



Sexual Harassment and Academic Engagement of Female Students in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of sexual harassment (SH) on the academic engagement of female students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria. The normalisation of gender-based violence (GBV), toxic academic masculinity, a culture of silence, and a lack of active leadership were identified as key features that encourage SH in higher education and may lead to academic disengagement among female students. A qualitative case study and in-depth interview approach were employed for data collection. Students' narratives were organised for analysis of the findings. The thematic focus included: (a) SH experienced by female students, and (b) SH and academic engagement. The study revealed poor academic (cognitive, affective, and behavioural) engagement among students, which was adversely affected by SH. These included difficulties connecting with academic activities, difficulty completing assignments, problems with presentations, a reluctance to ask questions or participate in group discussions, a sense of disorientation and disturbance, fear, a loss of motivation, poor psychological feelings towards school learning, teachers and peers, and students' inability to receive the needed assistance from the teacher to attain higher academic achievement. However, due to limited trust

in the institution, the lengthy legal process, and fear of being blamed, accused, or stigmatised, legal action against the harassers was rarely pursued.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Learning Activities, Academic Engagement, Female Students

Introduction

Background

Sexual harassment (SH) is a prevalent problem in universities, particularly in Nigeria, with female students being most vulnerable. SH is unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, verbal or physical behaviour, or gestures of a sexual nature that cause offence or humiliation, leading to an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (UN Women, 2013; Harassment Policy, 2016). It is a harmful intrusion into the educational sphere that goes beyond academic discourse. It appears as unwelcome, objectionable, and often threatening behaviour that undermines students' well-being (Burn, 2019). In Nigeria, there are SH laws (though not implemented) in different states, in addition to the Constitution, which recognises these rights as sacred and requires all persons to respect them. In most cases of SH, victims' fundamental human rights (the right to dignity of the human person (Section 34) and the right to freedom from discrimination (Section 42)) are threatened and violated (Action for Justice, Nigeria 2024). SH is viewed as a pervasive problem in educational settings that can negatively affect students' learning.

Globally, 27% of partnered women of reproductive age (15-49 years old) are estimated to have experienced sexual intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime. The global prevalence rate of SH among female university students is 37% (Smith & Sinclair, 2002). Research has confirmed high rates of SH in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and research organisations, characterised by precarious working conditions and hierarchical relations between employees and students, as well as a culture that normalises GBV and silences the phenomenon (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

In developing countries, the prevalence of GBV appears to be higher than in developed countries. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence is high, exceeding 50% in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa (Workye, Mekonnen, Wedaje & Sitot, 2023). One in three students in HEIs (30.6%) have experienced sexual assault at least once in their lifetime (Blaker, 2022).

For SH on campus, universities are expected to ensure a just and timely response and to take action to prevent these harms. Many of the instances of SH and sexual assault that impacted people most, as reported in

the 2021 survey, happened in settings such as lectures and classes, libraries, clubs, events, and student accommodation (Blaker, 2022).

While SH is high in Africa compared with developed countries, it seems to be higher in Nigeria, most likely due to a harsh economic situation and poor leadership, which adversely affect lecturers and leave the majority of the youth, comprising 60% of the population, unemployed and depressed. A recent study on SH among students in HEIs in Ogun State, Nigeria, revealed that SH was the most frequently reported form of GBV among students (Ojeniyi & Moronkola, 2023). In Nigeria, SH is a major problem for many students. A 2018 World Bank survey reported that 70% of female graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions had been sexually harassed in school by fellow students and lecturers. In addition, a study found that women are more at risk of sexual violence and harassment than men. Furthermore, any form of GBV is systematically associated with feeling less safe, feeling unwell, and lower work productivity or study performance, especially for women and non-binary people (Humbert et al., 2022). A survey found that 34.2% of 160 Nigerian students reported SH as the most prevalent form of GBV (Ugah, 2023). The impact of SH on students' learning experience is substantial. Studies show that university students who have experienced SH report serious impacts on their well-being and are vulnerable to psychological distress, substance abuse, depression, anger, low life satisfaction, and physical illnesses (Rospenda et al., 2000; Buchanan et al., 2009; Jirek & Saunders, 2018). Another study found that SH can create a hostile learning environment, making it difficult for students to feel safe and comfortable engaging in class discussions and other school activities (Fitzgerald, Gelfand & Drasgow, 1995; Berdahl & Moore, 2007). This can lead to decreased participation and engagement in class, as well as lower grades and academic achievement (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Students' poor academic achievement could be attributed to many factors, especially an uncondusive learning environment, such as that caused by SH. It was stated that sexually abused students report limited academic engagement, low academic achievement, as well as a generalised sense of insecurity in the school environment (Athanasiaades, Stamovlasis, Touloupis, & Charalambous, 2023).

Concepts

Students' academic engagement is an important construct that helps explain students' behaviour in the teaching-learning process. Students' academic engagement can be seen as the glue that holds together all aspects of student learning and growth, making teaching more fun, engaging, and rewarding, and having a critical impact on students. When students are in a safe, violence-free environment, have a good relationship with their lecturers

and classmates, and feel a sense of belonging to their school (emotional engagement), they may be more likely to participate in class discussions and activities (behavioural engagement), which might lead to a stronger commitment and investment in their learning (cognitive engagement) (Sutton, 2021).

Academic engagement is “the quality and quantity of students' participation or connection with the educational endeavour and hence with activities, values, individuals, aims, and place that comprise it” (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009, p. 495). It is the degree to which students are ‘connected’ to their academic activities and to what is going on in their classes (Adimora, Ngwoke, Oyeoku & Onwuka, 2016). Students’ academic engagement is multidimensional, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive types. Behavioural engagement is students’ involvement in academic and extracurricular activities, including effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation, following rules, and the absence of disruptive behaviours. Affective/emotional engagement is students’ attitudes towards their school, classroom, classmates, and teachers, such as boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, a sense of belonging, and liking or disliking school. Cognitive engagement involves participation in academic and extracurricular activities, thoughtfulness and a willingness to master difficult skills such as self-regulation, a preference for challenge and hard work, going beyond requirements, efforts to master new knowledge and skills, and the use of learning strategies (Sutton, 2021). It is imperative to understand that students’ academic engagement significantly affects their academic achievement, and that high academic engagement can lead to high self-esteem, likely because students’ belief in themselves leads them to think that their activities could lead to better academic achievement (Ayenew et al., 2014).

SH, an unpleasant behaviour, is responsible for many negative consequences for the victim's social, psychological, physical, and academic aspects. Studies have emphasised the adverse effects of SH on students’ academic engagement. For instance, in schools, men devalue women by drawing attention to their sexuality, which eventually erodes their self-esteem. Research has shown that females who have been sexually harassed reported experiencing embarrassment, feeling self-conscious, and feeling less sure or less confident in themselves (Ayenew & Gebremeskal, 2014).

The phenomenon causes victims’ irritation, frustration, anxiety, stress, and trauma. The negative academic consequences include students avoiding school, experiencing low academic performance, losing interest in education or extracurricular activities, and showing insufficient dedication to academic life. Regrettably, SH policies in schools are neither comprehensive nor implemented (Konlan & Dangah, 2023). These findings indicate the

negative consequences of SH on learning activities, and the study has specifically examined the impact across three distinct domains. The findings of this study and previous related studies provide clarity on the negative consequences of SH for victims.

Research Method

The study utilised a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of female students who were victims of sexual harassment (SH) within Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) and their coping mechanisms. The goal was to understand the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive impact of SH on academic engagement and well-being. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) were employed because they were deemed beneficial for capturing respondents' perspectives and maintaining the research focus (Morris, 2021). This approach gave the researchers the opportunity to engage closely with the research participants. Experienced and well-trained research assistants assisted with data collection. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of SH in academic settings. They received three days of data collection training. The training covered confidentiality, privacy, interview and focus group techniques, and opportunities for the team to rehearse administering interviews, focus groups, and other study procedures. Using purposive sampling, 32 participants (14 undergraduate and 18 postgraduate students) who voluntarily gave their consent participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 45 years. Fourteen female students from various Nigerian universities who had personally experienced SH shared their lived experiences. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants through referrals. There were currently enrolled undergraduates and postgraduate students willing to speak about their experiences with SH. An in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interview guide that allowed participants to freely narrate their experiences was used. Informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional support provisions were ensured. Pseudonyms or participant numbers (e.g., Participant 5) were used to anonymise data.

Open-ended guidelines were used during the IDIs. The participants were made aware of the discussion theme and arranged in groups in a private setting to ensure their safety and freedom to share their views on sensitive topics. The questions that guided the study included i) What are the female students' experiences of SH? (ii) What is the impact of SH on female students' academic engagement? The moderator guided the discussion and encouraged each participant to contribute, ensuring a respectful interaction. Each group shared non-confidential experiences during the interview session

and was given the opportunity to write down any confidential experiences of sexual harassment they might like to share.

During data collection, interviewers received regular feedback from senior research assistants on their facilitation techniques and the use of the exercises. We also held a review meeting midway through data collection to reflect on our findings and experiences and to adjust data collection as needed.

Participants who consented to an interview also participated in a session to share their experiences. The interview session and the paper-based responses from those who opted for anonymity were recorded. The project coordinator oversaw and verified the completeness and accuracy of the data. The research assistants regularly reviewed progress and communicated any problems during data collection. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewers in English within a week of data collection. Transcripts were read and re-read to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Meaningful units of text were highlighted and assigned descriptive codes.

Codes included fear of failure, coerced consent, isolation, loss of concentration, academic withdrawal, emotional trauma, reporting barriers, etc. Codes were grouped into broader themes, such as:

- Abuse of power and authority.
- Emotional and cognitive trauma
- Disruption of academic engagement
- Fear, silence, and stigma
- Institutional failure and distrust

Themes were refined by comparing them with the raw data to ensure they reflected participants' lived experiences. Overlapping or ambiguous themes were merged or split as appropriate. The final themes were clearly defined and supported by participant quotes. Each theme captured aspects of students' affective, behavioural, and cognitive academic engagement. The themes were woven into a coherent narrative, supported by rich, illustrative quotations from participants.

Results

Sexual Harassment experienced by female students in HEIs in Nigeria.

The study shows that SH often occurs within the HEI, where female students appear to be more vulnerable than their male counterparts. They experience various forms of SH on campus on a daily basis, including non-consensual sexual acts, physical contact, verbal abuse, inappropriate staring, suggestive gestures, sexual assault, rape, and harassment.

Unwanted Touching and Public Harassment Among the most prevalent experiences were unwanted touching of sensitive body parts, such as the breasts, buttocks, and genitals, in crowded spaces. Additionally, girls receive unsolicited messages, romantic proposals, date requests, teasing, and demands for sexual favours in exchange for better grades.

One of the participants expressed her experience as:

Frequent harassment in public spaces and crowded lecture rooms, including unwanted physical contact, invasive staring, teasing, and discomforting behaviour, causes anxiety and fear. These incidents are reportedly more common when wearing revealing or fitted clothing, with men often attempting non-consensual touching and persistent staring. Such inappropriate behaviour is not unique to me; other girls have also reported similar experiences (Participant 1).

Exploitation, power abuse

SH by lecturers often involves coercion for sexual favours, accompanied by threats of academic penalties for non-compliance. Some students have reported being failed or extorted, leading to psychological distress and undermining their academic performance. Similarly, lecturers use their power over students to bargain for sexual favours in exchange for good grades. One female student described her experience as follows:

My lecturer gave me the impression that his course was difficult to pass and pressured me into meeting privately despite my initial refusal. He picked me up from my aunt's house, drove me to a campus location, and began touching me inappropriately. When I resisted, he demanded money to pass me and threatened to fail me if I told anyone. Fearing further problems, I decided not to inform my aunt and felt compelled to pay the money (Participant 2).

Another student explained,

I faced issues with one of my courses, and my lecturer offered to help, but took me to a secluded campus location, where he made inappropriate advances. When I resisted, he failed me twice, causing me to repeat for two years. Fear of disbelief, stigmatisation, and potential consequences prevented me from reporting the incident to the school authorities (Participant 3).

A student's report of a lecturer's unethical sexual act includes,

One of my lecturers engages in unethical behaviour and exploits students by promising better marks in practical exams.

He often invited us, as students, to a restaurant under the guise of discussing academic matters, but then acted inappropriately by making comments about my appearance, attempting to touch my cheek, and positioning himself to press against my breast while discussing my report. He also placed his hand on my shoulder under the pretence of assisting with a laptop, causing me discomfort and distress. In a later meeting, I brought friends along, which deterred further harassment, and the lecturer focused solely on providing feedback on my report (Participant 4).

The students' reports describe the detrimental effects of sexual harassment on students' academic engagement. For instance, these accounts indicate that students' affective engagement, including their emotional connection to their academic environment, was severely disrupted. Analysis of Participant 2's quotes indicates that fear and anxiety stemmed from the lecturer's threats and coercion, leading to helplessness and emotional distress. Participant 3's account shows that fear of stigmatisation and disbelief prevented the student from reporting the harassment, leading to emotional withdrawal and a loss of trust in the institution.

Participant 4 reports that the lecturer's inappropriate actions caused discomfort and distress, undermining the student's sense of safety and emotional connection to the academic environment.

Behavioural engagement was hindered by harassment. Participant 2 was forced to pay money out of fear, leading to disengagement from other academic or social activities due to shame or financial strain. Participant 3's report shows that repeating courses and the emotional toll of harassment led to disengagement from academic pursuits, disrupting the academic trajectory. Participant 4's strategy of bringing friends to subsequent meetings indicates a behavioural shift aimed at managing harassment, reflecting reduced trust and a need for defensive measures.

Cognitive engagement, the ability to focus, process, and retain academic material, is negatively affected by harassment-related trauma. Participant 2 reports that pressure and coercion distracted them from academic tasks, leading to diminished cognitive focus. Participant 3 indicates that repeated failures and fear of repercussions likely undermined the participant's confidence and ability to concentrate on their studies. Participant 4 indicates that the discomfort and distress caused by harassment likely affected the participant's ability to fully engage with academic feedback and discussion.

The experiences shared by these female students reflect a broader pattern of SH endured across different contexts. Regardless of the location or the identity of the perpetrators, our participants consistently reported that these incidents of harassment had a detrimental impact on multiple aspects of their lives, including their ability to engage in learning and their overall academic performance.

Sexual Harassment and Academic Engagement

SH significantly disrupts academic engagement in HEIs, as evidenced across the affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains:

Affective Engagement

Emotional Distress and Fear

Many participants reported experiencing anxiety, fear, and emotional insecurity as a result of incidents of SH. For instance, unwanted touching or invasive staring left students feeling unsafe in public or crowded spaces.

SH by lecturers, including coercion and threats, further exacerbated victims' emotional distress. Victims felt helpless, particularly when their academic progression depended on compliance.

The emotional toll of SH often extended beyond the workplace, undermining self-esteem and straining interpersonal relationships. For example, participants who experienced rape or prolonged harassment reported long-term psychological effects, including depression, guilt, and distrust of others.

Long-Term Emotional Impact

The traumatic effects of SH often persist well beyond the academic years. Many participants reported experiencing anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem even after graduation.

The emotional toll included reluctance to engage with others, social isolation, and a diminished sense of personal safety. These factors contributed to a lasting negative perception of the academic environment.

Behavioural Engagement

Behavioural engagement encompasses students' active participation in academic and social activities, which is often diminished due to SH:

Avoidance and Withdrawal

Victims of SH often avoided specific academic settings or individuals perceived as threats. For instance, students steered clear of crowded lecture halls, departmental offices, and social interactions with peers.

Some students disengaged from group activities, class presentations, and discussions because of fear of further harassment or ridicule.

Forced Compliance and Defensive Actions

In extreme cases, students felt compelled to comply with unethical demands, such as granting sexual favours, to safeguard their academic progress. This coerced compliance undermines ethical standards and erodes trust in institutional systems.

Participants also used defensive strategies, such as bringing friends to meetings with predatory lecturers or coordinating to expose perpetrators. While effective in some cases, these actions diverted attention from academic pursuits to the management of threats.

Academic Disengagement

A recurring theme was a loss of interest in academic tasks. Victims reported skipping lectures, postponing submissions, or dropping courses entirely because of fear of encountering perpetrators. Fear of retaliation or stigma further discouraged victims from seeking justice or reporting incidents, perpetuating cycles of disengagement.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement involves focus, comprehension, and the mental effort students invest in learning. SH disrupts this critical domain in profound ways:

Impaired Focus and Concentration

Many participants described feeling overwhelmed by memories of their traumatic experiences while trying to study or participate in class. Recurrent thoughts of harassment created mental barriers to learning.

Distraction was particularly pronounced during private study sessions, group assignments, or periods of academic pressure, such as exams or presentations.

Memory and Comprehension Difficulties

Emotional distress caused by sexual harassment (SH) significantly impaired cognitive processes, including memory and comprehension. For instance, participants reported forgetting lecture content or struggling to complete assignments due to intrusive thoughts.

This inability to concentrate on learning tasks led to a decline in academic performance, as students struggled to engage with complex material and develop critical thinking skills.

Reduced Motivation and Academic Aspirations

Prolonged exposure to sexual harassment (SH) eroded students' motivation to excel academically. For example, participants who were deliberately failed by lecturers for resisting advances reported a loss of confidence in their academic abilities.

The cumulative impact of SH incidents often led to a diminished interest in education, with some students considering withdrawing from their studies or settling for sub-optimal academic outcomes.

Abuse of Power and Authority, fear, coercion, silence and Stigma

Students are often coerced into sexual requests, with their grades and academic progress at stake.

A case of sexual harassment between a male lecturer and his supervisee.

- 1) *My project supervisor expressed a desire for an affair, which I reluctantly accepted out of fear that he might jeopardise my graduation. Despite agreeing, I repeatedly postponed his demands for sex. Three days before my project defence, I told him I was ready and arranged to meet him at a hotel. I had secretly coordinated with three boys who waited nearby. Once the lecturer undressed, I signalled the boys, who entered and recorded him naked. The lecturer panicked and fled. When shown the video later, he pleaded for discretion and promised not to obstruct my graduation. I successfully defended my project and graduated without further issues (Participant 5).*

Similarly,

- 2) *My lecturer deceived me into a relationship by falsely promising marriage. He frequently demanded that I do domestic chores, including cooking, cleaning, and running errands, while also engaging in non-consensual sex. I eventually became pregnant, concealed it, and withdrew from school to avoid stigma and my parents' disapproval. Despite my repeated attempts to discuss our future, the lecturer evaded responsibility, promising to speak with my parents but ultimately revealing that he was engaged to another woman who was also pregnant with his child. When my parents became involved and escalated the matter to the university, the lecturer refused to marry me. The situation resulted in an unplanned child, damaged my relationship with my parents, and disrupted my academic and career aspirations (Participant 6).*

A student was sexually harassed by her lecturer, which disrupted her program and led to her plan to abandon her program.

3) *When I approached my lecturer and postgraduate representative to submit my research project and request a proposal defence, he complimented my appearance and attempted to hug me. After I refused, he became angry and demanded an intimate relationship before assisting me, dismissing my explanation that I was engaged. Reporting the incident to the Dean led to a slow resolution, causing significant delays and nearly prompting me to abandon the programme. Ultimately, I lost a year before a new representative was appointed (Participant 7).*

Sexual harassment, as detailed in these narratives, profoundly affects students' academic engagement (cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively). The reports illustrate how power dynamics within supervisory relationships compromise academic progress, erode emotional well-being, and disrupt students' academic trajectories.

In relation to academic engagements, Affective engagement, defined as students' emotional connection to their academic environment, is reflected in the first account by Participant 5, which describes harassment in which fear and anxiety dominate students' emotional experiences. The student entered an unwanted relationship out of fear of academic repercussions, indicating a lack of emotional safety in the academic space.

Similarly, Participant 6's narrative depicts betrayal, shame, and stigma stemming from the lecturer's manipulation, which led to emotional distress and eventual withdrawal from school. Participant 7 expresses frustration and emotional turmoil, feeling coerced and unsupported, which nearly led to abandoning the programme. These cases illustrate the emotional exhaustion and disengagement that result from unsafe academic environments.

Behavioural engagement, including participation in academic activities and adherence to academic responsibilities. Participant 5's deliberate plan to trap the lecturer signals a shift from academic to survival strategies. Participant 6 withdrew from her programme due to the stigma surrounding her pregnancy, a direct result of harassment. Participant 7, on the other hand, faced delays in completing the programme due to the lecturer's refusal to assist unless demands were met. Such behaviours indicate disruptions to academic routines and participation caused by sexual harassment.

Cognitive engagement involves students' investment in learning and intellectual growth. Participant 6's narrative shows how harassment abruptly

halted her educational aspirations, depriving her of opportunities for intellectual development. Participant 7's experience shows how a focus on academic progress was derailed by institutional inefficiencies in addressing harassment, fostering disillusionment with the academic system.

The quotes below show that many participants (Participants 8, 9, 11, and 13) describe psychological effects of SH, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, as well as long-term consequences for both personal and academic life. They also describe a fear of reporting SH due to stigma, disbelief, or retaliation. Participants 12 and 14 also explain that SH fosters isolation, as students withdraw from relationships, group work, and classroom participation.

Given the fear of job termination and low marks in practical examinations, female students were afraid to disclose their experiences of SH to others. Some lecturers threatened to fail them in their courses if they did not comply with their requests.

- 4) *I experienced sexual harassment (SH) in my first year of university when my course representative, sent by my lecturer, invited me to his office for important information. After I arrived with a friend, the lecturer became angry and refused to assist me unless I saw him alone. This left me fearful, and the learning environment became unbearable. I failed the course repeatedly, spent an extra 2 years at university, and finally graduated with a third-class degree. After graduation, I faced verbal abuse from another lecturer who criticised my low grades, saying I could not pass his course due to my supposed low IQ. These experiences, stemming from the sexual harassment, caused me significant trauma, low self-esteem, and depression that lasted for four years. It was only after an intervention by a professor that I found the courage to move forward, though I continue to struggle with the lasting effects of the trauma (Participant 8).*

Due to fear of stigmatisation, disbelief and poor socio-economic status, most students lack the courage to speak out.

- 5) *A trusted family friend, who had promised to help secure my admission to university and partially sponsor my education, betrayed that trust. On my first day at the university, he began making advances. When I threatened to report him to his wife, he threatened to withdraw my admission. He coerced me into a sexual relationship and continued to exploit it. Fear of losing my education and*

guilt prevented me from reporting him, and when I tried to confide in my mother, her disbelief silenced me further. These traumatic experiences deeply affected my mental health, hindered my academic performance, and led to a lower grade upon graduation. Despite now being a mother of four, the lingering trauma continues to weigh heavily on me (Participant 9).

Similarly,

- 6) *I was raped at the age of 17 years when I visited a male friend/classmate in the university to invite him to a church vigil. Before the awful incident, he asked me to be his girlfriend, but I refused. Having lost my virginity to him, I decided to continue the act with him. However, each time I had sex with him, I felt terrible because it reminded me of the rape incident. Presently, these experiences adversely affect my emotions, distract me from reading, and affect my relationship with people and with God (Participant 10).*

A female undergraduate reported her difficulty concentrating in her studies due to her horrible experiences related to sexual harassment.

- 7) *Tremendous adverse experiences of sexual harassment during my studies have made reading difficult and reduced my interest. Each time I wanted to read, I would be overwhelmed and distracted by memories of my traumatic experiences. This is very disturbing because I used to be fully engaged in my studies, and it has resulted in consistently poor performance in my courses (Participant 11).*

Also affected, as reported by the students, are problems with concentration in academic work, interacting with classmates, engaging in group work with classmates, difficulty with homework, and poor participation in academic and extracurricular activities.

One of the participants explained:

- 8) *The awful experiences I had with SH have affected me so much that I have lost concentration in class and during my private reading. I no longer feel safe interacting with my classmates, and I am unable to do my homework as well as I used to. I also lack confidence in my friends, and I have noticed that my academic performance suffers as a result of these distractions. I feel terrible when I compare*

my current performance to my previous one (Participant 12).

Similar report:

- 9) *“I am experiencing depressive symptoms such as sleeplessness, loss of appetite, a lack of interest in what I used to enjoy, and anxiety resulting from my experiences of SH. My experiences of SH have a lasting impact on my ability to learn and comprehend. They also disrupt my academic engagement and progress in my academic output. Each time I try to do my homework, give a class presentation, or participate in discussions, I battle to suppress the awful memories, which always disrupt my cognition and cause forgetting (Participant 13).”*

A participant reported getting scared of relationships after being raped by someone she trusted.

- 10) *“My rape by someone I trusted and respected has left me deeply scarred and fearful of intimacy. It has made me afraid to relate closely to others, both male and female, especially those who resemble my assailant. This fear has led me to avoid people’s company, preferring isolation, even in the classroom (Participant 14).”*

Participants 8, 9, and 10 reveal the roles of Fear and Silence through their expressions of fear when reporting SH because of stigma, disbelief, or retaliation.

Participants 12 and 14 demonstrate that SH fosters isolation, as evidenced by their withdrawal from relationships, group work, and classroom participation. Participants 8, 9, 11, and 13 reveal Lasting Trauma, evident in the psychological effects of SH, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and in long-term consequences for both personal and academic life.

Regarding affective engagement, which concerns students' emotional connection to their academic environment, including motivation, feelings of safety, and a sense of belonging, Participants 8, 9, and 14 describe the emotional toll of SH, including fear, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Participant 8’s fear of retaliation from a lecturer and the resulting academic struggles illustrate how SH erodes students' emotional connection to their studies. Participant 10 describes a loss of emotional stability and a sense of connection to spirituality and relationships, highlighting how SH isolates students from their social and academic communities. Participant 14

further emphasises that SH undermines emotional trust, fostering isolation and fear that disrupts affective engagement in academic and social spaces.

In line with behavioural engagement, which includes participation in academic activities, group work, and extra-curricular involvement, Participant 12 explicitly reports withdrawing from group work, homework, and classroom participation due to trauma caused by SH. This lack of engagement illustrates how harassment undermines collaborative and participatory learning. Participant 9 recounts how fear and guilt stemming from a coercive relationship led to poor academic performance and eventual disengagement from her studies. Participant 11 links SH trauma to diminished effort and interest in reading, reflecting the broader impact on behaviours critical to academic success.

Cognitive Engagement, defined as students' ability to focus, comprehend, and retain information, is evident in the descriptions of Participants 11 and 13, who report that memories of SH disrupt focus, comprehension, and retention, directly affecting their ability to learn and perform academically. Participant 13 explicitly links depressive symptoms, such as sleeplessness and loss of appetite, to impaired cognition, illustrating how trauma disrupts their academic output.

Participant 10 emphasises that ongoing emotional distress caused by SH distracts them during private study, affecting their intellectual engagement and productivity. The study's results reveal that various experiences of sexual harassment are detrimental to students' academic (affective, behavioural and cognitive) engagement and, consequently, to academic achievement.

The narratives above underscore the need for institutions to implement accessible counselling services and peer-support programmes to address trauma-related symptoms.

Establish confidential, non-retaliatory channels for reporting SH to reduce fear of stigma and reprisal. Deliver consent and bystander intervention training to foster a culture of respect and accountability. Provide academic support for students affected by SH, including flexible deadlines, counselling, and mentoring to help them re-engage.

Institutional and Structural Implications of SH

SH creates a hostile learning environment, rendering academic spaces unsafe for victims. This undermines the inclusivity and equity that HEIs seek to promote.

Institutional failures to address SH erode trust in the system, leaving victims reluctant to report incidents. Participants consistently reported slow or ineffective responses to complaints, discouraging others from seeking redress.

The cumulative effects of affective, behavioural, and cognitive disruptions lead to a downward academic spiral. Victims often experience poor grades, retaking courses, or extended study periods, as documented in several participant accounts.

While some strategies offer short-term relief, maladaptive coping can worsen trauma over time. Few students reported incidents to university authorities, often because of ineffective responses and a lack of accountability, so most sought informal support.

SH significantly affects academic engagement across the affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains. Emotionally, victims report anxiety, fear, frustration, and trauma, which lead to a loss of interest in academic and extracurricular activities. Affective engagement suffers, resulting in diminished emotional investment and reluctance to participate in academic life.

Behaviourally, SH prompts avoidance of classes, group activities, and even school attendance, contributing to academic withdrawal and reduced social interaction. Victims disengage from academic settings and show limited participation in group tasks and discussions.

Cognitively, SH-related emotional distress impairs memory, focus, comprehension, and critical thinking, leading to poor academic performance. Cognitive engagement, the mental effort students invest in learning, is severely disrupted, preventing deep engagement with academic material.

Consistent with prior findings (e.g., Konlan & Dangah, 2023), the study shows that the lack of comprehensive SH policies and weak institutional responses exacerbate trauma and discourage reporting, reinforcing cycles of silence and academic disengagement. These findings underscore the urgent need for robust institutional policies and support systems to address SH and mitigate its academic consequences.

Major Findings and Thematic Structure

Theme	Subthemes	Participants
Abuse of Power and Coercion	Threats to academic success, forced relationships, and manipulation.	Participant 5 accepted a relationship under duress to avoid project failure
Emotional and Cognitive Trauma	Depression, anxiety, memory loss, and academic detachment.	Participant 13 reported depressive symptoms affecting cognition and academic output
Fear, Silence, and Stigma	Non-disclosure, fear of retaliation, internalised blame	Participant 9 remained silent due to disbelief from family and fear of losing admission
Disruption of	Affective, behavioural, and cognitive disengagement.	Participant 11 could not focus on

Academic Engagement		studying due to recurring trauma memories
Isolation and Withdrawal	Avoidance of peers, poor participation, and loss of confidence.	Participant 12 avoided group work and had declining academic performance
Institutional Neglect	Delayed justice, lack of support structures, and policy gaps.	Participant 7 lost a year waiting for the university to assign a new supervisor

Analytical Framework

Academic Engagement (Interpretation of findings through the lens of the three academic engagement domains)

Engagement	Definition	Effect of SH
Affective Engagement	Emotional investment in learning (motivation, sense of belonging).	Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fear, and spiritual disconnection.
Behavioral Engagement	Participation in academic tasks, group work, and class attendance.	Class avoidance, reduced group participation, and withdrawal from studies.
Cognitive Engagement	Attention, effort in learning, and critical thinking.	Memory disruption, inability to concentrate, reduced comprehension.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that sexual harassment (SH) in Nigerian higher education institutions has pervasive and detrimental effects on students' academic engagement across the affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains.

Abuse of power and faculty coercion were recurring themes. Lecturers used their authority to pressure students into sexual relationships, often linking compliance to academic progression. This aligns with earlier research highlighting how power asymmetries in academic settings enable sexual exploitation (Adetunji, 2020; Ajuwon et al., 2011). Such coercion fostered fear and strategic silence, as students prioritised safety and academic survival over confrontation.

SH negatively affected affective engagement, with students reporting anxiety, depression, anger, and emotional detachment from academic life. These emotional consequences align with findings from Kamal & Tariq (2020), who noted that victims of SH in academic contexts often experience long-term psychological distress that undermines their academic motivation and sense of belonging.

Thirdly, behavioural disengagement was common. Many students avoided classes, skipped lectures, and disengaged from group activities,

consistent with previous studies that have shown a correlation between SH and withdrawal from academic participation (Fawole et al., 2002; Mamaru et al., 2015). Some students even dropped out or extended their studies due to repeated victimisation or to avoid harassers.

Cognitively, victims experienced difficulty concentrating, poor academic performance, and reduced cognitive functioning, consistent with the literature on trauma's effects on learning (Campbell et al., 2009; Sarpong & Osei-Tutu, 2014). Intrusive memories and emotional exhaustion impaired students' ability to engage meaningfully with academic tasks.

Moreover, institutional responses were described as inadequate and unsupportive. Many students avoided reporting due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, or procedural delays. This aligns with previous critiques of institutional cultures that prioritise reputation over survivor protection (Bennet, 2009; Nwaduru, 2020). The absence of clear, confidential, and responsive grievance systems further exacerbated victims' sense of vulnerability.

Lastly, students used various coping strategies, including emotional suppression, seeking social support, prayer, and denial. These strategies align with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Theory of coping, which holds that individuals manage stress through both emotion-focused and avoidance strategies.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment severely undermines all aspects of students' academic engagement. The psychological toll of SH includes trauma symptoms such as depression, anxiety, fear, and isolation. The academic toll manifests as disengagement, low performance, and an increased risk of dropout. Institutional failures, such as ineffective reporting systems and a lack of accountability, reinforce silence and perpetuate abuse.

Recommendation

- Implementation of trauma-informed counselling services
- Establishment of anonymous, safe reporting mechanisms
- Reform of sexual harassment policies and the enforcement of accountability
- Provision of academic accommodations for sexual harassment survivors.

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Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author, Dorothy Ebere Adimora, due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The data are not publicly accessible because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Our policy is to share data on request.

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