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Sexual Agency, Relationship Dynamics, and *Kayan Mata* Aphrodisiacs Use among Young Women in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the intersection of sexual agency, relationship dynamics, and the use of Kayan Mata aphrodisiacs among young women in Ibadan, Nigeria, premised on the Feminist Empowerment Theory (FET). Despite growing visibility of women's sexual needs, structural inequalities, cultural taboos, and relationship pressures continue to shape intimate choices. Anchored in FET's emphasis on systemic transformation and women's strategic life choices, this research explored how Kayan Mata functions as both a vehicle of empowerment and a coping mechanism within patriarchal constraints. Utilizing a qualitative, descriptive cross-sectional design, the study draws on 20 in-depth interviews with women aged 18-40 and 10 key informant interviews with vendors, healers, and health professionals across Ibadan's five urban LGAs. Data collected through purposive and snowball sampling was thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that while Kayan Mata use often boosts confidence, enhances intimacy, and supports relationship maintenance, it is also shaped by internalized norms and societal expectations. The study calls for policy interventions that promote comprehensive sexual health education, dismantle stigmas around female sexual expression, and support women's autonomy beyond commodified tools. True empowerment, it argues, requires shifting from private remedies to public rights and collective agency. In conclusion, young Ibadan women use Kayan Mata to subtly negotiate agency within complex socio-cultural sexual dynamics. Therefore, governments should promote feminist policies, reform curricula, ensure safe sexual health access, regulate aphrodisiacs, engage men, and amplify women's voices.

Keywords: Sexual agency, relationship dynamics, *Kayan Mata* aphrodisiacs, socio-cultural sexual dynamics

Introduction

The concept of sexual agency refers to the capacity of women to make autonomous decisions regarding their sexuality and relationships. In recent years, the conversation around women's sexual agency and empowerment has gained momentum, particularly in African societies where such discussions have traditionally been considered taboo. In this evolving landscape, the use of aphrodisiacs such as *Kayan Mata* has become both a cultural and contemporary phenomenon. *Kayan Mata*, a Hausa phrase meaning "women's things," refers to a variety of herbs, spices, and oils traditionally used to enhance women's sexual experiences, attract or maintain partners, and fortify romantic relationships. It is frequently marketed and utilised as a tool to enhance sexual satisfaction, suggesting a potential avenue for women to exert greater control over their sexual experiences and challenge traditional norms that often prioritise male pleasure. Women use *Kayan Mata* to assert sexual control and confidence, navigating and sometimes subverting societal expectations around female sexuality. Though it has long been rooted in Northern Nigerian traditions, the practice has gained popularity among young women across the country, including urban Southern centres like Ibadan, Lagos and others.

Alabi (2020) observes that women utilise traditional aphrodisiacs like *Kayan Mata* not only to improve sexual experiences and sustain relationships, but also as a means of empowering themselves. This further explains the role of these substances in women's lives. The increasing acceptance of *Kayan Mata* is connected to broader socio-cultural and economic shifts in Nigerian society, including changing gender relations, marriage fluctuations, and the rise of extramarital affairs (Adebowale-Tambe, 2019). These factors create a complex backdrop against which the use of *Kayan Mata* must be understood.

This growing interest raises critical questions about how such products intersect with sexual agency, relationship dynamics, and self-perception among young Nigerian women. While some view the use of *Kayan Mata* as a form of empowerment enabling women to assert control over their sexual pleasure and relationship outcomes, others critique it as a reflection of underlying gender inequalities, where women feel pressured to modify themselves to meet male expectations. In Ibadan, a bustling academic and cultural city, the surge in *Kayan Mata* use among young women highlights the confluence of tradition, modernity, and digital consumerism. Social media platforms and influencer culture have significantly contributed to its mainstream visibility, turning once-private practices into trending lifestyle topics. Yet, despite its popularity, academic attention to the phenomenon remains limited, especially concerning its implications on women's agency and relationships.

Related Literature Review

The intersection of sexual agency, traditional aphrodisiac use, and relationship dynamics has become an increasingly important area of study within African gender and sexuality discourse. In Nigeria, the use of *Kayan Mata* evolved from a culturally embedded practice to a widespread phenomenon, especially

among young women across different regions of the country. Aminu et al. (2024) underscore the health and sociocultural implications of *Kayan Mata*, particularly among married women in Northern Nigeria. It reveals that women use these products not just to enhance sexual pleasure but as tools of influence within marital dynamics, often to sustain affection and negotiate power. Their research also shows that women use these products not just to enhance sexual pleasure but as tools of influence within their marital dynamics, often as a means of sustaining affection and controlling male behaviour. This suggests that *Kayan Mata* may serve as an informal mechanism for negotiating power and agency within patriarchal marital systems.

Abdullahi and Tukur (2013) further elaborate on the physiological effects of sexual stimulants. Their study in Kano, Northern Nigeria, revealed that while many women use aphrodisiacs for satisfaction and partner retention, a concerning number suffer from side effects such as coital injuries and reproductive health complications. They observed physiological side effects from unregulated use of these products, raising health and safety concerns. This raises questions about safety, regulation, and the unspoken pressures that push women toward such methods of sexual enhancement. The work of Ajayi and Olamijuwon (2019) provides a broader context by analysing sexual agency among young African women. They argue that despite increasing access to sexual health information, societal expectations still heavily restrict women's autonomy in expressing sexual needs.

The rising popularity of *Kayan Mata* may reflect an adaptive response by women seeking covert means of asserting control in sexual relationships. Ajayi and Olamijuwon (2019) discuss sexual agency and argue that aphrodisiac use is often a covert response to societal restrictions on female sexual expression. Salami (2021) highlights the commodification of *Kayan Mata* via social media, emphasising its rebranding as a fashionable and empowering tool. This is supported by studies such as Eze and Mordi (2022), who show that women often rely on these products to balance desire with social acceptability. Ibrahim and Haruna (2021) discuss how commercialisation has turned traditional practices into modern consumer goods. Okon and Ekong (2022) provide insight into how relationship power dynamics influence aphrodisiac use.

Similarly, Salami (2021) discusses the rise of the digital sex economy in Nigeria, identifying *Kayan Mata* as one of the most commodified products on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. According to Salami, the online promotion of these products reframes them as fashionable, empowering, and essential for modern romantic success. This trend indicates a cultural shift where younger women are integrating traditional practices with digital consumerism in their pursuit of sexual agency. Wong, Lee, and Kim (2019) provide a cross-cultural lens by examining how cultural norms shape aphrodisiac use globally. Their study revealed that in societies where female sexual pleasure is marginalised, women often resort to indirect tools like aphrodisiacs to satisfy both personal and relational needs. This parallels the Nigerian context, where conversations about female desire are still taboo,

making products like *Kayan Mata* a socially acceptable gateway for self-exploration.

Rodriguez, Martinez, and Gonzalez (2017) quantitatively assessed the link between aphrodisiac use and marital satisfaction, reporting that consistent use of such products among couples was associated with increased intimacy and happiness. Although their study was based in Latin America, it reinforces the idea that sexual satisfaction can directly influence relationship stability, a finding relevant to Nigerian youths seeking lasting romantic bonds. Eze and Mordi (2022) examined how gender norms influence women's sexual autonomy in Nigeria. They observed that women often rely on cultural narratives and "acceptable" tools like herbal enhancers to explore their sexuality without openly defying social norms. This covert strategy allows them to balance personal desire with societal expectations.

Ibrahim and Haruna (2021) analysed how the commercialisation of aphrodisiacs has shifted their use from ritualistic practice to economic enterprise. Their findings show that urban women now view these products less as traditional artifacts and more as lifestyle accessories, a trend particularly evident in cosmopolitan cities like Ibadan. This aligns with the objectives of this study, which focuses on young, urban women's experiences with *Kayan Mata*. Ojo (2020) adds a historical perspective by tracing the origins of herbal aphrodisiacs in Nigerian culture. He explains that products like *Kayan Mata* were initially part of bridal training, used to prepare women for marital duties. Their present-day resurgence reflects both continuity and reinvention of cultural heritage in response to modern sexual politics.

Okon and Ekong (2022) explore relationship power dynamics among urban Nigerian women, noting that romantic relationships are increasingly negotiated through emotional and sexual leverage. The strategic use of enhancers like *Kayan Mata* could be seen as an extension of this pattern, where women seek ways to balance emotional labour with tangible outcomes in relationships. Yusuf and Bello (2022) focus on the symbolic meaning of *Kayan Mata* in Hausa societies, emphasising how it reinforces femininity and marital competence. Though traditionally confined to Northern Nigeria, the expansion of these practices to the South (including Ibadan) indicates a diffusion of gendered practices that may be reinterpreted differently in urban contexts.

In the work of Oyelade and Adekunle (2023) youth sexual behaviour in Nigerian cities was explored, and it identifies a rising trend in experimental practices, including aphrodisiac use. They suggest that this behaviour is driven by media exposure, peer influence, and increasing assertiveness among women seeking control over their sexual experiences. Further studies, such as Alabi (2020), emphasise both the health and economic impacts of *Kayan Mata*. Products like tiger nut milk and herbal perfumes are not only used for their aphrodisiac qualities but are also seen as confidence-boosting tools and livelihood sources for many women. However, concerns about adulterated products and unsafe methods of application have been raised, with health professionals warning of risks such as cervical injuries and infections (Ojo,

2020). These contradictory outcomes highlight the tension between traditional empowerment and emerging health vulnerabilities.

Thus, more research is necessary to understand how women in urban Southern contexts, particularly in cities like Ibadan, reinterpret these traditional tools in digitally mediated, health-conscious environments. Collectively, these studies paint a holistic picture of *Kayan Mata* use as both a cultural remnant and a contemporary tool of sexual expression. The literature reveals not only the motivations behind its use but also the implications for agency, health, and relationship dynamics. However, there remains a gap in understanding how young, educated women in Southern Nigeria particularly in cities like Ibadan, are interpreting and engaging with these practices in the digital age. This study seeks to fill that gap by contextualising *Kayan Mata* use within the lived experiences of urban youth navigating intimacy, desire, and power.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Empowerment Theory (FET) originates from feminist thought and activism aimed at challenging gender inequalities and promoting women's agency. It builds on the work of feminist scholars who argue that true empowerment goes beyond individual choices and requires structural change (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999). This theory is deeply rooted in feminist movements that have historically fought for women's rights, independence, and control over their own bodies and decisions. The idea of empowerment as a feminist concept emerged during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when scholars and activists emphasised women's rights, reproductive autonomy, and economic independence (Kabeer, 1999). By the 1990s, the concept had evolved into a structured framework within development studies, gender research, and social policy (Cornwall, 2016).

Two key scholars, Naila Kabeer (1999) and Jo Rowlands (1997), played significant roles in formalising the concept of feminist empowerment. Their work highlights that empowerment is not just about individual confidence but also about challenging systemic power structures that limit women's choices. Naila Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where such choices were previously denied. She argued that real empowerment happens when women gain resources, decision-making power, and control over their lives. Jo Rowlands (1997) introduced the idea that empowerment is both a process and an outcome, meaning that women must go through a journey of self-awareness and action to achieve control over their lives.

Empowerment or Reinforcing Gender Norms?

Feminist Empowerment Theory helps us question whether using *Kayan Mata* is truly empowering or simply reinforcing societal expectations. If a woman uses *Kayan Mata* because it enhances her personal experience and pleasure, this aligns with empowerment. If she feels pressured to use it to "keep a man," then her actions are being shaped by gendered expectations rather than

personal agency. Many women in existing studies admitted that their partners expected them to use *Kayan Mata*, reinforcing the idea that women bear the responsibility of maintaining attraction and intimacy in relationships. This reflects a broader pattern where women are encouraged to constantly work to remain desirable, while men are not held to the same standard (Cornwall, 2016). True empowerment happens when women feel free to make choices about their sexuality without pressure, fear, or dependence on external products (Nwokocha and Taiwo 2012; Kabeer, 1999). While *Kayan Mata* can be a tool for self-expression, its widespread use raises concerns about whether women are making truly independent choices or responding to cultural conditioning.

Feminist Empowerment Theory provides an important framework for understanding the complex relationship between *Kayan Mata* use, sexual agency, and societal expectations. While some women use it as a form of self-confidence and sexual control, others use it because they feel they must. The commercialisation of *Kayan Mata* also raises questions about who really benefits from its widespread use, women seeking empowerment, or the market that sells empowerment as a product. True empowerment should not come from a purchased item, but from self-awareness, confidence, and the ability to define one's sexuality on one's own terms (Nwokocha 2010). Thus, the use of *Kayan Mata* sits at a crossroads between personal empowerment and societal pressure. To truly empower women, we must ensure they have access to knowledge, the ability to make free choices, and the confidence to feel desirable on their own terms, not because a product tells them they should.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Ibadan, Nigeria. This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to investigate the use of *Kayan Mata* among young women between ages of 18 and 40 in urban Ibadan. A qualitative approach was utilized, involving twenty (20) In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with young women and ten (10) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with *Kayan Mata* vendors, traditional healers, and public health professionals. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure a diverse representation of socio-demographic backgrounds across the five Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Ibadan Metropolis including Ibadan North, Ibadan North-East, Ibadan North-West, Ibadan South-East and Ibadan South-West. Semi-structured interview guides were used to elicit detailed accounts of participants' knowledge, experiences, and perceptions regarding *Kayan Mata*. Data was analysed thematically to identify patterns, beliefs, and experiences related to *Kayan Mata* use.

Results

The use of *Kayan Mata* products in Ibadan Metropolis is influenced by several interrelated factors, ranging from personal desires and societal pressures to cultural beliefs, peer influence, and economic accessibility. Many respondents

noted that *Kayan Mata* is often seen as a tool to enhance sexual appeal, improve marital relationships, and empower women in their intimate lives.

Patterns of Use Across Social Categories

Analysis of participants' experiences shows single that single women in committed relationships and young married women form the greatest percentage of *Kayan Mata* users. This tendency is also in line with the age of the study's sample: 18-40 years, that is, the age when most women actively negotiate their emotional, relational and sexual identities. This is the period of life when the relational exploration is increased, and long-term relationships are established, and the early years of marriage, where intimacy, desirability, and partner satisfaction issues are very important matters. Women aged 20-35 years were in the limelight of this category. Women who were in serious relationships but were single mentioned that *Kayan Mata* assisted them to stay confident and deliver to the perceived expectations with evolving romantic commitments. Likewise, young married women complained that they used them to find their way through marriage intimacy pressures, maintain attraction, and rekindle passion during periods of emotional distance.

Educated and urban based women were also very common among the users, and this was mainly because they were more exposed to online vendors of such products, social media marketing, and peer networks where such products are openly discussed.

Relationship Issues

Relationship issues are a significant catalyst for the use of *Kayan Mata*, with many respondents viewing it as a solution to sexual or emotional challenges within their relationships. For some women, marital dissatisfaction or communication barriers can lead to a desire to reignite intimacy. *Kayan Mata* products are often seen as a way to address issues like emotional distance, low libido, or long periods of sexual monotony, restoring passion in relationships. One respondent shared her experience thus:

My partner stopped showing interest in me, and I started feeling like he was no longer attracted to me. After using *Kayan Mata*, things started changing; we became more intimate again. (IDI 5/35Years/Christianity/CivilServant/Married/IbadanNorth-East/Bashorun)

The description of this respondent illustrates the emotional fragility that accompanies perceived withdrawal from a partner. Her story explains how women construct reduced attentiveness as a potential threat to stability of their relationship. Her experience sees *Kayan Mata* as a solution to restoring emotional intimacy and redefining desirability. This highlights the way in which sexual enhancement products become symbolic: they are

functional, not merely at the physical level, but also as processes that help women to mediate their fears of rejection and work through emotional dilemmas inherent in long-term relationships.

Similarly, another respondent who had recently entered a relationship with her partner explained the role *Kayan Mata* played in boosting her confidence thus:

I didn't feel attractive enough for my partner at first. But when I tried *Kayan Mata*, I felt empowered and I noticed the change in how he looked at me. (IDI 7/24 Years/Christianity/Student/Single/Ibadan North/Agbowo)

Kayan Mata is seen as a psychological buffer against insecurity. Her account above shows how young women internalize social norms of attractiveness and sexual desirability. Here, the product provided a sense of reassurance and contributed to relational confidence, illustrating how the use of *Kayan Mata* can be shaped by both internalised standards and relational aspirations. This observation further suggests that it is not only personal preference that forms the sexual self-concept of women but also the expectation of partner evaluation.

Long-term relationships further reveal the thematic issue. Most women discussed the cumulative effects of emotional labour, routine fatigue, and persistent relational demands. In these conditions, *Kayan Mata* becomes a means of breaking repetitive patterns and redistributing the role of intimacy.

For some respondents, *Kayan Mata* likewise serves as a tool for overcoming the effects of emotional exhaustion, especially in long-term relationships. Many women indicated that they turn to these products as a means to feel rejuvenated in their romantic lives.

We see women who come to us to explain how much they do just to please their husbands. Many women are tired and exhausted from the stress of trying to make their men keep up. *Kayan Mata* is very powerful. You don't need to be the one to initiate things anymore when you use it. Your partner will automatically become more involved, and your relationship will have hope again. (KII 8, Traditional Believer, Traditional Doctor, Married, Ibadan North-West, Eleyele, 15 years of experience)

This narrative highlights the fact that intimacy, its maintenance, and quality, is often feminised and absorbed in gendered ideals. The fact that she noted that the partners would be more involved after the women used *Kayan Mata* goes to show that these products can be used as an agent of renegotiating relational participation. Instead of simply improving sexual pleasure, *Kayan Mata* is turned into a relational tool, as a result of which women seek reciprocity and emotional involvement.

In a similar manner, a mother of three elaborated on the emotional rejuvenation she experienced thus:

After having my third child, I felt exhausted emotionally and physically. *Kayan Mata* made me feel like I could be the woman my partner fell in love with again. (IDI 17, 40, Christianity, Civil Servant, Married, Ibadan North-West, Onireke)

This shows how the burden of reproductive labour and child-care influences the emotional and sexual identity of women. Her experience points to the fact that there is a very deep interplay between physical exhaustion, motherhood, and desirability. Postpartum exhaustion may disrupt intimacy, and here, *Kayan Mata* is used as the means of restoring not only sexual performance but also the self. The desire to “be the woman my partner fell in love with again” reflects deep-seated gender norms that place the burden of sustaining relational affection and attraction primarily on women.

Whether it is insecurity, relationship distance, and loss of desire or being pressured by the need to appear attractive, women do not choose to be involved in these products often as an individual choice, rather, it is an expression of more general negotiations of gendered expectations, emotional labour and demands of relationships inherent in intimacy. As such, the use of *Kayan Mata* highlights the importance of women using sexual enhancement products as the means to maintain the relationship; strategies to reaffirm identity, and manage the evolving dynamics of their intimate relationships.

The cultural expectation that women should maintain their partner’s interest also surfaced in many responses. One respondent explained thus:

I started using *Kayan Mata* because I wanted to make sure, I kept my husband’s interest. In this society, if you don’t satisfy your man, someone else will. (IDI 14/34 Years/Traditional Believer/Trader/Married/Ibadan North-West/Agbeni)

For many women, these products become a means of preserving marital harmony and emotional connection. As one respondent put it thus:

Using *Kayan Mata* isn’t about fixing a problem. It is about ensuring that one’s relationship remained strong. (KII 3/Christianity/Women’s Rights Representative/Married/Ibadan North-East/Iwo Road/8 Years of Experience)

Autonomy and Control in Sexual Decision-making

Autonomy in sexual decision-making refers to an individual's ability to make choices about their intimate life without coercion or societal expectations dictating their actions. While some women perceive *Kayan Mata* as a tool for

gaining control, others feel their use of it is influenced by the expectations of their partners or society. A Respondent answered thus:

Even though I enjoy the effects of *Kayan Mata*, I sometimes feel like I am only using it because I want to meet the expectations of my partner. It is hard to separate what I really want from what I think I'm supposed to want. (IDI 11/ 23 Years/Christianity/Student/Single/Ibadan North-East/ Iwo Road)

This response highlights a psychological conflict common among women who use *Kayan Mata*. While it provides benefits, there is often an underlying question of authenticity, are they truly acting out of personal desire, or are they conforming to external pressures? This blurring of internal and external motivations complicates the idea of agency, as some women may feel they are making a choice when, in reality, that choice is shaped by societal pressures. A respondent recounted thus:

I am more confident using *Kayan Mata*, but I know a part of me does it because my partner wants it, not just because I need it. (KII 3/Christianity/Women's Rights Representative/Married/Ibadan North-East/Iwo Road/8 Years of Experience)

The respondent's acknowledgment that part of her motivation comes from her partner's desires reflects the subtle ways in which autonomy is negotiated within relationships. Even when women feel empowered by using *Kayan Mata*, their choices are not always entirely independent. This highlights how societal norms and personal empowerment exist in a delicate balance, where women's agency is partially shaped by external expectations, even as they seek personal satisfaction. Another Respondent said thus:

I do not think I need *Kayan Mata* to be in control of my sex life, but sometimes it makes me feel more empowered when I use it. (IDI 16/22 Years/Christianity/Trader/Single/Ibadan North-East/Oritamefa)

This response suggests a more autonomous perspective, where the respondent does not depend on *Kayan Mata* for sexual agency but sees it as a tool that enhances her confidence. This perspective indicates that while aphrodisiacs can serve as an empowerment mechanism, they should not be seen as the sole source of confidence and agency in intimate relationships. Sexual agency in the use of *Kayan Mata* is highly complex. While many women feel empowered, their choices are often shaped by social, relational, and cultural expectations. True autonomy in sexual decision-making requires more than just access to aphrodisiacs, it requires knowledge, confidence, and the ability to engage in open conversations about sexual well-being. Expanding sexual health

education and challenging gendered expectations are crucial steps toward ensuring that women's use of *Kayan Mata* is truly a choice rather than an expectation.

Social Norms, Stigma, and Sexual Expression

Social norms and cultural expectations have a profound influence on how sexual desires are expressed, especially for women. In many cultures, including in Ibadan, there is a significant stigma associated with women expressing their sexual desires openly. Women are often expected to conform to traditional gender roles, which include being sexually modest and not overtly expressing their sexual needs. The use of *Kayan Mata* aphrodisiacs may serve as a way for women to subtly assert their sexual needs without breaking social norms. Women can privately use these products to enhance their sexual experiences without overtly challenging the cultural and religious taboos surrounding open sexual expression. A respondent said thus:

I make, sell, and use my products, so, I understand the stigma associated with people who use *Kayan Mata*. In our culture, it is believed that it is wrong for women to talk about sex openly. In fact, in some communities, talking about sex is still a taboo. So, using *Kayan Mata* helps me express my sexual needs in a private way without feeling judged. Using *Kayan Mata* is our own way of taking control of our pleasure without openly going against our cultural norms. (KII 8/Traditional Believer/Traditional Doctor/Married/Ibadan North-West/Eleyele/15 Years of Experience)

This response highlights how cultural taboos limit open discussions about female sexuality. Women are often discouraged from openly expressing their sexual desires, as it is considered immodest or inappropriate. However, this does not mean that women do not have sexual needs; instead, they seek discreet ways to address them, such as using *Kayan Mata*. The respondent's statement reflects how women must navigate restrictive norms, ensuring that their actions align with cultural expectations while still seeking fulfillment and personal agency in their intimate relationships. While society enforces strict expectations of modesty and discretion, women still find ways to exercise agency over their sexual experiences. This reinforces the idea that women's sexual empowerment often occurs in hidden, culturally acceptable ways, rather than through open defiance of social norms. A respondent affirmed thus:

Sex is something women are expected to endure for their husbands. We cannot express our desires freely. So, I use *Kayan Mata* as a way to secretly enhance my own sexual experience. (IDI 14/34 Years/Traditional Believer/Trader, Married/Ibadan North-West/Agbeni)

This statement reflects the deeply ingrained expectation that sex is primarily for male pleasure, while women's enjoyment is secondary. The notion that women "endure" sex rather than actively participate in it for their own pleasure is a significant gender issue. The respondent, however, finds a way to reclaim some control over her sexual experience through *Kayan Mata*, which she uses privately to enhance her pleasure. This shows how women negotiate agency within restrictive structures, rather than directly confronting these societal expectations. Another respondent added thus:

Women in Ibadan do not talk openly about their sexual desires. I do not mind using *Kayan Mata* because it helps me feel more confident, but I would not share that with my friends. (*IDI 7/24 Years/Christianity/Student/Single/Ibadan North/Agbowo*)

This response highlights the role of peer pressure and collective cultural expectations in restricting open discussions about sex. Even among women, there is an unspoken rule that conversations about personal pleasure are inappropriate. In spite of experiencing confidence from using *Kayan Mata*, the respondent still chooses to keep it private, fearing potential judgment or disapproval from friends and society. This suggests that social stigma is not only externally enforced but also internalised, as women police each other's behaviour to conform to societal norms. A respondent shared thus:

Whenever I use *Kayan Mata*, it's in private because it feels like something I can't openly admit to. It's the only way I can experience sexual satisfaction without facing criticism. (*IDI 19/27 Years/Christianity/Civil Servant/Married/Ibadan South-East/Molete*)

This respondent's experience reflects the shame associated with female sexual pleasure in many conservative societies. The idea that sexual satisfaction must remain hidden reinforces the social imbalance between male and female sexuality, where men can openly seek ways to enhance their sexual experiences, while women must do so in secrecy. The respondent's need for discretion suggests that societal norms create psychological barriers, making women feel guilty or ashamed for seeking sexual fulfillment. A Key Informant shared thus:

Even though I know using *Kayan Mata* is not something that is openly discussed, it helps many women meet their sexual needs without causing a scandal. (*KII 5, Islam, Public Health Specialist, Married, Ibadan South-East, Oja-Oba, 5 years of experience*)

This response suggests that women recognise societal restrictions but still find ways to work around them. The use of *Kayan Mata* is a compromise between personal fulfillment and social acceptability: how to navigate rigid and gender norms without provoking criticism. It highlights the broader tension between private agency and public reputation, where women must carefully balance their sexual autonomy with their social image.

Reported Side Effects and Health Concerns

While most women described positive experiences with *Kayan Mata*, several respondents and key informants noted adverse effects. Reported side effects included vaginal itching, burning sensations, excessive dryness, unusual discharge, and mild infections. Traditional healers and health practitioners also reported attending to women with irritation or discomfort linked to certain unregulated herbal mixtures. These indicate that while *Kayan Mata* is widely used, its health implications remain insufficiently understood and often minimised by users due to shame or the private nature of sexual concerns. A respondent mentioned:

While some materials used in making *Kayan Mata* are traditional and herbal, there is a lack of research into their long-term effects. We have seen cases of women coming to the clinic with symptoms like dizziness, stomach discomfort, and skin rashes, which could be related to the use of these products. (KII 6, Islam, Public Health Specialist, Married, Ibadan South-West, Ring-Road, 5 years of experience)

This response exposes the critical gap in scientific research on *Kayan Mata* products. While these aphrodisiacs are often marketed as organic and safe, their unregulated nature means that women may be unknowingly exposing themselves to harmful substances. The lack of standardization in production increases the risk of contamination, incorrect dosages, and the inclusion of ingredients that may cause allergic reactions. Additionally, the absence of medical oversight means that women rely on informal knowledge rather than evidence-based medical guidance, which could lead to health complications. Another major concern is the effect of *Kayan Mata* on reproductive health. Some women turn to these products to boost libido, enhance fertility, or restore intimacy post-childbirth. However, certain unregulated herbs may disrupt hormonal balance, leading to irregular menstrual cycles, difficulty in conception, or even pregnancy complications. Another Respondent added:

Some of the ingredients in *Kayan Mata* products are known to influence hormonal cycles, which can be inimical to women's sexual and overall health at large, especially for women who are trying to conceive. (KII 2, Christianity, Public Health Specialist, Married, Ibadan North-East, Bashorun, 10 years of experience)

This response emphasizes the paradoxical nature of *Kayan Mata*; while it is perceived as a fertility enhancer, it may actually interfere with natural reproductive processes. This raises concerns about the consequences for women who consume these products without medical supervision.

Men's Awareness and Perceptions

Although men were not interviewed in this study, women's narratives and key informant explanations provide indirect insight into male awareness and responses. Most of the respondents interpreted their partners' increased affection, attention, or sexual involvement as evidence that *Kayan Mata* had positive effects, even when their men were unaware of its use. Similarly, key informants, including traditional practitioners, noted that men often did not know their partners used such products but nonetheless reported improved intimacy. Media reports also suggest that women frequently associate men's heightened commitment or responsiveness with the perceived effectiveness of *Kayan Mata*. This study's interpretations reflect women's perceptions rather than men's self-reported experiences and therefore represent a limitation of the study.

Discussion of Findings

This study explored how young women in Ibadan navigate sexual agency and relationship dynamics through the use of *Kayan Mata* aphrodisiacs. Rooted in Feminist Empowerment Theory (FET), the research interrogated the tension between personal autonomy and structural constraints shaping women's intimate lives. FET contends that empowerment extends beyond individual decision-making to include systemic transformation, challenging patriarchal norms, enhancing women's access to resources, and fostering self-determined agency (Nwokocha, 2004; Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997).

Findings revealed that *Kayan Mata* serves as both a coping mechanism and an empowerment tool, enabling women to negotiate emotional intimacy, revive sexual passion, and assert control within relationships. However, this perceived agency is often ambivalent. While some participants described feeling confident and revitalised, others admitted using *Kayan Mata* to conform to male expectations or social pressure. Thus, agency emerges as a negotiated construct, less a pure expression of autonomy than a strategic adaptation within patriarchal confines. A recurring theme was the hidden nature of female sexual expression, constrained by cultural and religious taboos. Women privately use *Kayan Mata* to bypass restrictive norms, subtly reclaiming sexual satisfaction without confronting societal expectations. This covert empowerment aligns with Rowlands' (1997) assertion that empowerment involves both internal transformation and relational negotiation.

The findings further reveal that empowerment through *Kayan Mata* is complicated by its unregulated health risks, which introduces additional complexities. While most respondents reported increased confidence and intimacy, both users and key informants highlighted some side effects ranging

from vaginal irritation, dryness, and discomfort to hormonal imbalances and potential reproductive and fertility complications. These health concerns reveal an important paradox in that; the same products women use to reclaim sexual agency may, at the same time, expose them to some vulnerabilities that undermine body autonomy. FET emphasises that empowerment requires access not only to choices but also to safe, informed, and structurally supported choices. In this context, the health risks of *Kayan Mata* introduce a structural barrier that limits women's ability to exercise meaningful agency.

From a policy lens, these findings reveal the need to integrate sexual agency into reproductive health and gender policies. Public health interventions must go beyond biomedical messaging to include culturally sensitive conversations about sexual pleasure, consent, and autonomy; while also ensuring women have accurate information about the potential health consequences of aphrodisiac use. Moreover, gender equality strategies must address the social stigma that compels women to seek empowerment in silence. Expanding access to comprehensive sexual education, supporting women's safe spaces, and challenging regressive norms can shift empowerment from the private to the public sphere, ensuring that sexual agency is not a compromise but a right.

Conclusion

It suffices to posit that the exploration of *Kayan Mata* use among young women in Ibadan reveals a complex interplay of agency, societal norms, and intimate negotiations. Far from a simplistic narrative of empowerment or subjugation, the phenomenon embodies a *sui generis* form of covert resistance, where women reconfigure restrictive sexual scripts within culturally sanctioned boundaries. *Kayan Mata* becomes not merely a tool for physical pleasure but a strategic device for reclaiming intimacy, navigating emotional fatigue, and subtly asserting sexual autonomy. Yet, this agency is never absolute, it is partial, negotiated, and often shaped by relational expectations, social stigma, and internalised cultural codes. The private, often unspoken use of these aphrodisiacs underscores a deeper politics of silence, where women's desires are validated only when cloaked in discretion. This veiled empowerment disrupts binaries of liberation versus conformity, challenging policy and scholarship to rethink how autonomy is exercised under constraint. Nonetheless, the results also bring to the fore other emergent health issues of unregulated *Kayan Mata* products, which is a way of reminding us that the steps to sexual agency may put women at risk leading to the further complications of their intimate negotiations. Ultimately, the phenomenon of *Kayan Mata* reflects a silent yet potent form of socio-sexual navigation, one that demands deeper, policy-attuned understanding of how young women assert agency amid layered social pressures.

In order to address the nuanced interplay of sexual agency, societal expectations, and the use of *Kayan Mata* aphrodisiacs among young women in Ibadan, a multi-tiered feminist policy approach is essential. Sexual health

education must be reconceptualised to reflect the lived realities of women, emphasising autonomy, emotional literacy, and informed consent. Curriculum reforms should integrate culturally sensitive but rights-based modules that normalise women's sexual agency without stigma. Public health initiatives should provide confidential access to sexual wellness resources while facilitating safe spaces for open dialogue. Interventions must also engage men, challenging patriarchal norms that render female sexuality subordinate or transactional. At the policy level, regulations around traditional aphrodisiac use should not be prohibitionist but rather protective, ensuring quality control while recognising women's right to pleasure and bodily autonomy. Community-level advocacy must dismantle shame-based discourses around female desire by amplifying women's voices through feminist collectives and media campaigns. Empowerment must be both structural and symbolic, reshaping how society values women's choices in intimate relationships without surveillance or moralisation.

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