

Full-Length Research Article

Exploring Factors Influencing Cohabitation among Osun State University Students, Nigeria: Implications for Family Demography and Sociological Practices

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Summary: Cohabitation represents a significant shift in family structures as they undergo demographic and economic transitions. This practice is a common phenomenon among Nigerian university undergraduates. Therefore, this study examined the demographic factors that determine cohabitation practices among undergraduates in Osun State, Nigeria. Guided by the individualization theory, the research design adopted was a survey, and questionnaire and in-depth interview instruments were used to collect the data. A sample of 400 respondents was included in the quantitative analysis, while 18 participants were included in the qualitative aspects of the analysis. Descriptive (frequency and percentages) and bivariate (chi-square test and correlation) were used to analyze the quantitative data, while the qualitative data were content analyzed. The findings revealed that a majority of the respondents have high (45.3%) knowledge of cohabitation practice, and pre-marital cohabitation (56.5%) is one of the major dimensions of cohabitation reported by the respondents. Determining factors adduced for engaging in cohabitation were the urge to be a 'baby mama' (77.5%) and economic benefits (74.5%); while 73.0% of them have a regular pattern of practicing cohabitation. About 42.0% of them have good perception, and less than 55% have a negative attitude towards cohabitation. A significant age difference in knowledge of cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 96.96$, $p < 0.01$) and knowledge of cohabitation was positively correlated with attitude ($r = 0.611$, $p < 0.01$) and perception ($r = 0.528$, $p < 0.01$) among the respondents. Similarly, perception of cohabitation was positively correlated with attitude towards cohabitation ($r = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$). The implication of this finding is that high knowledge will lead to high perception and positive attitude towards disengaging from cohabitation practices. Adolescents and youths should be enlightened about the negative consequences of cohabitation relationships that may jeopardize their future endeavours.

Keywords: Cohabitation, dimensions, knowledge, pattern, perception, university students

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INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation refers to a living arrangement where two individuals of opposite sex reside together and maintain an intimate relationship without being legally married (Gold, 2012; Foran *et al.*, 2022; Lamela *et al.*, 2015). Marriage in Nigeria is customarily arranged through an extended process that includes ceremonies and negotiations. Marriage is a sign of social acceptance in traditional society, indicating one's position of maturity and responsibility (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2014; Obarisiagbon, 2023; Avogo *et al.*, 2019). There are spiritual, legal, social, economic, and family implications to marriage. Couples who live together without having a legally recognised marriage ceremony are viewed as having disregarded long-standing norms of culture. Cohabitation was uncommon in traditional society, and those who did so were looked down upon until they officially married. Various factors, including education, religion, urbanisation, ethnicity, generation, and marriage laws, are considered when establishing a legal marriage

among Nigerian couples (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2014; Avogo *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2013;). Youth in African countries such as in Nigeria and Kenya are confronted with challenging decisions: either to embrace and uphold customary marriage customs, or to embrace modern values, mores, and lifestyles, or even to find a means of reconciling the two (Nungo *et al.*, 2025; Nii-Amoo Dodoo *et al.*, 2006; Avogo *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2013). A paradigm shift in marriage and family life has occurred in recent decades. Examples include the transition from extended to nuclear households, parent-arranged marriages to individual mate selection, large to small family sizes, and rural to urban places of residence (Alebiosu, 2020). In the 21st century, many young people choose to live together without getting married instead of delaying marriage. Adults employed in metropolitan settings also practiced cohabitation. According to the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), about 2.3% of respondents who were female, and 2.7% of respondents who were male reported they were

cohabiting (NDHS, 2018). These statistics show a rise in cohabitation compared to a 2008 NDHS survey that found 1.0% of men and 0.5% of women lived together (NDHS, 2018; NDHS, 2008).

Social scientists such as demographers and sociologists treat cohabitation as a distinct occurrence; not only has it displaced marriage, but also it has represented a structural change in family relationships (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2019; Duyilemi *et al.*, 2018; Scent *et al.*, 2019; Adeyera *et al.*, 2023; Odimegwu *et al.*, 2018). Although in the past, cohabitation before marriage was not viewed as the right thing to do, it is now sometimes seen as a “necessity,” since some people do it out of preparation for marriage and others do it out of convenience. For instance, in Nigerian cultural and traditional society, it is against the norms and values of the society to allow a young unmarried couple to live together, especially where they do not have any family affinity (Odimegwu *et al.*, 2018; Obarisiagbon, 2023; Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Muhinat, 2022; Obikeze *et al.*, 2018; Iyekolo, 2021). However, the rising prevalence of cohabitation in many developed countries has placed the phenomenon at the forefront of discussion and debate on family change. Contemporary cohabitation, which dates primarily from the 1960s and 1970s, has attracted much attention as a demographic and social innovation (Gold, 2012). Yet, cohabitation prior to marriage has been consistently associated with a poorer quality of marital communication, lower marital satisfaction and higher levels of domestic violence, even though cohabitation was an obscure practice, and seen as taboo throughout the 19th century until the 1970s (Duyilemi *et al.*, 2018; Scent *et al.*, 2019). Non-marital unions have become common, because the meaning of the family has been altered by individualistic social values which have progressively matured since the late 1940s (Kalu *et al.*, 2021; Aborisode, 2021). Notwithstanding, the field of family sociology and demography interests hinges on cohabitation as an informal co-residential union that is less well defined and documented than marriage, unlike its traditional marriage counterpart. The role of cohabitation in the modern family is the focus of demographical and sociological attention, in particular, how closely it resembles marriage or such premarital statuses as dating and formal engagement (Gold, 2012; Foran *et al.*, 2021). Cohabitation has been structured into a policy debate regarding legal provision for cohabiters, and creating a suitable platform for cohabiting unions that will aid them in building a firm union and rearing their children (Gold, 2012; Avogo *et al.*, 2019).

A change in family structure is, diplomatically a central and contentious subject in both developed (Britain, the United States, Europe and Australia) (Foran *et al.*, 2021; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2024) and developing nations (Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya) (Avogo *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2013). In Nigeria, the increase in cohabitation is one of the most significant shifts in family demographics of the past century and has become common among undergraduate students in Nigerian higher education institutions (Alebiosu, 2020). The increase in population of undergraduate students and the inability of the government to adequately provide the needed social infrastructures and funding of higher education in Nigeria has led to risky coping mechanisms among the students (Adeyera *et al.*, 2023; Odimegwu *et al.*, 2018; Obarisiagbon, 2023; Lawal *et al.*, 2018). The increase

in the number of undergraduate students and the inability of the school authorities to provide adequate hostel accommodation has led to an increase in cohabitation among the student population in Nigerian public universities (Adeyera *et al.*, 2023). Government policy on students' hostel accommodation, which encourages private developers, has created an inability of the institutions to build and expand new hostels for the student population, and this has forced students to look outside for accommodation (Alo, 2008). The majority of students who live together do not allow their parents to know about it. This therefore exposes the students to all forms of risk and harm as they continue to cohabit. Students who live with their partners are often faced with domestic violence and sexual exploitation by their partners, including by outsiders or individuals that they are not acquainted with (Adeoye *et al.*, 2012).

The constraint of hostel accommodation within the universities has led to a deviant form of cohabitation known as ‘campus marriage, or ‘couple’s life’ among students (Baranowska-Rataj, 2014; Shields-Dutton, 2016). This concept of ‘campus marriage or couples’ life’ among students explains how students of the opposite sex come to an agreement to live together and share things in common, without any traditional or legal authorization (Iyekolo, 2021; Kalu *et al.*, 2021). These forms of lifestyles over time in recent years have threatened the values, beliefs and sanctity of the institution of marriage and family. Cohabitation has inevitably come to stay with all its supposed positive and negative consequences; although similar to marriage, cohabitation has some distinct functions from marriage (Odimegwu *et al.*, 2018; Lawal *et al.*, 2021). The participants in a cohabitation setting are not immune from the various problems that besiege it, problems such as the sacrifice of the primary aim of being in school, an unwanted pregnancy, the use of contraceptives by female students, abortion, domestic violence, sharing of domestic chores, and the dangers inherent in such practices (Avogo *et al.*, 2019; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018). Frequently, Nigerian society frowns on unmarried adults cohabiting within the society, without paying adequate attention to young adults/adolescents who are in tertiary institutions living together in the same society (Ogunsola, 2004). Most tertiary institutions make laws to control indecent dressing among students but do not make any reference to cohabitation among them. Some of the consequences that are often associated with cohabitation include unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies, engaging in abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, mistrust of either partner, lack of privacy, poor academic performance, or a financial crisis involving one partner (Ogunsola, 2004). Conversely, the practice of cohabitation has serious health implications, more especially for females who are often at the receiving end of the dangers and consequences that come up in the aftermath of cohabitation. For instance, a female student may use incorrect contraceptive pills that can affect some of her vital organs, and if a pregnancy occurs, they are more likely to seek an abortion as a way to avoid discrimination and stigmatization (Amato *et al.*, 2007; Beck *et al.*, 2002). In addition, female students are more likely to visit ‘quack; doctors who are not licensed practitioners for abortions and other health related issues (Amato *et al.*, 2007). Some of the female students might be advised not to have another

abortion since they already experienced several, and this will lead to them giving birth to an unwanted, unplanned baby, which could mean the end of their academic pursuit. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore the factors that influences cohabitation practices among Nigerian undergraduate students in Okuku campus of Osun State University. The specific objectives were to: examine the knowledge of cohabitation, attitudes towards cohabitation, perceptions of cohabitation, types and dimensions of cohabitation, pattern of cohabitation, social problems associated with cohabitation, and factors associated with cohabitation, among students at Osun State University. These objectives formed the central base of this research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design: This exploratory study employed a survey research design, appropriate for its non-experimental nature. The approach facilitated the collection of opinions from a representative sample of the target population, enabling informed conclusions, inferences, and generalizations.

Study location: The study was conducted in Osun State, South-Western Nigeria, whose capital is Oshogbo. The state comprises three senatorial districts and 30 local government areas and hosts several tertiary institutions, including Osun State University, located in the semi-rural Okuku community. This area is primarily agrarian, with farming as the dominant occupation. The university operates six campuses—Oshogbo, Okuku, Ipetu-Ijesha, Ejigbo, Ikire, and Ifetedo. The Okuku campus was purposively selected due to its large student population and concentration of adolescents (15–19 years) and youths (18–30 years). It houses two faculties: Social Sciences, with four departments (Sociology, Political Science, Geography, and Economics) and an estimated 2,000 students; and Management Sciences, with five departments (Accounting, Banking and Finance, Business Administration, Human Resource Management, and Entrepreneurship), comprising approximately 3,500 students.

Data collection and study population: Data were gathered using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The study population consisted of students enrolled in both faculties. Simple random sampling was used to select 400 students from a sampling frame of 5,000 registered students, spanning Levels 100 to 400. The sample size determination followed Lemeshow *et al.*'s (1990) formula, which yielded a baseline of 384 and was expanded to 400 to enhance generalizability.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 18 participants for qualitative interviews. These participants were currently engaged in cohabitation practices and consented to participate voluntarily. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, non-probability sampling was deemed appropriate to ensure ethical engagement and informed consent. Ethical considerations were thoroughly observed during respondent selection across both faculties. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered and successfully retrieved by the principal investigator. This 100% response rate was achieved by encouraging immediate completion and collection at various student locations, including hostels

and campus facilities. Questionnaires were distributed daily to maximize coverage. In-depth interviews explored the patterns, dimensions, and lived experiences of cohabitation among student participants. The fieldwork was conducted between June and July 2017, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

Statistical analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and bivariate analyses (chi-square tests and correlations), executed with SPSS version 21. Descriptive analyses highlighted core data features, while bivariate techniques assessed associations and relationships among study variables. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed, translated verbatim, systematically sorted, and subjected to content analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample. Of the respondents, 46.2% were male and 53.8% were female. The majority (76.0%) fell within the 20–24 age group, followed by 13.5% aged 25–30 years and 10.5% aged 15–19 years. In terms of religious affiliation, most respondents identified as Christian (63.5%), while 30.5% were Muslim and 6.0% practiced Traditional African religions. Ethnically, the sample comprised 42.5% Igbo, 41.3% Yoruba, and 16.2% Hausa respondents. Regarding parental occupation, 69.0% of respondents reported that their fathers were employed, and 62.2% indicated their mothers were self-employed.

Knowledge of cohabitation practice among university students: Figure 1 illustrates respondents' levels of knowledge regarding cohabitation. The results indicate that a majority of respondents possess a high level of awareness and understanding of cohabitation practices.

Perspectives on Cohabitation Practices Among University Students: Figure 2 presents respondents' perspectives on cohabitation practices. A majority (73.8%) perceived cohabitation as “not married but living together,” indicating widespread recognition of its informal nature. Additionally, 12.0% viewed cohabitation as a “conjugal relationship supported by parents,” while 7.9% considered it a “long-term relationship that resembles marriage.” Only 6.3% interpreted cohabitation as equivalent to marriage between two people. These varied perspectives suggest diverse understandings of cohabitation among university students, shaped by cultural expectations, personal experiences, and social context.

Qualitative findings further revealed that participants gained their understanding of cohabitation through interactions with individuals in their community who were actively engaged in such relationships. In relation to this, one participant in the in-depth interview (IDI) sessions remarked that:

I do not know what a cohabitation relationship was until I got admission into the university. I see students – males and females staying together as couple...that is why they are called 'couple's life'. A lot of young people in this campus often engage in cohabitation

relationships. They believe that it is a way to draw a deeper intimate relationship between themselves that will secure marriage position for them after graduation. Often times, both male and female enjoy the cohabitation union since they mutually benefit from it (*Female student/20 years/IDI*).

Table 1.
Distribution of Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	Variables	N	%
Sex	Male	185	46.2
	Female	215	53.8
Age at last birthday	15 – 19 years	42	10.5
	20 – 24 years	304	76.0
	25 – 30 years	54	13.5
Religion	Christianity	254	63.5
	Islam	122	30.5
	Traditional religion	24	6.0
Ethnic Group	Yoruba	165	41.3
	Igbo	170	42.5
	Hausa	65	16.2
Marital Status	Single	376	94.0
	Married	24	6.0
Average Monthly Stipend	Less than ₦10,000	60	15.0
	₦10,000 – ₦14,000	205	51.2
	₦15,000 – ₦19,000	42	10.5
	₦20,000 and above	93	23.3
Level of study	100 level	102	25.4
	200 level	69	17.3
	300 level	160	40.0
	400 level	69	17.3
Years spent in the University	One year	108	27.0
	Two years	89	22.3
	Three years	134	33.4
	Four years	69	17.3
Family type	Monogamous	243	60.8
	Polygamous	157	39.2
Who do you live with?	Both parents	298	74.5
	Father only	18	4.5
	Mother only	78	19.5
	No response	5	1.5
Father level of education	No formal schooling	24	6.0
	Primary school	18	4.5
	Secondary school	22	5.5
	Tertiary school	318	79.5
	Vocational school	18	4.5
Mother level of education	No formal schooling	24	6.0
	Primary school	18	4.5
	Secondary school	5	14.5
	Tertiary school	228	57.0
	Vocational school	72	18.0
Father/Guardian occupational status	Employed	276	69.0
	Unemployed	24	6.0
	Self employed	100	25.0
Mother/Guardian occupational status	Employed	115	28.8
	Unemployed	36	9.0
	Self employed	249	62.2
Total		400	100

Respondents who expressed a strong preference for cohabitation relationships frequently encouraged their partners to participate in such arrangements. These relationships typically begin as temporary living situations, which gradually evolve into more permanent cohabitation. Over time, one partner often applies increasing pressure on the other to formalize the arrangement by moving in for the

duration of their university education. This dynamic was highlighted in one of the in-depth interview (IDI) sessions, which affirmed that:

*I got involved in cohabitation relationship in the university and I encouraged my partner to cohabit with me after some months we met. We stayed together temporary and much later as our intimate relationship was going deeper, I mounted pressure on her to stay with me permanently till we graduate from the university together. This is as a result that I want her to be very close to me and we can therefore be honest with each other throughout our stay in the university. I felt this type of cohabitation union is likely to lead us to a longer relationship that will end in future marriage when we have finished our studies (*Male student/19 years/IDI*).*

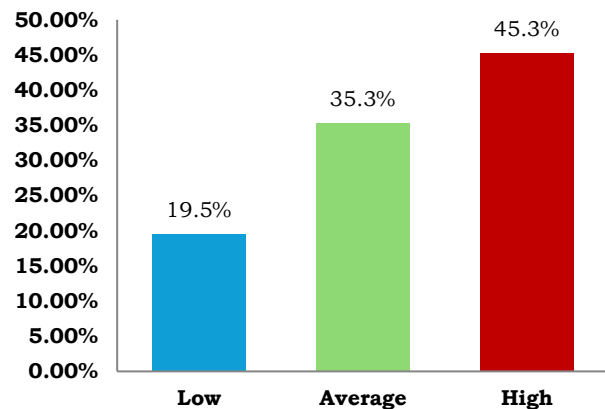


Figure 1:
Bar chart showing Respondents' Level of Knowledge of Cohabitation

Types of Cohabitation Relationships Among University Students: Figure 3 illustrates the various types of cohabitation relationships reported by respondents. A majority (60.5%) identified pre-marital cohabitation as the most prevalent form among university students. Other forms of cohabitation were cited less frequently, including alternative relationships (3.8%), limited cohabitation (8.5%), convenient cohabitation (13.5%), and substitute cohabitation (13.8%). These findings suggest that students primarily view cohabitation as a precursor to formal union rather than as an alternative or substitute to marriage. In addition, the qualitative data reinforced the findings from the quantitative analysis. This alignment was echoed by a female participant during one of the in-depth interview (IDI) sessions, who remarked:

*University students engage in cohabitation because they feel that it will end up in marriage. So, they cohabit to stay together and build an intimate relationship as the so-called 'husband' and 'wife'. Majorly, young people in the university cohabit to build a 'long-time picture' of a marital union for the future; but it does not always end in marriage. They often broke up after staying together in a year or less. There could be reasons for their break-up which they never disclose to anyone (*Female student/22 years/IDI*).*

Additionally, a male participant in the IDI sessions corroborated the preceding response, stating:

I engage in cohabitation, and I felt that I do not want my girlfriend to have another relationship with another boy in my university, as this will hurt me a lot. So, I discussed with her and she agreed to move in with me. I am more comfortable seeing her every day in my hostel room and I believe we will get married as soon as we are done with our studies. She benefits from me and I also benefit from her...it is a mutual understanding for both of us to stay together. However, we do not discuss our pre-marital affairs or cohabitation relationships with families and relatives because they will frown and be mad at us cohabiting together (Male student/20 years/IDI).

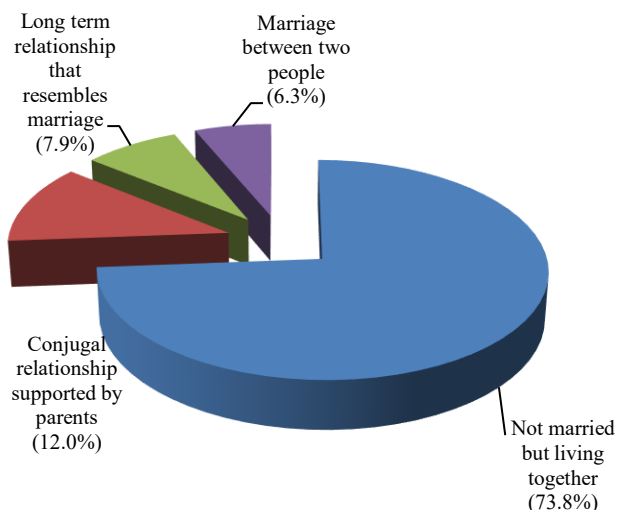


Figure 2: Respondents' perspectives on cohabitation practices

However, findings from the qualitative data further revealed that participants acquired their knowledge from other individuals who practice cohabitation within their community. Regarding this, one of the participants in the in-depth interview (IDI) sessions commented that:

I do not know what a cohabitation relationship was until I got admission into the university. I see students – males and females staying together as couple...that is why they are called 'couple's life'. A lot of young people in this campus often engage in cohabitation relationships. They believe that it is a way to draw a deeper intimate relationship between themselves that will secure marriage position for them after graduation. Often times, both male and female enjoy the cohabitation union since they mutually benefit from it (Female student/20 years/IDI).

Respondents who love cohabitation relationships encouraged their partners to be involved with them in such relationships. Such relationships often start with temporary cohabitation, and after a long time, one of the partners will keep mounting pressure on the other partner to move in with him or her throughout their stay in the university. One of the IDI sessions affirmed that:

I got involved in cohabitation relationship in the university and I encouraged my partner to cohabit with me after some months we met. We stayed together

temporary and much later as our intimate relationship was going deeper, I mounted pressure on her to stay with me permanently till we graduate from the university together. This is as a result that I want her to be very close to me and we can therefore be honest with each other throughout our stay in the university. I felt this type of cohabitation union is likely to lead us to a longer relationship that will end in future marriage when we have finished our studies (Male student/19 years/IDI).

Types of cohabitation relationships prevalent among university students: The figure 3 below showed types of cohabitation relationships prevalent among respondents. A majority (60.5%) of them mentioned that pre-marital cohabitation relationships is more prevalent among university students than other type of relationships (Alternative – 3.8%; Limited – 8.5%; Convenient – 13.5%; and Substitute – 13.8%).

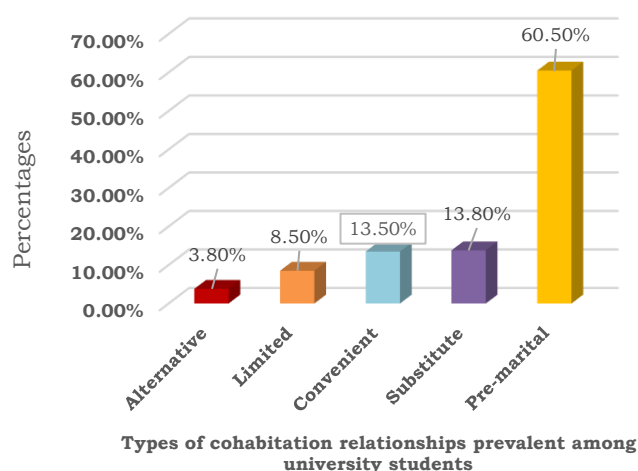


Figure 3. Bar chart showing the types of cohabitation relationships prevalent among university students.

Also, the findings from the qualitative data buttressed the quantitative data findings, and one of the female participants in the IDI sessions asserted that:

University students engage in cohabitation because they feel that it will end up in marriage. So, they cohabit to stay together and build an intimate relationship as the so-called 'husband' and 'wife'. Majorly, young people in the university cohabit to build a 'long-time picture' of a marital union for the future; but it does not always end in marriage. They often broke up after staying together in a year or less. There could be reasons for their break-up which they never disclose to anyone (Female student/22 years/IDI).

Also, another male participant in the IDI sessions corroborated the above response as below:

I engage in cohabitation and I felt that I do not want my girlfriend to have another relationship with another boy in my university, as this will hurt me a lot. So, I discussed with her and she agreed to move in with me. I am more comfortable seeing her every day in my hostel room and I believe we will get married as soon as we are done with our studies. She

benefits from me and I also benefit from her...it is a mutual understanding for both of us to stay together. However, we do not discuss our pre-marital affairs or cohabitation relationships with families and relatives because they will frown and be mad at us for cohabiting together (Male student/20 years/IDI).

Dimensions of cohabitation practices among university students: Respondents were examined on the dimensions of cohabitation practised, and Figure 4 below illustrates the dimensions of cohabitation relationships practiced among respondents. A majority (63.6%) of the respondents indicated that cohabitation practices among university students have a positive dimension compared with those (36.4%) with the notion of negative dimensions regarding cohabitation practices

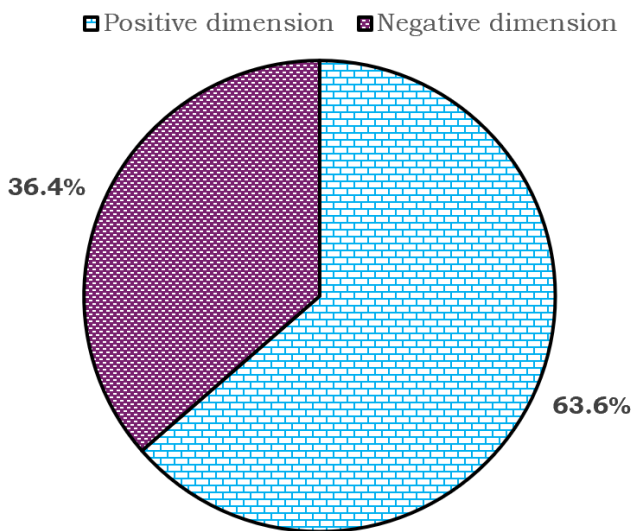


Figure 4. Pie-chart illustrating the dimensions of cohabitation practices among respondents

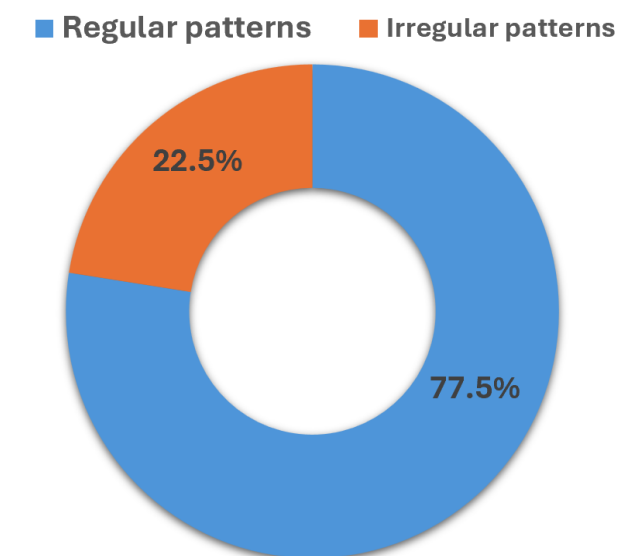


Figure 5 Pie-chart showing the patterns of cohabitation practices among respondents

Patterns of Cohabitation Practices: Figure 5 illustrates the reported patterns of cohabitation practices among respondents. A significant majority (77.5%) described their involvement in regular cohabitation arrangements, indicating consistency and stability in their living situations. In contrast, 22.5% reported irregular cohabitation practices, reflecting episodic or non-continuous patterns of living together. These findings suggest that cohabitation among university students is largely structured and sustained, though a notable proportion engage in more transient or informal arrangements.

Qualitative findings further illuminated the patterns of cohabitation practices among participants. One respondent in the IDI sessions remarked:

Cohabitation among young persons in the university is an individual choice...some people have started cohabiting from home before getting admission to the university. While others decided and chose on their own to cohabit when they get to school. So, I believe that it is an individual choice to cohabit or not (Male student/20 years/IDI).

Reasons for Patterns of Cohabitation Practices: Respondents identified several factors that influence the observed patterns of cohabitation among university students in contemporary society. As shown in Figure 6, the majority cited age as a primary reason shaping cohabitation practices. Additional factors included educational status (21.4%), employment status (10.4%), and marital status (5.9%), suggesting that demographic and socio-economic characteristics play a significant role in students' cohabitation behaviors.

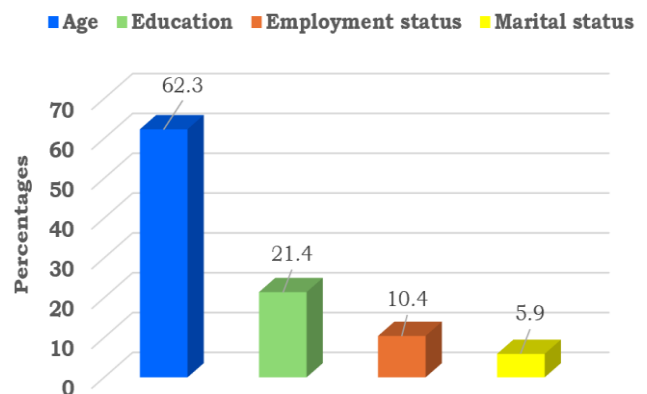


Figure 6 Reasons for the patterns of cohabitation practices among respondents

Also, the finding from the qualitative data buttressed the quantitative data finding above, and one of the female participants in the IDI sessions emphasised that:

One of the major reasons why young people in the university cohabit is as a result of low socio-economic reasons such as lack of financial capacity or non-employment levels. Based on these reasons mentioned above, several young persons in the university will agree to cohabit in order to share their responsibilities among themselves, and since they are already planning to extend their cohabitation relationships to marriage in the future (Female student/22 years/ IDI).

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents’ Attitude towards Cohabitation Relationships and Practices

Variables	Responses	N	%
Do you have approval attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students?	Yes	235	58.8
	No	141	35.2
	No response	24	6.0
Do you have disapproval attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students?	Yes	168	42.0
	No	208	52.0
	No response	24	6.0
Do you have defensive attitude towards your personal experience of your involvement in cohabitation relationships and practices?	Yes	163	40.8
	No	213	53.2
	No response	24	6.0
Based on your attitude and experience towards cohabitation relationships and practices, will you recommend the cohabitation practices to your age cohorts in the university?	Yes	151	37.8
	No	225	56.2
	No response	24	6.0
Respondents’ attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices	Positive attitude	168	42.0
	Negative attitude	232	58.0
Total		400	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2017.

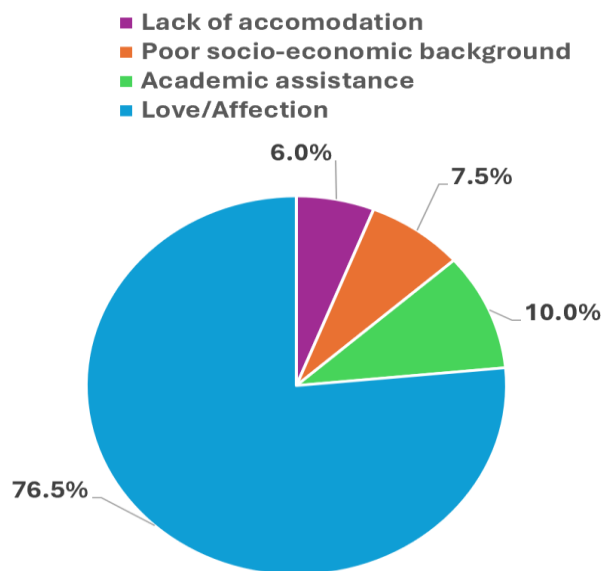
Table 3. Distribution of Respondents’ Perception of Cohabitation Relationships and Practices

		N	%
Perception of cohabitation relationships and practices as not a good path for future marriage	Low perception	265	66.3
	Moderate perception	117	29.2
	High perception	18	4.5
Perception of cohabitation relationships and practices as trial marriage	Low perception	352	88.0
	Moderate perception	30	7.5
	High perception	18	4.5
Do you perceive that cohabitation relationships and practices can lead to marriage?	Yes	211	52.8
	No	165	41.2
	No response	24	6.0
Total		400	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2017.

Attitudes toward cohabitation relationships and practices: Table 2 below shows the respondents’ attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. A majority of the respondents (58.8%) indicated a ‘Yes’ affirmation, having an approval attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. About 52.0% of respondents indicated a ‘No’ reply affirmation of a disapproval attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. Also, 53.2% of respondents indicated a ‘No’ reply as affirmation of a defensive attitude towards their personal experience of their involvement in cohabitation relationships and practices, and 56.2% of respondents indicated a ‘No’ reply as affirmation of their attitude and experiences towards cohabitation relationships and practices that they would not recommend cohabitation relationships and practices to their age cohorts in the university. A majority of the respondents display negative attitudes (58.0%) towards cohabitation relationships and practices (Table 2).

Perception of cohabitation relationship and practices: Also, table 3 below shows the respondents’ perception of cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. A majority, 66.3% of the respondents, reported a low perception of cohabitation relationships and practices as not a good path for future marriage. A majority (88.0%) of respondents mentioned a low perception of cohabitation relationships and practices as a trial marriage. Furthermore, 52.8% of respondents indicated a ‘Yes’ reply in affirmation, perceiving that cohabitation relationships and practices can lead to marriage.



Factors associated with cohabitation relationships and practices: Figure 7 showed the factors associated with cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. Factors such as lack of accommodation (6.0%), poor socio-economic background (7.5%), academic assistance (10.0%), and love/affection (76.5%) were mentioned by the respondents that are associated with cohabitation relationships and practices among university students.

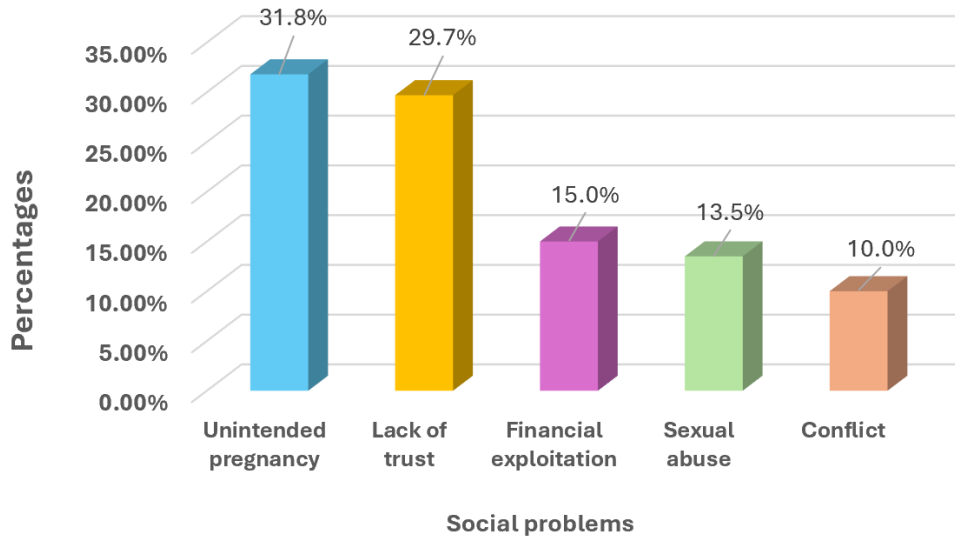


Figure 8. Factors associated with cohabitation relationships and practices among university students

Table 4a.

Chi-Square Analysis of the Association Between Socio-Demographic Factors and Respondents' Knowledge of Cohabitation Relationships and Practices

Variables		Low	Average	High	Total	χ^2	p
Gender	Male	60 (15.0%)	27 (6.8%)	98 (24.5%)	185	75.72	0.001
	Female	18 (4.5%)	114 (28.5%)	83 (20.8%)	215		
Age in years	15 – 19 years	78 (19.5%)	36 (9.0%)	06 (1.5%)	42	96.96	0.000
	20 – 24 years	00 (0.0%)	99 (24.8%)	48 (12.0%)	304		
	25 – 30 years	00 (0.0%)	06 (1.5%)	127 (31.8%)	54		
Marital status	Single	78 (19.5%)	141 (35.2%)	157 (39.2%)	219	30.89	0.000
	Married	00 (0.0%)	00 (0.0%)	24 (6.0%)	24		
Average monthly stipend	Less than ₦10,000	30 (7.5%)	24 (6.0%)	06 (1.5%)	60	100.44	3.020
	₦10,000 – ₦14,000	36 (9.0%)	78 (19.5%)	42 (10.5%)	205		
	₦15,000 – ₦19,000	00 (0.0%)	00 (0.0%)	91 (22.8%)	42		
	Above ₦20,000	12 (3.0%)	39 (9.8%)	42 (10.5%)	93		
Level of study	100 level	20 (16.4%)	54 (44.3%)	48 (39.3%)	122	320.60	2.120
	200 level	10 (14.5%)	16 (23.2%)	43 (62.3%)	69		
	300 level	58 (48.3%)	12 (10.0%)	50 (41.7%)	120		
	400 level	20 (22.5%)	49 (55.0%)	20 (22.5%)	89		

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Social problems associated with cohabitation relationships and practices: Figure 8 showed the social problems associated with cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. A majority of the respondents reported unintended pregnancy (31.8%), lack of trust (29.7%) and financial exploitation (15.0%) as social problems associated with cohabitation relationships and practices that occurred among university students. Also, sexual abuse (13.5%) and conflict (10.0%) were also mentioned by the respondents as social problems associated with cohabitation relationships

Bivariate analysis of socio-demographic factors and cohabitation knowledge: Table 4a presents the bivariate analysis of socio-demographic factors associated with respondents' knowledge of cohabitation. A higher proportion of female (28.5%) and male (24.5%) respondents reported average to high levels of knowledge about cohabitation. The Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between gender and knowledge of cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 75.72$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents aged 25–30 years (31.8%) demonstrated high knowledge levels, with a significant association observed between age group and knowledge ($\chi^2 = 96.96$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, a majority of single respondents (39.2%) reported high knowledge, and

marital status was significantly associated with knowledge of cohabitation. In contrast, only 22.8% of respondents receiving a monthly stipend of ₦10,000–₦14,000 indicated high knowledge levels. However, the Chi-square test showed no significant association between monthly stipend and knowledge of cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 100.44$, $p > 0.05$). Furthermore, while 62.3% of 200-level students reported high knowledge, there was no statistically significant association between level of study and knowledge of cohabitation ($\chi^2 = 320.60$, $p > 0.05$) (Table 4a).

Also, table 4b below shows the socio-demographic factors associated with respondents' attitude towards cohabitation. A majority of the females (58.8%) have a negative attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test shows a significant association of respondents' attitude towards cohabitation with gender differences ($\chi^2 = 9.48$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents who are aged 20-24 years (68.2%) exhibited higher levels of a negative attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test shows a significant association with age ($\chi^2 = 90.62$, $p = 0.000$). Fifty-nine percent of respondents who are single asserted a negative attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test shows a significant association with marital status ($\chi^2 = 31.40$, $p = 0.000$) (Table 4b).

Table 4b.

Chi-square Analysis showing the association of Socio-demographic factors and Respondents' Attitude towards Cohabitation Relationships and Practices among University Students.

	Variables	Positive	Negative	Total	χ^2	ρ
Gender	Male	96 (48.9%)	100 (51.0%)	196	9.48	0.001
	Female	84 (41.2%)	120 (58.8%)	204		
Age in years	15 – 19 years	30 (71.4%)	12 (28.6%)	42	90.62	0.000
	20 – 24 years	91 (31.8%)	195 (68.2%)	286		
	25 – 30 years	48 (66.7%)	24 (33.3%)	72		
Marital status	Single	144 (41.1%)	206 (58.9%)	350	31.40	0.000
	Married	24 (48.0%)	26 (52.0%)	50		
Average monthly stipend	Less than ₦10,000	24 (44.4%)	30 (55.6%)	54	58.99	0.000
	₦10,000 – ₦14,000	73 (36.7%)	126 (63.3%)	199		
	₦15,000 – ₦19,000	42 (63.6%)	24 (36.4%)	66		
	Above ₦20,000	30 (37.0%)	51 (63.0%)	81		
Level of study	100 level	30 (29.4%)	72 (70.6%)	102	26.63	0.000
	200 level	45 (48.4%)	48 (51.6%)	93		
	300 level	70 (51.5%)	66 (48.5%)	136		
	400 level	24 (34.8%)	45 (65.2%)	69		

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Table 4c.

Chi-square Analysis showing the association of Socio-demographic factors and Respondents' Perception towards Cohabitation Relationships and Practices among University Students.

	Variables	Poor	Moderate	Good	Total	χ^2	ρ
Gender	Male	85 (43.8%)	21 (10.8%)	88 (45.4%)	194	118.62	0.001
	Female	15 (7.3%)	113 (54.9%)	78 (37.8%)	206		
Age in years	15 – 19 years	09 (18.8%)	27 (56.2%)	12 (25.0%)	48	19.96	0.000
	20 – 24 years	85 (21.5%)	89 (22.5%)	118 (30.9%)	292		
	25 – 30 years	09 (15.0%)	21 (35.0%)	30 (50.0%)	60		
Marital status	Single	97 (24.6%)	131 (33.5%)	139 (35.6%)	367	35.53	0.000
	Married	03 (0.0%)	03 (0.0%)	27 (6.3%)	33		
Average monthly stipend	Less than ₦10,000	30 (51.7%)	20 (34.5%)	08 (13.8%)	58	110.39	0.000
	₦10,000 – ₦14,000	54 (26.5%)	88 (43.1%)	62 (30.4%)	204		
	₦15,000 – ₦19,000	01 (2.2%)	20 (43.5%)	25 (54.3%)	46		
	Above ₦20,000	14 (15.2%)	08 (8.7%)	70 (76.1%)	92		
Level of study	100 level	02 (1.9%)	36 (34.6%)	66 (63.4%)	104	265.86	0.000
	200 level	22 (31.9%)	23 (33.3%)	24 (34.8%)	69		
	300 level	72 (46.8%)	12 (7.8%)	70 (45.4%)	154		
	400 level	02 (2.7%)	68 (93.2%)	03 (4.1%)	73		

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Respondents with average monthly stipend of ₦15,000–₦19,000 (in Nigerian naira) reported a positive attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test shows a significant association with average monthly stipend and respondents' attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices ($\chi^2 = 58.99$, $\rho < 0.000$). About 71% of respondents who are in their 100 level of study showed a negative attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test shows a significant association with level of study ($\chi^2 = 26.63$, $\rho = 0.000$) (Table 4b).

Similarly, table 4c below shows the socio-demographic factors associated with respondents' perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices. The findings showed that a majority of the female respondents (54.9%) showed a moderate perception towards cohabitation and the Chi-square test showed a significant association of perception of cohabitation with gender differences ($\chi^2 = 118.62$, $\rho < 0.001$).

Respondents who are aged 15-19 years (56.2%) exhibited a moderate perception of cohabitation, and the Chi-square test showed a significant association of perception of cohabitation with age ($\chi^2 = 19.96$, $\rho = 0.000$) (Table 4c). About thirty-six percent of the respondents who are single have a good perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square test showed a significant association of perception of cohabitation with marital status ($\chi^2 = 35.53$, $\rho = 0.000$). A majority (76.1%) of the respondents with above ₦20,000 have a good perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices, and the Chi-square showed a significant association of perception of cohabitation and average monthly stipend ($\chi^2 = 110.39$, $\rho = 0.000$) (Table 4c). A majority (93.2%) of the respondents who are in their 400 level of study showed moderate perception towards cohabitation and the Chi-square test shows a significant association of perception of cohabitation and level of study ($\chi^2 = 265.86$, $\rho = 0.000$) (Table 4c). Also, the findings from the qualitative data buttressed the

quantitative data findings above, and one of the male participants in the IDI sessions indicated that:

Young persons, especially the male individuals, have positive attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices. They engaged in and enjoyed cohabiting, most especially the younger male folks, because most females are engaged in domestic chores for them such as cleaning, washing, cooking and so on. The male encouraged themselves to be part of cohabitation relationship as they exhibit masculinity behaviour during cohabitation relationships and practices...I was introduced into cohabitation relationships and practices by a close friend of mine. And since then, I have been living together with my girlfriend at a rented hostel outside the university campus. She helps me a lot with domestic chores and supports me emotionally (Male student /23 years/IDI).

Another participant mentioned that:

I am into cohabitation relationship for three years since my 100 level. My boyfriend talked me into it and I could not say no to him for fear of losing him to another girl. I moved in to his house and we live together since our 100 level of study. I feel comfortable with it because he cannot cheat on me and I also cannot cheat on him either. My personal perception is that female folks are more likely to engage in cohabitation relationships and practices more than their male counterparts to protect their relationship from breaking-up. Although our families are not aware of our cohabitation relationships and practices, but we live and do as couples do and everyone at the university campus are aware of our relationship and our staying together as 'husband and wife' (Female student/22 years/IDI).

Table 5:

Inter-correlation of knowledge, attitude and perception of cohabitation relationships and practices among university students

S/No	Variables	1	2	3
1	Knowledge of cohabitation	1	–	–
2	Attitude towards cohabitation	0.611**	1	–
3	Perception of cohabitation	0.528**	0.187**	1

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Inter-Correlation of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perceptions Regarding Cohabitation Relationships and Practices: Table 5 shows the inter-correlation of the respondents' knowledge, attitude and perception of cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. The findings revealed that respondents' knowledge was positively correlated with attitude ($r = 0.611$, $p < 0.01$) and perception ($r = 0.528$, $p < 0.01$) towards cohabitation relationships and practices. Also, respondents' perception are positively correlated with attitude ($r = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$) towards cohabitation relationships and practices. This implies that high knowledge will lead to positive attitude and high perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students.

Therefore, the findings further revealed that respondents' knowledge, attitude and perception of cohabitation relationships and practices are inter-related, which further implied that high knowledge would lead to positive attitude and high perception that may likely discourage university students from engaging in cohabitation relationships and practices.

DISCUSSION

We explored the factors that influence the cohabitation relationships among students of Osun State University, Nigeria. The findings of the recent study indicated that the knowledge of cohabitation among undergraduate students in Osun State University was 45.3%. This figure is similar to the one reported for universities in Ghana (Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2023) and Kenya (Hattori et al., 2007). Thus, the cohabitation knowledge levels among the respondents were comparable to that reported in more developed countries, which is lower (Hattori et al., 2007; Axinn et al., 1993). Such trends of lower knowledge of cohabitation relations before indulging into such practices, if not checked, are bound to result in rising cases of being predisposed to early sexual debut, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sexual abuse, gender violence, abortions, and illegitimate children (children born out of wedlock) (Pierce et al., 2020; Gevers et al., 2013; Posel et al., 2013). One interesting aspect of the knowledge trends showed that undergraduate students have different perspectives towards cohabitation practices, as they viewed these as cultural values and norms that exist among young people aged 15-24 years, as they see it as living together not being married, or having a conjugal relationship supported by parents, and a long-term relationship that resembles marriage, as well as viewing it as a marriage between young people (Hattori et al., 2007; Gevers et al., 2013).

Several studies have laid emphasis that these kind of perspectives evolving around young persons had severely compromised their life orientations and core values, particularly when having to bargain about education standards, particularly among female students (Brown et al., 2023; Osuafor et al., 2018). This is seen when female students remain behind in the hostels washing clothes and cooking for their cohabiting male partners, who never miss their lectures and school activities (Brown et al., 2023; Pleasence et al., 2012). Also, the knowledge of the cohabitation practice is average to high, as a result of their orientations from their family values and background, where they are not allowed to engage in such practices. This implies that the respondents have a better understanding of what cohabitation is, but they do not know that unmarried people living together in the same house are practicing cohabitation. Within the university, the term 'couple's life' is used instead of cohabitation and it is used to refer to an unmarried male and female who are living together. This study collaborated with the summation of the studies of Zhang et al. (2022) and Uprety (2023), that cohabitation practices are usually copied among young people who are exposed to such relationships within their environs. This was mostly disturbing, given that the findings of this study indicated that those who are into cohabitation relationships acquired their knowledge from their counterparts who are

practicing cohabitation relationships within their environs (Uprety, 2023; Cho *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, partners who love cohabitation relationships often lure their partners into such practices, which often begins with temporary living together for few days. Then, much later, one of the partners will create a platform of escalating pressure on the other partner to move in with him or her throughout their stay in the university. Such partners who are in a relationship and do not succumb to such peer pressure are made to suffer stigma, discrimination, and shame by their partners, peers and friends, and the wider school community. This is in line with a few studies, such as in the published works of Ezumah *et al.* (2021) and Adeyera *et al.* (2023), who mentioned that young people, especially females, who refused a cohabitation relationship were subjected to discrimination and stigmatization by friends, as well as leading to abruptly broken relationships (Scent *et al.*, 2019; Argentova *et al.*, 2018). Despite the high levels of knowledge and perspectives towards cohabitation practices, pre-marital cohabitation relationships were predominantly prevalent among the respondents, while convenient and substitute cohabitation practices were to an extent largely mentioned by the respondents. The findings showed that there were mixed feelings among undergraduate students as to the types of cohabitation relationships that were prevalent among university students. However, the effect of cohabitation on marital success showed equal proportions holding contradicting perspectives.

The predominant types of cohabitation relationships being practised by undergraduate students is not adequately studied, as this varies across persons' identity and cultural orientations (Argentova *et al.*, 2018; Vigil *et al.*, 2022; Vaingankar *et al.*, 2020; Afifi *et al.*, 2024). However, another study's findings revealed that cohabitation and its practices were not an option in a traditional African family and as such, it is frowned upon by families, religious bodies, and society (Alo, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2023). However, in contemporary families, there is a growing approval of cohabitation among young Nigerian adults, and university students are not an exception (Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Muhinat, 2022; Obikeze *et al.*, 2018; Iyekolo, 2021; Kalu *et al.*, 2021; Aborisade, 2021; Alo, 2008). The findings of the present study indicate that there were striking similarities between the study subjects and findings of some studies in developed countries such as in the United States (Ogunsola, 2004; Manning *et al.*, 2014), United Kingdom (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018; Manning *et al.*, 2019) and across Europe (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2014; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018) as well as parts of Asian countries (Pelikh *et al.*, 2022).

However, the study revealed that the majority of respondents perceived cohabitation practices positively, in contrast to those who expressed negative views. This finding suggests that most respondents perceive cohabitation among university students in a favorable light, identifying benefits or constructive aspects to the practice. These 'positive dimensions' may reflect beliefs that cohabitation fosters emotional intimacy, enhances relationship experience, promotes shared responsibilities, or provides practical solutions to challenges like accommodation shortages (Muhinat, 2022; Obikeze *et al.*, 2018; Iyekolo, 2021; Kalu *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, the 36.4% who view cohabitation negatively likely associate it

with social risks such as emotional instability, exploitation, academic distraction, or moral concerns. This split highlights a nuanced outlook: while cohabitation is widely accepted or even normalized within the university context, a significant minority still questions its social and developmental implications. It may also underscore generational shifts in relationship norms, shaped by exposure, personal values, and socio-economic pressures (Vigl *et al.*, 2022; Ghosh, 2021).

The findings of this study reveal that cohabitation among university students is a multifaceted practice shaped by a range of personal, relational, socio-economic, and institutional factors. The meaning and experience of cohabitation varied considerably across respondents, reflecting diverse motivations—from intimacy, autonomy, and accommodation challenges to relationship experimentation and peer influence. Consistent with studies conducted in the United States and Europe (Manning *et al.*, 2014; Manning *et al.*, 2019), respondents in this study commonly perceived cohabitation as a transitional stage in dating relationships, rather than as an alternative to marriage. The dimensions and patterns of cohabitation observed—whether regular or irregular, trial-based, or convenience-driven—mirrored global trends in student relationship behavior, thereby supporting the view that young adults increasingly negotiate partnerships outside traditional marital frameworks. These findings align closely with the individualisation theory, which argues that individuals in contemporary society pursue self-directed life paths that prioritize personal autonomy, choice, and emotional fulfilment (Beck *et al.*, 2002). Within the university context, cohabitation emerges as a site of this individualising process: students make strategic decisions about living arrangements that reflect their values, needs, and emerging identities. The flexibility and fluidity of these arrangements underscore a departure from rigid societal norms in favour of personal agency.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights context-specific drivers of cohabitation in African university settings, where economic and environmental conditions exert substantial influence. Socio-economic factors such as parental occupation, income, and residence—as well as limited institutional housing—were significant in shaping cohabitation choices, echoing findings by Akokuwebe *et al.* (2016), Maharaj *et al.* (2005), and Tamuno-Opubo *et al.* (2021). These factors reinforce the notion that cohabitation is not solely a relational choice but also a coping strategy in response to structural constraints. In sum, the study's synthesis of global and local findings demonstrates that while university students engage in cohabitation for various reasons, their practices are rooted in a broader social evolution characterized by increased individual autonomy, reduced parental oversight, and shifting conceptions of intimacy and commitment. The individualisation theory offers a compelling lens through which to interpret these patterns, capturing the dynamic interplay between personal aspiration and structural limitation in students' lived experiences.

However, this study's findings have shown that age, education, employment, and marital statuses were the major factors for the patterns of cohabitation relationships among the respondents. Similarly, few studies have mentioned socio-cultural factors, such as age, sex, education, marital

status, and family history of cohabitation, as the major basis for the dimensions and patterns of cohabitation practices among university students (Tamuno-Opubo *et al.*, 2021; Akokuwebe *et al.*, 2015; Maharaj *et al.*, 2005; Mohlatlole *et al.*, 2018; Akokuwebe *et al.*, 2019; Akokuwebe *et al.*, 2023). It is important to note that a majority of the respondents indicated a positive approval attitude towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. Studies conducted in the East and South of sub-Saharan African countries show that marriages that are preceded by living together have 60% to 100% higher disruption rates than marriages without premarital cohabitation (Obikeze *et al.*, 2018; Iyekolo, 2021; Kalu *et al.*, 2021; Aborisade, 2021). Cohabitation is considered as a half-way house for people who do not want the extent of personal and social obligation that marriage represents. Other studies have shown that cohabitation experiences have affected the quality of marriage (Manning *et al.*, 2019; Akokuwebe *et al.*, 2016). Marriages in which at least one spouse is an ex-cohabiter are on average more likely to end up in divorce than are marriages in which neither partner experienced premarital cohabitation (Tamuno-Opubo *et al.*, 2021). Partners who cohabited before marriage reported lower levels of commitment to marriage as an institution (Scent *et al.*, 2019; Alo, 2008).

Cohabitation may consequently have far-reaching negative impacts in the lives of young adults later in life (Gold, 2012; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, this study's findings showed that university students may harbour negative attitudes and a low perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices, but their engagement in such relationships is largely prejudiced by various influences. Also, this study's findings revealed that factors such as lack of accommodation, poor socio-economic background, academic assistance, and love/affection influence university students to engage in cohabitation relationships and practices. However other studies mentioned that cultural and social norms (Pierce *et al.*, 2020), parental influences and attitudes (Adeoye *et al.*, 2012), religious teaching (Axinn *et al.*, 1993), fear of commitment (Gold, 2012), risk perception (Scent *et al.*, 2019), financial considerations (Alebiosu, 2020), generational shifts and communication (Adeyera *et al.*, 2023) and conflict (Odimegwu *et al.*, 2018) may negatively or positively influence cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. Thus, traditional norms often emphasize marriage as the ideal relationship structure, and cohabitation, being less conventional, might be viewed with scepticism. Social expectations around marriage and family also play a role, and in societies where marriage is highly valued, cohabitation may be seen as a deviation (Wu, 2000; Oppenheimer, 2003).

Consequently, parental influence and attitudes significantly impact young people's views, as parents hold conservative beliefs, and their children may internalize these norms. Subsequently, parental disagreements and disapproval of cohabitation can lead to negative perceptions among university students. Also, religious teachings often prioritize marriage, where the majority of religious communities often frown upon pre-marital cohabitation relationships and practices. Studies have shown that young people who adhere strictly to religious principles may perceive cohabitation as morally obnoxious (Brown *et al.*,

2023; Scent *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, cohabitation lacks a formal commitment compared to marriage, and individuals fear that it may hinder a long-term commitment, or lead to instability, as the ideal of a 'trial marriage' through cohabitation may not resonate with every individual. Moreover, studies have suggested that cohabiting partners face higher risks of relationship dissolution and divorce, as fear of potential breakup or uncertainty may contribute to negative attitudes and low perception among the university students (Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Posel *et al.*, 2013).

Economic factors play a major role where cohabitation often lacks legal protections and financial benefits associated with marriage, and some young people may view cohabitation as financially risky. Importantly, the millennials and Gen Z generations tend to prioritize individual autonomy and flexibility, as they may resist societal pressure to conform to traditional norms (Gold, 2012; Posel *et al.*, 2013). This generational shifts can lead to more casual attitudes toward cohabitation, but it can also create tension with older generations. Notably, cohabiting partners face unique challenges, as miscommunication and unresolved conflicts can strain relationships, as well as negative experiences may shape attitudes (Scent *et al.*, 2019; Axinn *et al.*, 1993). Hence, attitudes towards cohabitation are multifaceted, influenced by cultural, familial, religious, and personal factors; while some young persons may view it positively, but others remain cautious due to perceived risks and societal norms (Pleasence *et al.*, 2012; Cho *et al.*, 2016). This study's findings showed that a majority of the respondents mentioned unintended pregnancy, lack of trust, financial exploitation, sexual abuse, and conflict are social problems associated with cohabitation relationships and practices among university students.

Our findings revealed a significant association between knowledge and socio-demographic factors towards cohabitation relationships and practices among university students. We found that socio-demographic factors such as gender (female), age (15–30 years) and marital status (single) were found to be associated with knowledge among university students towards cohabitation relationships and practices. This finding is in accordance with other studies that showed a substantial association between respondents' knowledge and socio-demographic factors (Pleasence *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2022). In recent years, the knowledge of cohabitation relationships and practices has translated into various patterns of marriage and family formation, which have undergone significant transformations (Gold, 2012; Scent *et al.*, 2019). Thus, cohabitation, in particular, has become a noteworthy phenomenon that has been observed as both a postponement of marriage and an alternative form of coupling among university students. For instance, in South Africa, cohabitation is predominantly seen among persons in the 20–40 years age group and its prevalence has grown by about 50% (Moore *et al.*, 2013; Osuafor *et al.*, 2018).

Among young unmarried women, approximately 17.9% of White women and 17.1% of African women are presently cohabiting with a partner (Gevers *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, the respondents' attitudes was found to be associated with socio-demographic factors (gender, age, marital status, average monthly stipend, and level of study) among university students. The findings showed that more

than half of the respondents had a negative attitude towards university students living together even if they do not intend to get married, that it is advisable to live together before marriage to determine the compliance of future partners, that cohabitation is associated with some levels of negative attitudes. Studies have shown that cohabitation may be prevalent among university students who are more liberal and less religious, and they perceive it as a usual way of starting their first union and as a trial marriage (Gold, 2012; Scent *et al.*, 2019).

Respondents' perceptions were found to be associated with socio-demographic factors (gender, age, marital status, average monthly stipend, and level of study) among university students. This is in line with the works of Foran *et al.* (2021) and Afifi *et al.* (2024). Thus, several studies have documented that perceptions in cohabitation relationships and practices determine how one approaches, engages in, and reacts to relationships such as the cohabitation type (Scent *et al.*, 2019; Vaingankar *et al.*, 2020). Perceptions of cohabitation relationships will enable one to initiate and nurture healthy relationships and also to have the idea that rejecting a cohabitation relationship or practice is not a reflection of one's lack of value as a person (Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Muhinat, 2022). The findings from the intercorrelation analysis revealed that respondents' knowledge will stimulate a positive attitude and high perception towards discouraging university students from engaging in cohabitation relationships and practices (Alebiosu, 2020; NDHS, 2008).

Furthermore, this study draws from an intensive investigation of the relationship experiences, practices and values of people who are not living with a partner. It is worth mentioning that, over the past five decades, unmarried cohabitation has become widely accepted and even normative across societies in developed and developing countries, as support for cohabitation has increased among many groups, from teenagers to elders (Gold, 2012; Obikeze *et al.*, 2018). In fact, most first co-residential romantic unions are cohabitations rather than marriages. Yet, while the majority of university students will enter a cohabiting union, most of such cohabiting unions do not lead to marriage, and the share of those engaging in serial cohabitation are rising (Moore *et al.*, 2013). Whereas many young individuals in the university in the 20th century viewed cohabitation as a stepping stone to marriage, in the 21st century cohabitation increasingly serves as an intensive form of dating – at least at its inception (Gold, 2012; Posel *et al.*, 2013).

The pathways into marriage from cohabitation differ in important ways by social class, highlighting how union formation contributes to growing levels of inequality. Hence, regardless of whether the university students are deeply involved in cohabitation relationships, several studies have shown that cohabitation unions have observed greater predisposition to relationship toxicity (Scent *et al.*, 2019; Argentova *et al.*, 2018). Also, the findings from the intercorrelation analysis have shown that respondents' knowledge was positively correlated with attitudes that kindle a stronger perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices. This infers that high knowledge will lead to a positive attitude and high perception towards cohabitation relationships and practices (Lawal *et al.*, 2021; Muhinat, 2022). Therefore, the findings of this study further

revealed that respondents' knowledge, attitude and perception of cohabitation relationships and practices are interrelated, as adequate and correct knowledge will lead to a positive attitude and high perception that may likely discourage university students from engaging in cohabitation relationships and practices (Alebiosu, 2020).

Studies have shown that the inconsistencies concerning age cohorts in awareness and approaches to cohabitation relationships and practices among university students may reflect either variations in attitudes as people mature, or modifications between groups that will be taken over time owing to the changed involvements of those born in different decades (Afifi *et al.*, 2024; Manning *et al.*, 2019). Other studies suggested that university students moving in together before getting involved is linked with lower marital settlement, commitment, and confidence, worse interaction, and higher odds of separation (Wu, 2000; Manning *et al.*, 2019). Cohabitation continues to rise, but there is a lack of knowledge about expectations about cohabitation and the association between expectations and subsequent cohabitation. The consequence of living together ahead of marriage is attached to the predisposition for some couples to make less of a commitment to each other, or feel less pleased with their planning (Alebiosu, 2020; Brown *et al.*, 2023). University students who choose to cohabit may have different expectations than their partners about the shift. This study findings underline the significance of contemplating not only just behaviour but also individuals' anticipations for recognizing development of the union and more largely, family change. Thus, cohabitation has surpassed marriage as the most common union experiences in young adulthood, as the typical relationship experience in young adulthood, with the majority having cohabited but are not yet married (Posel *et al.*, 2013; Ezumah *et al.*, 2021).

Several studies have mentioned in the past that cohabitation typically served as a stepping stone to marriage, but this appears to have changed (Ghosh, 2021; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2015). Presently, cohabitation does not essentially serve as the pathway to marital life and bliss, and combined with this 'decoupling' of cohabitation and marriage, a growing proportion of young adults have stayed with several cohabiting partners (Pelikh *et al.*, 2022; Akokuwebe *et al.*, 2015). Although general behavioural trends (knowledge, attitude and perceptions) regarding cohabitation relationships and practices are clear, yet little is known about how university students view their relationship prospects in a climate in which cohabitation is more common than marriage. Several studies have shown that behavioural patterns of union formation are of limited utility for understanding this issue, and young university students sometimes comprise a group in which only half have entered into marriage by their late twenties (Adeoye *et al.*, 2012; Kalu *et al.*, 2021). Hence, concentrating on expectations is key as it offers perception into selected alternative unions. In addition, there is the possibility of growing disconnection from opportunities and interactive patterns in settings with great operational restrictions (such as economic indecision and commitment), such as a generation who came of age in the Great Recession (Gyasi-Gyamrah *et al.*, 2023; Hattori *et al.*, 2007).

The study offers critical insights into the evolving family dynamics among Nigerian university students. The increasing prevalence of cohabitation—driven by economic

considerations and shifting cultural aspirations (such as the desire to become a ‘baby mama’)—signals a notable shift away from traditional pathways to union formation, reflecting broader societal transformation. These emerging patterns carry significant implications for family demography, including potential delays in formal marriage, shifts in fertility timing, and the rise of non-traditional household structures, all of which underscore the gravity of the phenomenon. From a sociological standpoint, the observed positive relationships among knowledge, perception, and attitudes toward cohabitation indicate a growing normalization of informal unions among young adults. The study applies the theory of individualisation to elucidate how relationship decisions are increasingly shaped by personal autonomy, self-realisation, and economic pragmatism, rather than by conventional societal expectations. This theoretical lens situates the findings within the context of broader transitions in family behaviour, emphasizing a movement toward individualized life choices. The findings highlight the urgent need to develop youth-centered family policies and sociological frameworks that reflect and respond to the evolving relational norms within contemporary sub-Saharan Africa.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A key strength of this study lies in its use of primary data, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods. This mixed-methods approach distinguishes it from prior studies on cohabitation among students, which have relied mainly on qualitative data alone. By examining individual-level characteristics, this study provides contextually grounded insights into a historically underrepresented population, thereby enhancing the relevance and engagement of the findings for scholarly audiences. However, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the data were drawn from a cross-sectional sample of students from a single campus within a multi-campus institution, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Due to the study’s restriction to a single campus within a multi-campus university, the analysis does not support conclusions regarding temporal associations or broader institutional patterns. This awareness of potential limitations is crucial for cautious interpretation of the findings. Additionally, the sample consisted of students living off-campus due to the lack of university-provided accommodation, which introduces potential recall bias in responses. Moreover, the research team applied basic descriptive and inferential statistical methods, which limit cross-campus comparisons, particularly owing to potential inconsistencies in the recoding and renaming of variables to align with the statistical software. Lastly, the study focused exclusively on undergraduate students aged 15 to 30 years, therefore, the findings may not apply to older student populations.

This study highlights the high prevalence of cohabitation among undergraduate students at Osun State University, primarily driven by inadequate housing, interpersonal challenges, privacy concerns, and the desire for intimacy. The lack of on-campus accommodation—particularly for female students—emerges as a key structural factor encouraging cohabitation. Off-campus living arrangements further limit institutional oversight, increasing students’ vulnerability to various forms of abuse and socio-emotional risks. Findings indicate that students often perceive

cohabitation as a trial marriage or pathway to future relational stability. However, such relationships frequently involve unintended consequences, including unplanned pregnancies, financial exploitation, emotional trauma, and conflict. Adolescents in particular are drawn to cohabitation as a symbol of independence, yet they may lack the maturity and support systems to navigate its complexities.

This study underscores the pressing issue of the remarkably high rate of cohabitation among undergraduate students at Osun State University. The urgent need for adequate housing, interpersonal difficulties, the pursuit of privacy, and the desire for intimate companionship primarily drive this. A particularly critical factor is the lack of sufficient on-campus accommodation, especially for female students, which prompts many to enter cohabitation arrangements as a practical solution. Off-campus living further reduces institutional oversight, thereby heightening students’ exposure to various forms of abuse and socio-emotional risks. The findings reveal that many students view cohabitation as a trial marriage or a stepping stone toward future relational stability. Nevertheless, these arrangements often carry unintended consequences such as unplanned pregnancies, emotional trauma, financial exploitation, and interpersonal conflict. Adolescents, in particular, may be drawn to cohabitation as a symbol of independence; however, they often lack the maturity and support systems necessary to manage the associated complexities. In light of these insights, the study advocates for a series of targeted interventions. Institutions are encouraged to integrate cohabitation education into orientation programmes to promote informed decision-making. Parents must actively monitor their children’s living situations to achieve this outcome. University authorities should also prioritise the development of affordable on-campus hostels, particularly for female students, to reduce vulnerabilities related to cohabitation. Furthermore, the establishment of collaborative oversight mechanisms involving both university administrators and local community leaders could help regulate student conduct off-campus and promote safer living environments. Lastly, students must be made aware of, and encouraged to utilise, available support services—including social counselling—to navigate emotional distress and foster resilience throughout their academic journey.

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