

## A Critical Examination of the Impact of Religious Teaching on Sexual Behaviour Among Undergraduates in Delta State of Nigeria

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*Abstract— This study examines the influence of religious teaching on sexual behaviour among university students in Delta State, Nigeria. With rising concerns about premarital sex, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and transactional relationships on campuses, this research investigates whether religious teachings continue to shape students' sexual conduct in contemporary university settings. The study focused on three institutions: Delta State University (DELSU), Federal University of Petroleum Resources (FUPRE), and Novena University Ogume (NUO). Using a qualitative method, data were collected through interviews with campus fellowship leaders and students, supplemented by academic literature review. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and responses were analysed thematically, with strict adherence to ethical standards including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Findings reveal that religious teaching continue to influence students' moral outlook by promoting abstinence, self-discipline, and respect for relationships; however, a significant gap exists between belief and practice. Several factors undermine the effectiveness of religious guidance, including peer pressure, digital media influence, economic hardship, and inconsistent role modelling from religious leaders. Campus fellowships nonetheless serve as important spaces for moral guidance through mentorship, open discussions, and special programmes that emphasise responsible behaviour. The study concludes that while religious teachings impact students' sexual behaviour, the degree of influence varies considerably among individuals based on social and environmental factors. Recommendations include adopting more student-centred approaches, integrating technology and social media in religious education, providing economic and emotional support, and maintaining consistency in religious leadership to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of moral teachings in guiding students' sexual conduct.*

**Keywords:** Religious Teaching; Sexual Behaviour; University Students; Delta State; Nigeria.

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion remains one of the strongest forces shaping social life in Nigeria. It provides moral direction, cultural identity, and behavioural codes that influence how individuals relate with one another in society (Ottuh, Omosor & Abamwa, 2023). Among university students, sexual behaviour has become one of the most sensitive and widely debated issues. Rising cases of premarital sex, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and transactional relationships have raised concerns about the ability of religious teaching to regulate sexual conduct in modern times (Okonofua, 2018). This tension is particularly visible on campuses, where young people are at the stage of self-discovery but are also exposed to peer influence, media pressure, and economic challenges. The core of the problem lies in the contradiction between belief and behaviour. Students in universities across Delta state typically identify with a faith tradition; Christianity, Islam, or African Traditional Religion. They are consistently exposed to teaching that emphasise abstinence, faithfulness, and self-discipline. Yet there is a noticeable gap between these teachings and actual behaviour. Many Students who attend religious gatherings and fellowship programmes often struggle with sexual practices that contradict their professed faith, creating what Gwamna (2010) describes as a "double life" where belief and practice do not align. This reality raises a critical question: why do students who claim to be religious continue to engage in sexual behaviours that conflict with their teachings?

The significance of addressing this question cannot be overstated. Students' sexual choices affect not only their moral identity but also their physical health, academic progress, and future stability. Religion, as Uka (2015) points out, remains one of the strongest moral forces in Nigeria, but its effectiveness depends on how its values are communicated and practised in everyday life. By examining how religious teaching influence the sexual behaviour of students in universities across Delta State, this study provides insights relevant to fellowship leaders, chaplaincies, parents, and policymakers concerned with student wellbeing. While existing research has examined religion and morality among Nigerian youths, most of these works have treated the subject in general terms without paying adequate attention to university students in Delta State (Ekpenyong & Isiramen, 2016). Others have focused narrowly on health aspects of student sexuality, leaving the role of religion underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing directly on how religious teaching, particularly those communicated through campus fellowships and religious organisations shape the sexual decisions of students in Delta State. By engaging students and fellowship leaders in DELSU, FUPRE, and NUO, and combining their perspectives with existing literature, this study shows a clearer picture of where religion succeeds, where it struggles, and how its influence can be made more effective in guiding sexual behaviour.

## **UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

Sexual behaviour refers to the various ways individuals express their sexual feelings, attitudes, and practices. Among undergraduate students, it encompasses a wide range of actions, from abstinence and emotional intimacy to premarital sex, transactional relationships, and digital expressions such as sexting or consumption of pornography. In itself, sexual behaviour is not inherently negative or positive; its moral value depends on the context, intention, and conformity with social and religious standards. Within the Nigerian university environment, religious teachings generally classify sexual behaviour outside marriage as morally inappropriate, while sexual abstinence, chastity, and self-discipline are regarded as positive traits that reflect discipline and respect for divine and social values.

In universities across Delta State, the forms of sexual behaviour commonly observed among undergraduates include romantic dating that often leads to premarital sex, transactional sex motivated by economic needs, cohabitation among off-campus students, and exposure to sexually explicit media content. There are also cases of emotional relationships that remain non-sexual, which are often influenced by strong religious convictions or personal discipline. Studies and interviews in this research revealed that although most students acknowledge the moral expectations of their faith traditions, many still engage in sexual activities due to peer pressure, financial hardship, and the influence of social media. Thus, sexual behaviour among students reflects a complex mix of belief, temptation, experimentation, and environmental pressure. For religious teachings to remain effective, they must therefore move beyond condemnation and focus on shaping healthy attitudes, moral awareness, and emotional maturity among undergraduates.

## **CONCEPTS OF RELIGIOUS TEACHING ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR**

Religious teaching plays a central role in shaping perceptions and practices of sexuality in Nigerian society. For students in tertiary institutions, these teachings often serve as moral boundaries within which issues of sexual conduct are judged. Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) all emphasize sexual morality, although with variations in interpretation and enforcement. In spite of all these teachings, evidence from universities in Delta State shows that there remains a gap between the ideals promoted by religion and the lived realities of students' sexual behaviour.

In Christianity, sexual relations are regarded as a sacred gift from God, divinely ordained to find full expression exclusively within the covenant of marriage. Scripture presents a clear moral framework regarding human sexuality, with numerous passages

explicitly condemning sexual activity outside marriage. 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 instructs believers to "Flee from sexual immorality that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit," while Hebrews 13:4 affirms that "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Adewale & Oyekan, 2022). This biblical perspective emphasises that sexuality is not merely a physical act but carries profound spiritual significance. Religious organisations on university campuses actively reinforce these teachings through various ministry approaches. Campus fellowships at institutions like Delta State University (DELSU) and Novena University implement targeted programmes that promote sexual purity as a spiritual discipline. A notable example is their distinctive approach to Valentine's Day celebrations, where "love feasts" are organised as spiritual alternatives to secular romantic activities. These events deliberately reframe the occasion through biblical perspectives like 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, which states: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God." Through such initiatives, religious communities attempt to translate scriptural principles into practical guidance that addresses the contemporary challenges students face regarding relationships and sexuality.

In Islam, sexual morality is governed by strict ethical principles, with a central prohibition against zina. This is an Arabic term encompassing all forms of illicit sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage. The concept of zina extends beyond physical acts to include immodest behaviour and situations that might lead to temptation. The Quran forbids such conduct in Surah Al-Isra (17:32): "And do not come near to adultery. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way." This verse emphasises not merely avoiding the act itself but maintaining distance from circumstances that could lead to it. Similarly, Surah An-Nur (24:2) outlines severe consequences for those who engage in zina, thereby highlighting its gravity as a moral transgression.

Islamic teaching frame sexuality as a divine blessing to be experienced exclusively within the context of "nikah" which is marriage. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have advised young Muslims: "O young people! Whoever among you can marry, should marry, because it helps him lower his gaze and guard his modesty" (Sahih Al-Bukhari). This hadith forms the foundation for how Islamic student associations across universities in Delta State approach sexual ethics. These organisations regularly conduct awareness campaigns and educational forums where verses like Surah Al-Mu'minun (23:5-7) are discussed: "And they who guard their private parts except from their wives... for indeed, they will not be blamed." Through such programmes, James (2024) posits that, Muslim students are encouraged to practise "sabr", that is patience) and "taqwa" which is translated as God-consciousness, a spiritual disciplines for maintaining chastity before marriage. Many of these initiatives emphasise early

marriage as a religiously sanctioned solution for those struggling with sexual desires, while simultaneously promoting academic excellence and moral integrity as complementary aspects of a faithful Muslim identity.

African Traditional Religion (ATR) also upholds strong moral values concerning sexuality, though often rooted in cultural taboos and communal expectations. In many Delta communities, sexual misconduct such as adultery, incest, or premarital pregnancy was traditionally met with sanctions ranging from ostracism to ritual cleansing (Idowu, 1973). Virginity before marriage was prized as a sign of honour to the family, and sexual immorality was believed to bring misfortune not only to the individual but to the wider community. These traditional views, while less dominant among students today, still influence some family teachings and shape how certain campus fellowships contextualise their messages of sexual purity within African cultural identity.

Studies within Delta State provide valuable insights into how religious teaching influence student sexual behaviour, revealing complex interactions between faith principles and real-world pressures. Iwelu and Ossai's (2024) research across tertiary institutions in Delta State uncovered that despite religious awareness, many students engage in risky sexual practices. During interviews with students at DELSU, one 22-year-old female student candidly explained: "We hear these teaching every Sunday and at fellowship, but when you're alone with your boyfriend and he's pressuring you, or when your roommates make you feel childish for being a virgin, all those Bible verses sometimes feel very far away." This sentiment was echoed by several respondents who described the challenge of maintaining religious principles amid intense peer influence in our institutions. Economic factors emerged as particularly significant in shaping sexual decisions. A 24-year-old male student at FUPRE acknowledged: "Some of us come from poor backgrounds. When you see your classmates wearing designer clothes and using expensive phones, the temptation to find a 'sponsor' or sugar mummy becomes real. You know it's against what the mosque teaches, but poverty can make you rethink everything." This economic dimension was especially pronounced among female students, with one NUO undergraduate explaining that "the pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle makes some girls enter relationships they wouldn't otherwise consider." Social media influence was repeatedly mentioned as undermining religious teaching. A fellowship leader at Novena University observed: "Today's students are constantly exposed to content that normalises casual sex. They follow influencers who promote a lifestyle completely opposite to what religion teaches. Our weekly meetings compete with thousands of TikTok videos glorifying hookup culture." Students confirmed this reality, with one stating that "what we consume online shapes our thoughts more than what we hear in church."

Urien's (2024) research on parenting styles revealed additional dimensions to this complex picture. During focus group discussions, female students from strict religious

homes reported feeling more equipped to resist sexual pressure. As a participant in DELSU explained, "My parents did not just quote Bible verses; they modelled the values and explained why they mattered. They created a safe space where I could ask questions about sexuality without feeling judged." In contrast, students from religiously nominal homes, where parents emphasised religious affiliation without consistent moral guidance, described greater difficulty integrating faith principles into their sexual decisions. These findings collectively highlight how religious teachings, while influential, operate within a complex ecosystem of social, economic, and familial factors that ultimately shape students' sexual behaviour on Delta State campuses.

At the secondary school level, which indirectly feeds into the university system, Akhobai et al. (2024) studied students in Edo and Delta States and found that religious inclination alone did not significantly determine sexual behaviour. Instead, personal attitudes played a stronger role. This suggests that for religious teachings to be effective among undergraduates, they must move beyond mere identity, that is Christian, Muslim, or ATR and focus on shaping deep personal convictions and attitudes. Altogether, these perspectives reveal that religious teachings whether Christian, Islamic, or traditional will continue to set moral expectations for sexual behaviour among students in Delta State. However, the effectiveness of these teachings is moderated by several factors, including family upbringing, peer influence, economic challenges, and personal attitudes. The evidence points to a complex reality where students respect religious ideals in theory but often struggle in practice, leading to a tension between belief and behaviour.

## **INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS TEACHING ON STUDENTS SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR**

Religious teachings have a significant impact on how students in Nigerian universities, particularly in Delta State, view and practise sexuality. These teachings, drawn mainly from Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, set moral boundaries that either regulate or attempt to regulate students' sexual behaviour. For many Christian students, the Bible is a strong reference point that guides them toward abstinence until marriage, discourages premarital sex, and condemns practices such as homosexuality, pornography, and prostitution (Okon, 2019). Leaders of campus fellowships at Delta State University (DELSU) in Abraka often emphasise these teachings during weekly gatherings, where messages of sexual purity are blended with practical advice on coping with peer pressure and avoiding risky behaviours. At the Federal University of Petroleum Resources (FUPRE), similar influences are observed. Here, fellowship leaders organise small group discussions and counselling sessions during festive periods like Valentine's Day, an occasion often associated with heightened sexual activity among students. These forums are designed to counteract the

narrative of casual sex by promoting abstinence and emphasising God's design for sexuality within marriage. Such interventions have shaped student perceptions, as some students openly admitted that without these teachings, they would have succumbed to peer influences that encourage "hook-up culture" or transactional relationships, which are increasingly common on Nigerian campuses (Eze, 2021). At Novena University (NUO), the role of religious teachings is also evident, but the impact varies depending on students' level of commitment. Interviews with students revealed that while some take the church's stance on abstinence seriously, others engage in sexual activities but justify those using personal interpretations of religious texts, or by drawing a line between faith and social life. This tension highlights that religious teachings may not entirely prevent premarital sex but can influence the way students rationalise or conceal such behaviour (Nwachukwu & Akani, 2022).

Islamic teachings also contribute significantly to regulating sexual conduct. The Quran prohibits zina and encourages modesty and chastity (Quran 17:32). Muslim student associations across Delta State campuses often reinforce these values by organising public lectures and modesty campaigns, reminding students that sexual misconduct not only has spiritual consequences but also social and health implications. Such practices have contributed to a culture where visibly committed Muslim students adopt stricter sexual behaviours, such as avoiding opposite-sex relationships unless marriage is intended.

African Traditional Religion (ATR), though less dominant on campuses, also plays a role in shaping students' views. Within Delta State communities, ATR emphasises the sacredness of sexuality and links sexual immorality to taboos that could attract ancestral wrath or community sanctions (Idowu, 1973). For instance, among the Urhobo and Isoko peoples, traditions strongly discourage premarital pregnancy, which could lead to public shame and ritual cleansing (Okpevra, 2018). Some students who still identify with these traditional values admitted that such beliefs influence their choices, particularly in refraining from casual sex for fear of spiritual consequences. Despite these positive influences, there are contradictions between religious teachings and contemporary student life. Many students face the dilemma of balancing their faith with exposure to modern social practices, such as internet pornography, secular music, and peer-driven sexual experimentation (Akinyemi, 2022). While some students adjust their behaviour to align with religious expectations, others compartmentalise their lives, engaging in sexual activities privately while maintaining public adherence to religious morality.

In sum, religious teachings significantly influence student sexual behaviour in universities in Delta State. They provide moral frameworks that encourage abstinence, shape attitudes towards relationships, and discourage risky sexual practices. However,

their impact is not uniform; rather, it is mediated by the student's personal commitment, peer influence, and the broader campus culture.

## **CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN PRACTICING RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS ON SEXUALITY**

While religious teachings play an influential role in shaping the sexual behaviour among University students in Delta State, the reality on the ground shows that many students experience significant challenges in putting these teachings into practice. The campus environment is highly dynamic and exposes students to social trends, peer pressure, and external influences that sometimes run contrary to the moral instructions given by their religious traditions (Nwachukwu & Akani, 2022). One major challenge is peer influence, which is especially strong in residential hostels and off-campus lodges. Students who attempt to live by religious teachings often face ridicule from peers who promote liberal sexual attitudes. In DELSU, for example, some students confessed that while they attend fellowship activities and agree with messages of abstinence, they feel pressured by roommates or friends to participate in relationships that involve premarital sex. This contradiction creates a situation where students maintain public conformity to religious morality but engage in hidden sexual activities. Another contradiction is found in the celebration of events like Valentine's Day, which has become a central part of campus social life. While some fellowships organise "love feasts" that promote abstinence and godly relationships, many students still use the day as an opportunity for sexual experimentation. This shows the tension between religious ideals and the practical realities of student relationships.

Economic challenges also create contradictions. Some students, especially female undergraduates, admit that financial hardship pushes them into transactional relationships despite being aware of religious warnings against such practices (Urien, 2024). At Novena University, which is a private institution with relatively higher fees, some students explained that while they agree with religious teachings, the pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle often leads to compromising relationships with older men, popularly called "sugar daddies". This highlights the gap between belief and practice when survival or financial comfort is at stake.

Exposure to digital media is another challenge. With the rise of smartphones and internet accessibility, pornography and sexually explicit content are easily available to students. Akinyemi (2022) notes that digital media increasingly normalises sexual experimentation among Nigerian youths. This reality makes it difficult for students to fully comply with religious teachings on sexual purity, as private consumption of such content often contradicts their public identity as "born-again" or religiously observant individuals. Finally, there are contradictions arising from African Traditional Religious



values. While ATR generally discourages premarital pregnancy and adultery, some cultural practices such as early marriage or the use of sexuality in fertility rituals do not align neatly with Christian or Islamic moral frameworks (Okpevra, 2018). For students who still identify with traditional values, there can be confusion about which moral code to follow, especially when their community expectations differ from campus fellowship teachings.

In summary, the challenges in practising religious teachings on sexuality among students in Delta State are deeply rooted in peer pressure, modern campus culture, financial pressures, media influence, and the clash of multiple religious and cultural frameworks. These contradictions reveal that while religious teachings are strong in theory, their application in the daily life of students is often compromised by social realities.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has examined the relationship between religious teachings and the sexual behaviour of university students in Delta State, with particular focus on DELSU, FUPRE, and Novena University. The discussions have shown that religion whether Christianity, Islam, or African Traditional Religion plays an important role in shaping students' sexual values. Through fellowships, teachings, and cultural taboos, students are consistently reminded of the need to uphold chastity, avoid premarital sex, and respect moral boundaries. However, the study also revealed that despite the strong presence of religious teachings, many students struggle to live up to these ideals. Peer pressure, financial challenges, exposure to digital media, and the influence of campus social life create contradictions that make it difficult for students to fully practise what they are taught. While some students find strength in their religious beliefs and report positive outcomes such as focus in academics and moral discipline, others compartmentalise their lives, conforming publicly while privately engaging in sexual behaviours that conflict to their faith

In conclusion, religious teachings remain relevant and influential in guiding students' sexual behaviour, but their effectiveness is shaped by the context of student life. The contradictions observed point to the fact that moral instruction alone is not enough; it must be reinforced by supportive environments, practical guidance, and stronger mentorship for students navigating the challenges of university life.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Campus Fellowships should strengthen mentorship by pairing younger students with older, disciplined ones who can guide them in handling peer pressure and making responsible choices, to ensure the success of mentorship initiatives, those who serve as mentors must themselves receive proper guidance and training. Fellowship leaders, chaplaincy workers, and peer mentors should be mentored

through structured programmes organised by university chaplaincies, religious education units, or experienced clergy. These sessions should focus on counselling techniques, youth psychology, communication skills, and moral modelling. By being adequately mentored, these leaders will be better equipped to guide students with empathy, understanding, and consistency. This “mentor-the-mentors” approach will help sustain a culture of responsible sexuality and ensure that mentorship goes beyond advice-giving to genuine moral and emotional support.

2. Religious leaders need to contextualise teachings, addressing contemporary issues like digital pornography, "hook-up culture", and transactional relationships in a language that students understand.
3. Universities should collaborate with fellowships to create moral and social support systems such as counselling units, workshops, and awareness campaigns that complement religious teachings with professional guidance.
4. Students should be encouraged to balance faith and reality, recognising that religious teachings are not only spiritual instructions but also practical principles that protect emotional, academic, and health wellbeing.
5. Parents and guardians should maintain open communication with their children in universities, reinforcing at home the values that fellowships and religious institutions promote on campus.

In essence, while challenges exist, religious teachings continue to provide a moral compass for students in Delta State institutions. The task ahead is to bridge the gap between belief and practice, ensuring that the values students are taught can be realistically lived out in the face of modern campus pressures.

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Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Sex	Status / Role	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Faith	22	Female	Student, Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka	DELSU Campus, Abraka	12 April 2024
Emmanuel	24	Male	Student, Federal University of Petroleum Resources Effurun (FUPRE), Effurun	FUPRE Campus, Effurun	14 April 2024
Blessing	21	Female	Student, Novena University, Ogume	Novena University	16 April 2024

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Status / Role</b>	<b>Place of Interview</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
Mr Victor	28	Male	Fellowship Novena University	Leader, Novena University Campus, Ogume	18 April 2024
Anonymous Muslim Student Leader	25	Male	Student Students' (FUPRE)	Leader, Muslim Association FUPRE Campus, Effurun	22 April 2024
Female Students (Focus Group)	19– 23	Female	Group of Students, State University	Delta DELSU Campus, Abraka	20 April 2024