

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AS A PREDICTOR OF HEALTH RISK BEHAVIOURS AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN IBADAN, NIGERIA

Extended Abstract

Introduction

An adolescent as defined by WHO is an individual between the ages of 10-19 years undergoing transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescents comprise over 1/5 of the world's population, 4 out of 5 of which are in developing countries and about 22% of Nigeria's population (WHO, 2013; NDHS 2013). Adolescence is characterised with a desire to develop relationships with peers, this friendship pattern overtime graduates from being homogenous to being heterogeneous and then to more intimate relationships (Connolly and McIsaac, 2011).

Adolescence is characterised as a stage involving higher exposure to risks. Researchers have documented that initiation into romantic and sexual relationships normally occurs during this stage of development (Carmago, Giacomozzi, Wachelke and Aquiar, 2007). Romantic relationships are a hallmark of adolescence. By late adolescence, over 70% of adolescents would have been involved in at least one romantic relationship (Furman, Low and Ho, 2009) and they rely primarily on their romantic partner rather than their peer group for support. Romance has also been found to be at the fore front of adolescents' mind; 34% of girls and 25% of boys attribute their strong emotions to romantic relationships and reported to spend between five and eight hours each week thinking about actual or potential romantic partners. (Kutler and La Greca, 2004).

Furman and Collins (2007) defined romantic relationship as mutually agreed on-going voluntary and deliberate interactions; in comparison to most other peer relationships, a romantic relationship has a distinct intensity, which is usually characterised by expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behaviour. These relationships become more common and last longer as adolescents move from early to late adolescence and it becomes the primary source of support to individuals.

Against the assumption that romantic relationships during adolescence are too trivial to have any major significance or impact on an adolescent's life (Furman and Shaffer, 2003), positive experiences in these relationships, such as receiving support and affection, contribute to healthy self-esteem and promote communication and conflict management skills. It contributes to adolescents growing sense of who they are and what they believe in, it helps to improve self-worth, self-esteem and level of acceptance or popularity amidst peers. However, the scene of a romantic relationship also increases the possibility of an adolescent getting involved in health risk behaviours such as early sexual initiation, alcohol and drug use, exposure to violence (Rector, Johnson, Noyes and Martin, 2003).

As recognised by Centre for Disease Control, the six major health risk behaviours that adolescents are involved in includes alcohol and drug use, injuries and violence, tobacco use, unhealthy dietary behaviours, physical inactivity and sexual behaviours that contribute to unplanned pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (CDC, 2009). These have been found to be more pronounced in romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships, while socially acceptable afford adolescents opportunities to engage in sexual activity and may even motivate adolescents to become sexually active. Prior researches have suggested that there is a significant association between dating and sexual activity (Cooksey, Mott and Neubauer, 2002). It has been reported that adolescents first sexual experience usually occurs in a romantic relationship (Collins, Welsh and Furman, 2009) and most sexually active adolescents report that they first had sexual intercourse in a steady, serious relationship (Martinez, Copen and Abma, 2011). This early sexual initiation exposes adolescents to risks of having multiple sexualpartners or having sexualintercourse under the influenceof drugs or alcohol.According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2011), 6% of adolescents reported that they had sexual intercourse before age 13, 34% were currently sexually active within a romantic relationship and 40% of these sexually active adolescents did not use condom during the last intercourse they had (CDC, 2012).

The major focus of this study was to determine the prevalence of sexual intercourse and alcohol consumption among adolescents, to determine the frequency of romantic relationships among

adolescents and to determine the association between these health risk behaviors and involvement in romantic relationships among adolescents.

Methodology

Study area

The study was carried out in Ibadan North Local Government Area (LGA). Ibadan North is one of the five LGA in Ibadan municipality. Ibadan North Local Government Area is made up of 10 wards, it is one of the most developed areas of the state, the state secretariat and government house can be found within this Local Government Area. There are 36 public schools and over 50 private schools within this ward.

Study methods

The study was a cross-sectional study and utilized quantitative method. Data was obtained through a semi-structured questionnaire, 111 adolescents aged 10 – 19 participated in the study.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed through SPSS; Logistic regression was used to test the association between the outcome measures and the independent variables. A romantic relationship was measured by a single question: “*are you in a relationship?*” Alcohol consumption and involvement in sexual intercourse were also measured by single questions. For analytical purposes, responses to these questions were dichotomized into yes and no.

Results

Valid responses were obtained from 111 respondents. The mean age of the respondents in this study was 15.5 (0.13) years. About 50.5% of the respondents were females. More than half of the respondents (58.6%) grew up in monogamous families and 17.1% have a room to themselves. Almost 80% lived with both parents.

One quarter of the adolescents (25.9%) had taken alcohol (more than just a few sips), more than half (51%) of those who had taken alcohol started between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age. About 8.1% binge drink.

About 11.7% of the adolescents in this study had ever had sexual intercourse, 76.9% initiated sexual intercourse with a boy/girl friend, 61.5% did not use condom during their last sexual intercourse. About 55% of the adolescents are involved in a romantic relationship, 58.3% of them were females.

The logistic regression model showed that adolescents with no romantic relationships were twice less likely to have sexual intercourse as compared to their peers involved in romantic relationships ($p=0.21$). Those without romantic relationships were 2.8 times less likely to have taken alcohol than their peers who were involved in romantic relationships ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion

Romantic relationship is common among adolescents and found to be associated with having sexual intercourse among adolescents, and consuming alcohol. Romantic relationships are integral parts of adolescent development, they learn social skills and gain emotional stability, it is therefore important, in the light of the risk of exposure to risky behaviors, to teach adolescents basic skills that will help them in making informed decisions.