

Addressing Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Higher Institutions Through the Feasibility of a Digital Anonymous Feedback System

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Abstract - Sexual harassment remains a persistent and pervasive issue in Nigerian higher institutions, yet incidents often go unreported due to fear, stigma, and distrust in existing reporting mechanisms. This study investigates the feasibility and effectiveness of introducing a digital anonymous feedback system for students as a proactive measure to curb sexual harassment on university campuses. The aim is to provide students with a safe and confidential platform to report incidents of harassment, thereby empowering them to speak out without fear of retaliation. Using a quantitative research approach, a questionnaire was administered to students from selected Nigerian federal universities to gather data on their perceptions of sexual harassment reporting, the potential impact of an anonymous digital feedback system, and recommendations for addressing the issue. Findings reveal significant barriers to traditional reporting systems, including fear of reprisal and lack of trust in institutional responses. However, there is strong support among students for implementing an anonymous digital feedback system, with confidentiality and accessibility cited as key benefits. Based on the findings, it is recommended that Nigerian higher institutions prioritize the introduction of digital anonymous feedback systems, dedicate sections of their websites for lecturer ratings and anonymous reporting, and conduct awareness and training programs on sexual harassment prevention, including claims verification measures. By implementing these strategies, universities can create safer and more inclusive learning environments where students feel empowered to report sexual harassment without fear of reprisal.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Nigerian Higher Institutions, Anonymous Feedback System, Reporting Mechanisms, Quantitative Research

I. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue within Nigerian higher institutions, posing significant challenges to the safety, well-being, and academic performance of students. Defined as unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, sexual harassment can occur in various settings, including classrooms, dormitories, and social gatherings, creating a hostile learning environment for victims (Quinlivan, 2005). A survey of 525 undergraduates found that 40% of the women and 28.7% of the men had been sexually harassed by a college professor or instructor (Kalof *et al.*, 2001). Despite efforts to address this issue, many incidents of sexual harassment often go unreported due to fear of retaliation,

stigma, or lack of confidence in existing reporting mechanisms (Okonji *et al.*, 2024).

Traditional reporting methods, such as approaching faculty members or campus authorities, have been criticized for their lack of anonymity and confidentiality, which may deter victims from coming forward (Runyon, 2022). In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for innovative approaches to combat sexual harassment and empower victims to speak out about their experiences (Vetrivel, 2015). Digitalization is essential for creating a conducive learning environment free from sexual harassment.

Over the past decade, there has been a significant push toward integrating technology into teaching and learning processes to enhance educational outcomes (Akram *et al.*, 2021). One such approach is the introduction of a digital anonymous feedback system for students, which allows individuals to report incidents of sexual harassment confidentially through online platforms or mobile applications (Clark *et al.*, 2012). This system offers several potential benefits, including increased accessibility, anonymity, and efficiency in reporting, thereby overcoming some of the barriers associated with traditional reporting methods (Barr-Walker *et al.*, 2021). By providing a safe and confidential avenue for victims to voice their concerns, a digital feedback system has the potential to facilitate early intervention, support, and redress for survivors of sexual harassment (Runyon, 2022).

While the implementation of digital feedback systems has shown promise in addressing sexual harassment in other contexts, such as workplaces and online communities, their deployment and effectiveness within the Nigerian higher education system remain underexplored (Porter *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, research is needed to evaluate the feasibility and impact of introducing a digital anonymous feedback system for students to curb sexual harassment in Nigerian higher institutions. By examining students' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences regarding the adoption of such an innovation, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on sexual harassment prevention strategies and inform policy and practice within Nigerian higher institutions.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To determine students' attitudes toward reporting incidents of sexual harassment.
2. To ascertain the feasibility of a digital anonymous feedback system (DAFS) in Nigerian higher institutions.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of DAFS in curtailing sexual harassment in Nigerian higher institutions.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Students' Attitudes Towards Reporting Incidents of Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Institutions

Sexual harassment is broadly defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Such behavior creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, particularly affecting the well-being and academic performance of students in higher education settings (James, 1981). This definition encompasses a wide range of behaviors, from inappropriate comments and gestures to coercive sexual demands and physical assault. Numerous studies have documented the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education institutions globally. According to a study by the Association of American Universities (2019), approximately 13% of undergraduate and graduate students reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact involving physical force or incapacitation. In Nigeria, the problem is similarly pervasive, with many students reporting experiences of sexual harassment from peers, faculty, and staff. A 2018 World Bank Group survey reported that 70% of female graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their academic careers.

The impact of sexual harassment on victims is profound and multifaceted, affecting their psychological, emotional, and academic well-being. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth, which can lead to withdrawal from academic and social activities (Hill & Silva, 2005). Long-term effects can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic mental health issues, and adverse impacts on career trajectories (Meyer, 2008). In the context of Nigerian higher education, the stigma and fear associated with sexual harassment can further exacerbate these impacts, leading to underreporting and a lack of support for victims (Ishola et al., 2019). The fear of retaliation, social ostracism, and potential damage to academic and career prospects deter many students from reporting incidents, perpetuating a cycle of silence and victimization (Baker et al., 2017; Van Royen et al., 2015).

Despite the prevalence of sexual harassment on college campuses, many incidents go unreported, posing significant challenges to prevention and intervention efforts. Several factors contribute to underreporting among students, including fear of consequences, lack of trust in institutional responses, social norms discouraging disclosure, and

concerns about confidentiality (Cantor et al., 2015; Henry & Powell, 2016; Hossain et al., 2018). Additionally, survivors may face barriers such as self-blame, minimization of experiences, and uncertainty about the seriousness of the offense (Potter et al., 2020). According to Srikanth (2018), over 80% of participants in the study opined that the key reasons for sexual harassment incidents at educational institutions include lack of courage, fear of disgrace, and social isolation experienced by the victim upon filing a complaint against the abuser.

Furthermore, institutional factors such as inadequate support services, ineffective reporting procedures, and cultures that minimize or ignore sexual harassment exacerbate underreporting (McMahon et al., 2015; Grigoriadis, 2019). Without addressing these systemic issues, efforts to combat sexual harassment in higher education are likely to fall short. Traditional institutional responses to sexual harassment in higher education have often been criticized for their inadequacy. Formal reporting mechanisms typically require victims to approach faculty members or campus authorities, which can be intimidating and lack the necessary confidentiality (Oyewumi & Adefemi, 2020). Many institutions also lack clear policies and procedures for addressing sexual harassment, leading to inconsistent and often inadequate responses (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2017). Efforts to improve institutional responses include the development of more robust policies, training programs for staff and students, and the establishment of dedicated offices or committees to handle complaints (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). However, these measures have had varying levels of success, often depending on the commitment of institutional leadership and the resources allocated to these initiatives (Davies et al., 2018).

Students' attitudes toward reporting incidents of sexual harassment are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and institutional factors. Numerous studies have documented the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in higher education institutions and the significant barriers students face when considering whether to report such incidents. Ishola et al., (2019) highlight that fear of retaliation, stigma, and mistrust in reporting mechanisms are major deterrents for victims of sexual harassment. This aligns with Oyewumi and Adefemi's (2020) findings, which indicate that traditional reporting methods, such as approaching faculty or campus authorities, often lack the necessary confidentiality and anonymity, thereby discouraging students from coming forward.

A significant body of literature points to the need for innovative and confidential reporting mechanisms to address these barriers. For example, Fitzgerald et al., (2020) argue that providing anonymous reporting options can reduce the fear of retaliation and social stigma associated with reporting sexual harassment. This is particularly pertinent in environments where hierarchical and patriarchal structures may exacerbate the power dynamics between students and perpetrators, often faculty or staff (Ezejideaku, 2018). As

such, student attitudes toward reporting are not only influenced by personal fears but also by the perceived efficacy and safety of the available reporting channels.

B. Feasibility of a Digital Anonymous Feedback System (DAFS) in Nigerian Higher Institutions

The feasibility of implementing a Digital Anonymous Feedback System (DAFS) in Nigerian higher institutions hinges on several factors, including technological infrastructure, student access to digital devices, and institutional willingness to adopt such systems. Davies *et al.* (2018) have shown that digital feedback systems can be effectively implemented in various contexts, offering increased accessibility and anonymity for users. This is particularly important in higher education settings where students may be more familiar with and reliant on digital technologies for communication and information sharing.

In Nigeria, however, challenges such as inconsistent internet connectivity, limited access to digital devices among some student populations, and varying levels of digital literacy could impact the implementation of DAFS (Ojo & Omotayo, 2019). Nonetheless, the increasing penetration of mobile technology and the growing use of smartphones among Nigerian students present a promising avenue for the adoption of such systems (Adebayo, 2020). Furthermore, institutional readiness and commitment to addressing sexual harassment are crucial for the successful deployment of DAFS. Institutions must be willing to integrate these systems into their existing frameworks, provide necessary training for staff and students, and ensure that reports made through DAFS are taken seriously and acted upon promptly (Baker *et al.*, 2017).

C. Effectiveness of DAFS in Curtailing Sexual Harassment

The effectiveness of digital anonymous feedback systems (DAFS) in curtailing sexual harassment has been demonstrated in various settings, including workplaces and online communities. Research by Baker *et al.*, (2017) suggests that DAFS can play a critical role in facilitating early intervention and providing support to victims, thereby reducing the incidence of sexual harassment. The anonymity and confidentiality offered by such systems can encourage more victims to report incidents, leading to a greater understanding of the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment within institutions (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2020).

In the context of Nigerian higher education, where cultural and institutional barriers to reporting are significant, DAFS can provide a much-needed alternative to traditional reporting mechanisms. The study by Davies *et al.*, (2018) underscores that digital reporting systems can enhance the efficiency of the reporting process, making it easier for institutions to identify patterns of harassment and respond more effectively. Furthermore, by integrating DAFS with awareness and training programs, institutions can foster a more supportive and responsive environment, ultimately

contributing to a reduction in sexual harassment cases (Oyewumi & Adefemi, 2020).

In light of the limitations of traditional reporting mechanisms, DAFS has emerged as a promising alternative. These systems allow students to report incidents of sexual harassment confidentially through online platforms or mobile applications, thereby overcoming some of the barriers associated with traditional methods (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2020; Xu & Tan, 2020). Anonymous feedback systems, also known as anonymous reporting platforms or whistleblowing mechanisms, enable individuals to report incidents of misconduct, including sexual harassment, without revealing their identities. These systems typically involve online platforms or hotlines where individuals can submit reports anonymously, mitigating fears of retaliation or stigma associated with speaking out.

Research on anonymous feedback systems in various contexts, including workplaces and educational institutions, suggests they can facilitate the disclosure of sensitive information and increase reporting rates of misconduct (Dutta & Natarajan, 2016; Einarsen & Skogstad, 2018). In the context of higher education, anonymous feedback systems offer several potential advantages. They provide a confidential channel for students to report incidents of sexual harassment without fear of repercussions, overcoming barriers associated with traditional reporting mechanisms such as fear of retaliation, disbelief, or victim-blaming (Gruber & Fineran, 2016). By preserving anonymity, these systems empower survivors to share their experiences and seek support, contributing to a more transparent and accountable campus environment.

DAFS offer several potential benefits.

1. *Anonymity and Confidentiality:* Victims can report incidents without revealing their identity, reducing the fear of retaliation and social stigma.
2. *Accessibility:* Digital platforms are easily accessible, especially for tech-savvy student populations, making it more convenient to report incidents.
3. *Efficiency:* Reports can be processed and acted upon more swiftly, facilitating timely interventions and support for victims (Baker *et al.*, 2017).

The introduction of anonymous feedback systems has the potential to address many of the barriers to reporting sexual harassment among students. These systems can empower survivors to come forward without fear of reprisal or judgment. Research suggests that anonymity increases individuals' willingness to report sensitive information and reduces concerns about confidentiality breaches (Karp & Yoels, 2016). Moreover, anonymous feedback systems may encourage bystander intervention and promote a culture of accountability within higher education institutions (Cortina *et al.*, 2017).

Anonymous feedback systems represent a promising approach to addressing the underreporting of sexual

harassment in Nigerian higher institutions. By providing a confidential reporting option, these systems can empower survivors to disclose their experiences and seek support without fear of retaliation. However, successful implementation requires careful consideration of institutional policies, technological infrastructure, and support services to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of anonymous feedback systems on reporting rates, institutional responses, and campus climate to inform evidence-based practices for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in higher education. Despite these advantages, the implementation of Digital Anonymous Feedback Systems (DAFS) in Nigerian higher education institutions faces challenges, such as ensuring digital literacy among students, providing reliable internet access, and securing institutional commitment to act on reports made through these systems (Ojo & Omotayo, 2019). Nevertheless, the potential of DAFS to transform the reporting and response landscape for sexual harassment in higher education is significant, offering a pathway to more effective and inclusive measures for addressing this pervasive issue.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Study Design

This research adopted a quantitative approach to assess the effectiveness of introducing a student digital anonymous feedback system in curbing sexual harassment in Nigerian higher institutions. Based on this, a cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data from students in four federal Nigerian universities.

B. Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprises undergraduate students enrolled in Nigerian federal universities. This population was selected because federal universities represent a significant segment of higher education in Nigeria and are often more diverse in student demographics, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue across different regions and backgrounds. Additionally, considering the affordability of federal universities compared to private and state-owned institutions, it is believed that students from various backgrounds are more likely to attend federal universities. The population includes undergraduate students from various disciplines, as sexual harassment occurs across all academic levels and fields of study. By focusing on this broad population, the study aims to capture a wide range of experiences and perceptions related to sexual harassment and the potential effectiveness of a Digital Anonymous Feedback System (DAFS). To ensure that the sample is representative of the diverse student body in Nigerian federal universities, a random sampling method was employed. Four hundred students responded to the survey sent to random federal universities across the six political zones in Nigeria. This method was chosen to maintain objectivity and minimize bias in the selection process, ensuring that all students enrolled in

federal universities had an equal chance of being included in the study.

C. Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire with a mix of closed-ended and Likert scale questions was developed to gather data from students. The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' opinions and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of a digital anonymous feedback system in addressing sexual harassment on campus. It is divided into sections focusing on demographics, experiences of sexual harassment, awareness of reporting mechanisms, and attitudes toward anonymous reporting.

D. Data Collection Procedure

Permission was obtained from the relevant authorities in each university before data collection commenced. The researchers collaborated with university administrators to distribute the questionnaires to students either physically or electronically, depending on the university's preference. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses to encourage honest feedback.

E. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and survey responses. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was utilized for data analysis.

F. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data would be used. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before they completed the questionnaire.

V. DATA PRESENTATION

TABLE I DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	150	37.5
Female	250	62.5
Age		
18-25 years	300	75
26-30 years	70	17.5
31 years and above	30	7.5
Academic Level		
100 Level	100	25
200 Level	120	30

300 Level	90	22.5
400 Level	90	22.5
Faculty/Department		
Arts and Humanities	100	25
Science	150	37.5
Engineering	100	25
Social Sciences	50	12.5

TABLE II PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG PARTICIPANTS

Prevalence	Percentage (%)
Experienced Sexual Harassment	45
On Campus	60
Off Campus	40

Table II illustrates the percentage of respondents who reported experiencing sexual harassment both on-campus and off-campus.

TABLE III AWARENESS OF EXISTING REPORTING MECHANISMS

Awareness Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Aware of Reporting Mechanisms	120	30
Not Aware of Reporting Mechanisms	280	70

TABLE IV ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIGITAL ANONYMOUS FEEDBACK SYSTEM (DAFS)

Support for DAFS	Percentage (%)
Support	80
Fear of Retaliation	60
Stigma	30
Distrust in Existing Mechanisms	10

Table IV shows the percentage of respondents who support the introduction of a Digital Anonymous Feedback System (DAFS) and their reasons for supporting it.

VI. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Table I presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, including gender, age, academic level, and faculty or department. The majority of respondents were female (62.5%), aged between 18 and 25 years (75%), and represented various faculties and departments across the four Federal Nigerian universities.

Table II illustrates the prevalence of sexual harassment among participants. Overall, 45% of respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment during their time at the university. Among these, 60% indicated that the harassment occurred on campus, while 40% reported incidents occurring off campus.

Table III outlines participants’ awareness of existing reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment. Surprisingly, only 30% of respondents reported being aware of the formal reporting procedures provided by their universities, indicating a lack of awareness or visibility regarding such mechanisms.

Table IV depicts participants’ attitudes toward the introduction of a digital anonymous feedback system to address sexual harassment. An overwhelming majority (80%) expressed support for implementing such a system, citing reasons such as fear of retaliation (60%), stigma (30%), and a lack of trust in existing reporting mechanisms (10%).

VII. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings reveal significant insights into the prevalence of sexual harassment among students in Nigerian higher institutions and the efficacy of current reporting mechanisms. Despite the high incidence of sexual harassment reported by participants, a concerning proportion demonstrated limited awareness of the formal reporting procedures provided by their universities. This study validates the findings of Ezugoh, T. C., Egwu, J. U., and Okaekwu, G. O. (2021) in their study, *Sexual Harassment: Experiences, Prevalence, and Psychopathology in Some Selected Nigerian Tertiary Institutions in Lagos Metropolis*, where they examined the incidents and prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigerian higher institutions, highlighting the significant lack of awareness and effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms among students.

The data also highlight a strong positive attitude toward the introduction of a digital anonymous feedback system as a potential solution to address barriers to reporting, such as fear of retaliation, stigma, and distrust in existing mechanisms. This indicates a clear demand for innovative and confidential reporting channels that empower students to speak out against sexual harassment without fear of reprisal. This finding aligns with other studies and initiatives. For instance, the Speak Out tool in Ireland has been introduced across multiple higher education institutions to allow students and staff to anonymously report incidents of sexual harassment and violence. This tool has been welcomed for its ability to empower users to report incidents without fear of retaliation, thereby destigmatizing conversations about consent and improving data collection on the prevalence of such incidents (Moore, J. 2021, October 19).

The low awareness of existing reporting mechanisms underscores the need for universities to enhance the visibility and accessibility of support services for victims of sexual harassment. Additionally, the findings suggest the importance of comprehensive awareness campaigns to educate students about their rights, reporting options, and avenues for seeking assistance. This aligns with the findings of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, which indicate that many students are unaware of their institution’s sexual harassment reporting mechanisms,

emphasizing the importance of increasing the visibility and accessibility of these services. This study also emphasizes the need for comprehensive awareness campaigns to educate students about their rights, reporting options, and avenues for seeking assistance (Benya, F. F., Widnall, S. E., & Johnson, P. A. (Eds.), 2018).

The overwhelming support for anonymous reporting systems among participants emphasizes the potential of technology-driven solutions to foster a safer and more inclusive campus environment. However, universities need to address concerns regarding data security, confidentiality, and the effectiveness of response mechanisms to ensure the trust and confidence of students in such systems.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigerian higher institutions and the need for effective measures to address this pervasive issue. The findings demonstrate the significant barriers students face in reporting incidents of sexual harassment, including fear of retaliation, stigma, and distrust in existing reporting mechanisms. However, there is a clear demand among students for innovative solutions that ensure confidentiality and empower them to speak out against harassment.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The management of Nigerian universities and higher institutions should prioritize the introduction of digital anonymous feedback systems to provide students with a safe and confidential platform to report incidents of sexual harassment. These systems should be user-friendly, accessible, and integrated into existing university communication channels.
2. Higher institutions should dedicate a section of their websites for lecturer ratings or reviews by students anonymously. This feature should allow students to leave public comments on their experiences with lecturers, including instances of sexual harassment. Additionally, students should be able to upload evidence to support their claims. The existence of this innovation would naturally deter lecturers from harassing students.
3. Universities and other higher institutions' management should conduct regular awareness campaigns and training programs to educate students, faculty, and staff about sexual harassment prevention, reporting procedures, and support services available on campus. These initiatives should aim to create a culture of zero tolerance for harassment and promote bystander intervention. Furthermore, the management of Nigerian universities must prioritize the security and confidentiality of data collected through anonymous reporting systems.
4. Any institution that deploys DAFS should also endeavor to establish a verification mechanism to ascertain students' claims by requesting reasonable evidence

before indicting or accusing staff involved in the harassment of students.

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