multifaceted institutional and policy interventions that prioritize financial support, awareness, and student welfare.

**Keywords:** survival sex, disguised prostitution, economic, cultural, and peer pressures

**Introduction**

Survival sex and disguised prostitution have emerged as complex socio-economic phenomena that increasingly affect university students across the globe, including Nigeria (Tade & Adekoya, 2012). Survival sex refers to the exchange of sexual activities for essential needs such as food, shelter, education, and other basic resources (WHO, 2010). Often rooted in economic hardship, this practice serves as a coping mechanism for individuals seeking to maintain a minimal standard of living in the face of financial insecurity. University students especially those from low-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable due to limited access to stable income sources and insufficient financial support systems (Anderson et al., 2022).

On the other hand, disguised prostitution is more covert and involves the exchange of sexual favors under the appearance of legitimate or socially acceptable relationships (Zatz, 1997; Brock, 1998). Unlike traditional prostitution, disguised prostitution is not easily identifiable as transactional sex. It includes practices such as “sugar daddy” arrangements, transactional dating, or leveraging romantic relationships for material or financial benefits. These engagements blur the line between genuine affection and economic survival strategies, complicating their recognition and social responses (Minina et al., 2022).

Over the past decades, researchers have explored various sociological factors driving survival sex and disguised prostitution among students. Economic hardship remains the most significant factor, with students facing financial instability, limited access to scholarships, and weak family support structures (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Peer pressure and social expectations further reinforce these behaviors, as students often feel compelled to adopt lifestyles that reflect affluence and social inclusion even if it means engaging in transactional relationships. Cultural norms and societal attitudes also play a role, as relationships with older, wealthier partners are normalized in some contexts, thereby concealing the transactional nature of these relationships (Stone, 2014). Gender inequality deepens this vulnerability, especially among female students who face greater economic disparities and social expectations (Dahal et al., 2022). The lack of robust institutional support systems such as student welfare programs, mental health services, and financial aid worsens the situation. Moreover, the influence of urbanization, combined with the glamorization of wealth through social media, fosters unrealistic aspirations and heightens the allure of quick financial gains (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011).

Despite these realities, conducting research on survival sex and disguised prostitution is fraught with challenges. The sensitivity and stigma attached to these topics discourage open participation, limiting researchers' ability to collect honest and reliable data (Adikaram et al., 2022). Ethical concerns, including maintaining confidentiality and emotional safety for participants, further complicate the process. Moreover, respondents often underreport or misrepresent their involvement due to fear of judgment and social repercussions (De Jong et al., 2015). Identifying and accessing willing participants requires tact, trust, and ethical sensitivity.

Nonetheless, universities remain critical spaces for such inquiries. Students in financially challenged regions, such as Agbor, face heightened risks, and exploring their lived realities can offer vital insights. Understanding the prevalence and socio-economic dynamics of survival sex and disguised prostitution within this context is key to developing informed institutional responses. This includes improving student welfare services, expanding financial assistance, and implementing mental health support mechanisms. Furthermore, this study will inform stakeholders university authorities, students, and policymakers about the sociocultural and economic pressures driving these practices. It will also contribute to academic literature by offering fresh empirical insights into a subject that remains under-researched, particularly within the Nigerian context. By highlighting the challenges and coping strategies of students involved in these behaviors, the research will help shape policies and programs aimed at prevention, intervention, and support.

In a broader sense, examining survival sex and disguised prostitution from a sociological perspective enables a deeper understanding of the hidden struggles within academic environments. This research is a call to foster a more inclusive, supportive, and empathetic educational atmosphere one that safeguards student dignity and addresses the socio-economic realities that influence their choices.

**Materials and Method**

**Study Design**

The study was carried out at the University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria among undergraduate students across various faculties and departments. The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive research design following a qualitative approach to gather data on the sociological examination of survival sex and disguised prostitution among university students of the University of Delta, Agbor. The population was the university students which comprised individuals from all Niger-Delta States.

**Sampling Techniques and Size**

A multi-stage random proportionate sampling technique, a type of probability sampling, will be used to recruit university students across various faculties and departments. The minimum sample size will be determined using the Cochran formula for qualitative research and 50% population proportion will be adopted to suit the study (Lwanga and Lemeshow, 1991).

$$Sample size=\frac{ Z\_{{1-∝}/{2}^{2}} p(1-p)}{d^{2}}$$

Where $Z\_{{1-∝}/{2}}$ = Standard normal variate (at 5% type 1 error) = 1.96

p = expected proportion of respondents (50%)

d = absolute error = 0.05

$Sample Size= \frac{1.96^{2}×0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^{2}}=384$

**Selection criteria**

The study recruited only university students from the 100 to 500 levels across the various departments and faculties, and it was restricted to only females who consented to participate. The study excluded non-university students, male subjects and those who failed to consent for the study.

**Method of data collection**

Data was collected with the aid of a semi-descriptive questionnaire and a personal interview. The interview was used to ensure that the student meets the study inclusion and also to guide the respondents in the area of the questionnaire that need clarification. The semi-descriptive questionnaire was administered to every respondent and it was structured in five sections. Section A: Represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the students, Section B: seeks to evaluate the knowledge of the concept of survival sex and disguise prostitution, Section C: seeks to evaluate factors that prone students to sexual exchange (survival sex) and Section D: seeks to evaluate the reasons for disguised prostitution. Section E: evaluated the way forward to reduce students from survival sex and disguised prostitution.

**Reliability of Result**

The reliability of the of the results was tested statistically using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient to evaluate the consistency of the data collected with the International Business Machine Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS version 25) and our results showed that the overall coefficient was 0.74, which denoted that our data was consistent and Reliable.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Data collected was analyzed using the International Bussiness Machine of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS version 25) and results was presented in frequency and percentage. Chi-square of goodness fit was used as an inferential statistic and a probability less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant at 95% confidence interval.

**Results**

**Socio-demographic of the Study**

Most respondents fall within the 21–24 age group, representing 51.6% of the total, followed by those aged 18–20 years at 44.5%. A smaller proportion, 3.4%, are between 25–28 years, while only 0.5% are above 29 years. This indicates that most participants are young adults, by most respondents are from Delta State, making up 75% of the sample. Edo State follows with 12.8%, and Anambra State accounts for 11.2%. Ondo State had the least representation, with just 1%. This shows a strong regional representation from Delta State. Regarding their parents' occupations, a large number of respondents (63.8%) reported that their parents are businesspeople. Civil servants accounted for 27.9%, and those working in private firms made up 8.3%. This suggests that a majority of the students come from entrepreneurial family backgrounds. Their primary source of financial support, the vast majority (86.5%) rely on their parents or guardians. A smaller portion (8.9%) are self-funded, while 2.4% depend on their boyfriends. Other sources such as scholarships/grants (1.6%) and personal income (0.8%) were minimally represented. Finally, most students (71.4%) are enrolled in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The Faculty of Science follows with 14.3%, then Education (7.3%), Engineering (4.2%), and Basic Medical Sciences (2.9%). This suggests a dominant interest in social science disciplines among the respondents. (Table 1)

**Knowledge of the Concept of Survival Sex and Disguised Prostitution**

Table 2 shows that significant level of awareness and understanding of survival sex and disguised prostitution among respondents. A majority, 64.8%, indicated they have heard of the term "Survival Sex" before, while 35.2% had not. Similarly, an even larger proportion 74.5% reported understanding what disguised prostitution means, compared to 25.5% who did not. Notably, 86.7% of respondents believe that survival sex is common among university students, suggesting a strong perception of its prevalence within academic environments. When asked whether disguised prostitution is a form of survival sex, 72.4% agreed, indicating that most students see a clear connection between the two concepts. Additionally, 58.6% claimed to have either witnessed or heard of cases of disguised prostitution among students, while 41.4% had not. All the Chi-square (X²) tests returned statistically significant results (p-value = 0.00), meaning that in each case, the differences in responses were not due to chance. This points to a widespread and conscious awareness of the issues surrounding survival sex and disguised prostitution among the university student population surveyed.

## **Factors That Prone Students to Sexual Exchange (Survival Sex)**

The Table 3 reveals that multiple socio-economic factors significantly contribute to students engaging in survival sex. A large majority of respondents (93%) believe that financial difficulties are a major driver, with only 7% disagreeing. Peer pressure is also seen as a strong influence, as 88.5% of students agree that it plays a role in encouraging survival sex, while 11.5% do not. An even greater proportion, 91.9%, believe that the high cost of living increases the likelihood of students engaging in survival sex. Similarly, 86.5% of respondents think that a lack of parental support contributes to this behavior, showing that family financial instability or absence is also a key factor. Interestingly, while still significant, the belief that inadequate campus accommodation leads to survival sex was less strongly supported—61.5% agreed, while 38.5% disagreed. Nonetheless, all variables tested returned statistically significant results (p-value = 0.00), indicating that these factors are not perceived randomly but are widely acknowledged by students as meaningful contributors to survival sex.

**Reasons for Disguised Prostitution**

Table 4 shows the reason for disguised prostitution and The findings indicate that several factors significantly contribute to why students engage in disguised prostitution. A large majority of respondents (83.6%) believe that the desire for a luxury lifestyle is a major motivator, while 16.4% disagreed. Similarly, 88.3% of respondents agree that lack of financial support from family increases the likelihood of disguised prostitution, highlighting economic hardship as a key driving factor. Social media also plays a notable role, with 79.7% of students stating that it contributes to disguised prostitution, likely by promoting unrealistic lifestyles and material aspirations. Additionally, 61.2% believe that the desire to gain social status motivates students to engage in such behavior. Interestingly, opinions are nearly evenly split on whether the presence of older wealthy individuals, often referred to as “sponsors,” encourages disguised prostitution 49.0% agreed, while 51.0% did not. Despite the divided views on this particular variable, all responses except for this last one showed strong statistical significance (p-value = 0.00), indicating that the associations are meaningful and not due to chance.

**Way Forward to Reduce Survival Sex and Disguised Prostitution**

The Table 5 highlights strong student support for various strategies aimed at reducing survival sex and disguised prostitution on campus. A significant majority (86.5%) believe that providing more financial aid to students would help address the issue, while only 13.5% disagreed. Even more compelling, 97.1% of respondents agree that universities should create more awareness about the dangers of survival sex and disguised prostitution, showing a clear demand for educational interventions. Additionally, 87.5% of students think that offering part-time job opportunities on campus could reduce the incidence of survival sex, emphasizing the importance of economic empowerment. Similarly, 84.4% support the implementation of stricter regulations to curb disguised prostitution, reflecting a call for institutional accountability. Furthermore, 82.9% of respondents believe that providing affordable campus accommodation would play a key role in reducing survival sex, linking housing insecurity with vulnerability. All variables showed statistically significant results (p-value = 0.00), confirming that these proposed solutions are strongly and meaningfully supported by the student population.

**Table 1 showing the Socio-demography of study**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Frequency | Percent |
| What is your age group? |
|  | 18-20 years | 171 | 44.5 |
| 21-24 years | 198 | 51.6 |
| 25-28 years | 13 | 3.4 |
| above 29 years | 2 | .5 |
| Which state are you from? |
|  | Anambra State | 43 | 11.2 |
| Delta State | 288 | 75.0 |
| Edo State | 49 | 12.8 |
| Ondo State | 4 | 1.0 |
| What are your parents' occupations? |
|  | Business | 245 | 63.8 |
| Civil servant | 107 | 27.9 |
| Private firm | 32 | 8.3 |
| What is your primary source of financial support? |
|  | My boyfriend | 9 | 2.4  |
| Parents/Guardians | 332 | 86.5 |
| Personal | 3 | .8 |
| Scholarship/Grant | 6 | 1.6 |
| Self-funded | 34 | 8.9 |
| Which faculty are you enrolled in? |
|  | Basic Medical Sciences | 11 | 2.9 |
| Education | 28 | 7.3 |
| Engineering | 16 | 4.2 |
| Science | 55 | 14.3 |
| Social Sciences | 274 | 71.4 |
| Which faculty are you enrolled in? |
|  | Basic Medical Sciences | 11 | 2.9 |
| Education | 28 | 7.3 |
| Engineering | 16 | 4.2 |
| Science | 55 | 14.3 |
| Social Sciences | 274 | 71.4 |

**Table 2 Knowledge of the Concept of Survival Sex and Disguised Prostitution**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables**  | **No**  | **Yes**  | **X2** | **p-value**  | **Inference**  |
| Have you heard of the term 'Survival Sex' before? | 135 (35.2%) | 249 (64.8%) | 33.84 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you understand what disguised prostitution means? | 98 (25.5%) | 286 (74.5%) | 92.04 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think survival sex is common among university students? | 51 (13.3%) | 333 (86.7%) | 207.09 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think disguised prostitution is a form of survival sex? | 106 (27.6%) | 278 (72.4%) | 77.04 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Have you witnessed or heard about cases of disguised prostitution among students? | 159 (41.4%) | 225 (58.6%) | 11.34 | 0.00 | Significant |

**Table 3 Factors That Prone Students to Sexual Exchange (Survival Sex)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables**  | **No**  | **Yes**  | **X2** | **p-value**  | **Inference**  |
| Do you believe financial difficulties make students engage in survival sex? | 27 (7.0%) | 357 (83%) | 283.59 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Does peer pressure influence students to engage in survival sex? | 44 (11.5%) | 340 (88.5%) | 228.16 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think the high cost of living increases survival sex among students? | 31 (8.1%) | 353 (91.9%) | 270.01 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think lack of parental support contributes to survival sex? | 52 (13.5%) | 332 (86.5%) | 204.16 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you believe inadequate campus accommodation increases the chances of survival sex? | 148 (38.5%) | 236 (61.5%) | 20.16 | 0.00 | Significant |

**Table 4 Reasons for Disguised Prostitution**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables**  | **No**  | **Yes**  | **X2** | **p-value**  | **Inference**  |
| Do you think the need for a luxury lifestyle encourages disguised prostitution? | 63 (16.4%) | 321 (83.6%) | 173.34 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Does lack of financial support from family increase disguised prostitution? | 45 (11.7%) | 339 (99.3%) | 225.09 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think the influence of social media contributes to disguised prostitution? | 78 (20.3%) | 306 (79.7%) | 135.37 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think students engage in disguised prostitution to gain social status? | 149 (38.8%) | 235 (61.2%) | 19.26 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you believe the presence of older wealthy individuals (sponsors) promotes disguised prostitution? | 196 (51.0%) | 188 (49.0%) | 0.16 | 0.68 | Significant |

**Table 5 Way Forward to Reduce Survival Sex and Disguised Prostitution**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables**  | **No**  | **Yes**  | **X2** | **p-value**  | **Inference**  |
| Do you think providing more financial aid to students will reduce survival sex? | 52 (13.5%) | 332 (86.5%) | 204.16 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Should universities create more awareness about the dangers of survival sex and disguised prostitution? | 11 (2.9%) | 373 (97.1%) | 341.26 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you think offering part-time jobs on campus will reduce survival sex? | 48 (12.5%) | 336 (87.5%) | 216.00 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Should stricter regulations be imposed to prevent disguised prostitution on campus? | 60 (15.6%) | 324 (84.4%) | 181.50 | 0.00 | Significant |
| Do you believe providing affordable campus accommodation will reduce survival sex? | 66 (17.2%) | 318 (82.9%) | 165.37 | 0.00 | Significant |

**Discussion of Findings**

This study sheds light on the everyday realities faced by university students, revealing how age, economic background, and academic exposure all come together to shape experiences with survival sex and disguised prostitution. Most of the students who participated in this study are in their early twenties, a time when people start making more decisions for themselves but are still heavily dependent on financial support from home. With over 86% relying on parents or guardians, many of whom work in informal or unstable businesses, it becomes clear that financial uncertainty is a daily concern. That strain is even more evident when support isn't consistent or sufficient, pushing some students toward survival strategies that include transactional sex.

That academic background likely gives students greater exposure to issues around gender, inequality, and the economic struggles that feed into survival sex. Many students knew what survival sex and disguised prostitution meant, and most agreed these were common among their peers. This shows just how visible and normalized these practices have become in student life. Even more telling is how students connect these terms, seeing disguised prostitution as simply another face of survival sex. It's a reminder that language matters. Using terms like “survival sex” instead of “prostitution” often helps people talk about their realities without carrying the heavy burden of shame. It's not about avoiding the truth, it’s about naming things in a way that reflects the hard choices people are forced to make.

There’s no question that money problems are at the heart of this issue. Most students pointed to financial hardship, the high cost of living, and lack of support from home as key reasons why people turn to survival sex. These aren’t just isolated experiences; they echo larger patterns that researchers have noted in other settings where people are left vulnerable by systems that don’t support them. And while the dangers of things like drug use or homelessness might not be as pronounced on campuses, the underlying feelings of instability and lack of control are the same. But it’s not always just about survival. Some students also admitted that the desire for a more luxurious lifestyle plays a role. Social media doesn’t help—every day feeds are filled with people flaunting clothes, cars, and vacations. That pressure to appear successful can push students into situations they might not otherwise consider. The study also showed mixed opinions about the role of older, wealthier “sponsors,” suggesting that while some see them as part of the problem, others have come to see such relationships as normal or even beneficial.

When asked about solutions, students showed a clear understanding of what’s needed. They didn’t ask for judgment, they asked for support. Nearly all of them called for awareness campaigns, while many also pointed to the need for financial aid, campus jobs, and affordable housing. These aren’t unreasonable demands; they’re calls for a system that helps students stay afloat without having to trade dignity for survival. This aligns with research that emphasizes the importance of building supportive, empowering spaces rather than focusing on punishment or shame.

Finally, this study is a powerful reminder that stories of survival sex and disguised prostitution are often more complicated than they appear. Too often, these experiences are kept quiet—pushed into the shadows because of fear or stigma. But they deserve to be heard. Like others before them who survived through means the world was not ready to talk about, these students are part of a broader conversation about how we define morality, choice, and survival. The words we use to describe their actions matter because those words shape how society responds and how individuals see themselves. In choosing terms like “survival sex,” students are not only trying to explain their reality, they're asking to be understood.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study reveals a high level of awareness and understanding of survival sex and disguised prostitution among university students, with most acknowledging their prevalence and connection. The data clearly show that financial hardship, peer pressure, and the rising cost of living are the most significant factors pushing students toward these behaviors, further exacerbated by a lack of parental support and, to a lesser extent, inadequate housing. Disguised prostitution, in particular, is driven not only by economic need but also by social factors such as the desire for luxury, social status, and the influence of social media. While opinions are split on the role of wealthy sponsors, the overall consensus points to structural and socio-economic vulnerabilities as the root causes. Importantly, students do not merely recognize the problem—they propose meaningful solutions. There is strong support for increased financial aid, more awareness campaigns, on-campus job opportunities, affordable housing, and stronger regulations, all of which underscore a call for institutional action. These findings emphasize the need for universities and policymakers to address the underlying economic and social challenges facing students, rather than dismiss or stigmatize the survival strategies they adopt.

**CONSENT**

A written consent was issued to every subject to declare their consent to participate in this study as per University Standards.

**COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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