

'Sponsor' Relationship among Kenyan University Students (*Perspective Essay*)

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to explore both the factors that contribute to illicit relationships between university students and financially endowed adults (here-in referred to as sponsors) and in so doing offer some pragmatic solutions to the problem. The fact that young University students engage carnally with older richer men and women poses an ethical dilemma necessitated by a warped utilitarian and relativistic philosophical model of thought. The essay proceeds by exploring factors that force the students and adults into sponsor relationships(push factors) and factors that attract them into sponsor relationships(pull factors). It finally suggests some possible pragmatic solutions based on the author's experience and observations as a former high school student and teacher, a former university student, and a current university teacher.

Keywords: Sponsor, Sponsee

I. INTRODUCTION

While the concept of sponsorship has a positive, descriptive and dictionary connotation, it has been acquiring a rather bizarre connotation in Kenyan social context, specifically among university students. In the socio-linguistics of Kenyan University students, a *Sponsor* or '*Sponyee*' is a financially endowed adult willing to exchange their finances with fringe benefits from one or several university students. Some of the fringe benefits sponsors accrue from students include sexual attention while the '*sponsee*' (the student being sponsored) for the most part accesses the liquid cash of the sponsor. This kind of symbiotic relationship is necessitated by a myriad of factors which can be divided into the *Push* factors and *Pull* factors. Push factors refer to conditions that *force* either the sponsor or the '*sponsee*' into a sponsorship relationship while the pull factors refer to conditions that *attract* the sponsor or '*sponsee*' into a sponsorship relationship

II. PUSH FACTORS

Poverty: Lack of or inadequate access to basic needs and the need to meet these needs push university students into sponsor relationship. While university students are given government loan, generally known as HELB loan, the amount disbursed to some of them seem to only cater to fees and partially accommodation. The remaining amount, if any, cannot cater to the whole semesters' basic needs, including food and clothing. While some students come from reasonably well-off families, the majority comes from low-income families whose support to their university sons and daughters are at its bear minimum or shifted towards their younger siblings in primary

and secondary schools. With this gap, the students are forced to seek a solution to the problem, yet the kind of solution sought depends on the individual student's outlook, philosophy and moral upbringing. For some, of course, illicit sexual affairs are a less strenuous mode of backing up their meagre financial states.

Dysfunctional Marriages: The sponsors who are mostly financially endowed come from mixed age-groups; from the early thirties and to early sixties. Some are married and of different social status. They also come from different professions-Lawyers, accountants, doctors, lecturers to mention but a few. Politicians, senior business people and even religious or leaders are part of the many cohorts of Sponsors. The push factors for their sexual engagement with young university students can only be speculated, but most considerably, among the married sponsors, we can speculate dysfunctional marriages occasioned by psycho-sexual dissatisfaction. While marriage is generally considered as a cure to sexual ills for its presumed legitimacy, it does not necessarily lead to happiness and the bliss it is poetically assumed to offer. Physical abuse and unhappy marriages lead to sexual passivity and its correlate of extramarital affairs. Married couples within the precincts of a university may engage with university girls as a 'solution' to their miserable sex life in marriages. A beautiful young lady, so active sexually and with a warm heart can be a temporary antidote to an old abusive and sexually 'lousy' spouse just as an old rich sexually starved man is an antidote for a poor university boyfriend who cannot provide their needy girlfriends with basics needs.

Deficiency in life skills as a push factor: A holistic education is one in which all aspects of the learner's experiences are put into consideration. The learner is expected to be an all-round person. However, with the ongoing Education and with its emphasis on certificates and academic titles, several aspects of Education are left out to the possible detriment of the student. One such example of neglected educational aspects includes training in life skills. While it is almost obvious that many people live reasonably well, it is not obvious whether their living well is an effect of change or a product of systematic consideration of issues in life. Existential questions and life skills are supposed to be addressed in families, in church, in school, in media and most conveniently for University students, the University is supposed not just to be the centre of Education but also the centre of formation. Some of the life

skills that form part of holistic Education include decision making skills, assertiveness, Self esteem, creative thinking and critical thinking. It should be noted that life is the cumulative decision-making processes with subsequent consequences. As such bad decisions lead to bad life, lack of assertiveness and self esteem are precipices to bad decision, lack of creativity and criticality lead to shallow thinking and subsequent bad decision making. While these skills are so crucial there seem to be little emphasis in the family and in the wider society. In Kenyan Secondary schools for instance Life skills lessons are scheduled once a week and since they are not examinable the tendency is to replace such lessons with science and mathematics. Apart from skiving life skills lessons, clubs and societies in some schools are seen as a waste of meaningful time that could be used for covering form academic/ syllabus. However, these students who are denied formation in life skills and informal Education in schools are prospective victims of abuse and self-abuse at the university level, and that academic pumping alone is not enough for their future survival. In some universities where life skills like critical thinking are taught, it is done for grading purposes, and the students, for instance, know that they are studying critical thinking, communication skills, and computer skills to get good grades for graduation and not for appropriation into lifestyles. As is the routine, partly due to high numbers of students and partly due to indifference on the part of the University tutors and lectures, there is minimal interaction with the learners. One aspect that university students struggle with is sexually related issues. Universities are rife with sexually active students; some consider themselves as liberated high school slaves were thrown into the world of freedom, including sexual freedom. While they believe that they are free, they find themselves in emotional entanglement and unhealthy relationships including 'sponsor-sponsee' relationships with no one to help them out except through their imaginations which were stifled in high schools. The result is 'unwanted pregnancies', abortions, suicide, revenge and depression.

Permissiveness: The concept of Permissiveness refers to moral indifference. When the family, the society or learning institutions do not reproach certain kinds of behaviours that are deemed unethical, there is a tendency of the members of the society and the youths to normalize immorality and to frown upon what is moral. When students no longer find it out of odds to engage sexually with adults the age of their parents and when older persons do not find it odd to have sex with youngsters the age of their daughters or sons then we are talking about a society with a dead conscience. Such a society may not condemn the immoralities inherent in such acts, and the failure to do so opens the leeway to extreme ethical relativism and egoism that permits all kinds of acts including '*Sponsorship*'.

III. THE PULL FACTOR: PEER PRESSURE AS A PULL FACTOR

Peer pressure is one of the most common determinants of behaviour among humans. It is based on the fact that humans are essentially social animals who influence each other through direct and indirect psychological persuasions. In a popular sense, the spirit of competition demands that one should be better than other people. In an ideal situation, competition should be self-directed and chronological such that benchmarking and positive peer pressure demands that a person compares him/ herself with others only for his/her self improvement. Negative peer pressure, on the other hand, compels a person not towards improvement but for the sole purpose of being better than another one. The current generation of Kenyan University students belongs to the generation known as the *Millenials* characterized by the capitalist environment, which in turn exhibits itself through a heightened sense of entitlement, cut-throat competition and maximization of profit. With this mentality, the value of any relationship is assessed in terms of competitiveness and profitability. In the wake of Sponsor relationship, University students are more than willing to sacrifice moral principles regulating sexual behaviour and embrace the *I-am-better-than thou* attitude instead of the *I-am-better-than -I- was* attitude. The latter is the premise for the maximization of profit provided by a sponsor. The students from financially stable families engage with sponsors not that they lack daily upkeep but for the same reason, afore stated; Competition with colleagues and maximization of accrued profits. The disregard for ethics in such kind of relationship is one of the impacts of capitalist social Philosophy. At a more benign level, the genuinely needy students attempt to solve their issues by looking for sponsors, not that there may be no alternative solutions but because they want to imitate their *colleagues-in-fashion* and that getting money in exchange for sexual favours is a pleasurable and less stressful way of acquiring money.

IV. SOME PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS

University: Universities in Kenya have staff employed to deal with existential issues faced by students, normally under the deans of student affairs, counselling departments and chaplaincies. Despite their presence and efforts, cases of sponsor relationships, suicides, drug trafficking and abuses still abound. While it is true that much underground work is taking place in these departments, we posit that deans, counsellors, chaplaincies and even lecturers need to be more proactive beyond the office desks and immerse themselves into student's life even if it is undercover. Staying in offices waiting for students to bring forward issues is not only a sign of passivity and to some degree, a symptom of indifference but also a misguided mentality about the versatility of the contemporary learner. While counselling is based on the willing client willing relationship, there is nothing wrong in a counsellor interacting informally with students and student representatives as a means of gathering information and detecting possible troubles among students. One of the big

hindrances is that the world of academia is so much idolized and hierarchy oriented such that a professor, a lecturer and a PhD holder may not meet with undergraduate students on other grounds except when they are dictating lecture notes. The social chasm places the university teacher at a pedestal that may not be penetrated by 'simple uneducated undergrads'. As such it is recommendable that the lecturers come down to the level of students so that students may feel free to interact informally with professors and lecturers who as a matter of fact should clear the fog of social interactions with students. Universities have sports and social, religious clubs that are well-meaning lecturers and professors should penetrate. To be a university teacher is not to be a demi-god in a far -off land, it is to be an Aristotelian, a Dewian and an existentialist dealing real humanity of students. Lastly, Universities can also avail or help learners to access information on other sources of financing like bursaries, grants and national development funds as a part of the many mitigation measures against the sponsorship.

Canteens and tuck shops: In several Kenyan universities there are university canteens or tuck shops that facilitate the purchase of basic items like snacks, stationeries and other basic items. They are sources of income for those who operate them. In most cases, they are run by students or student organizations with the permission and regulation of the university administration. However, in many cases, the profits accrued tend to benefit only a few individual students or even staff. If universities made it a policy that the tuck shops should be used as a means of generating cash for the needy students, cases of desperation related to financial needs would reduce significantly. One of the chaplaincies, Kenyatta University catholic chaplaincies, has a long tradition of using tuck shops to serve the student's needs. All profit accrued from its tuck shops are dispensed towards the needy students in cash or kind through stuff like maize mill, sanitary pads, shoe polish are dispensed to students who are in most need.

Parents: While it feels great for a parent to have a child studying in a University and it being one of the processes towards social mobility, prestige and honour the problem is that some parents in Kenya tend to neglect their sons and daughters assuming that they are already adults who do not need follow-ups. Some parents assume that student loan given by Kenyan Higher Education loans board is sufficient enough for the daily upkeep of their sons and daughters at the University, which is rarely true. They use this premise as a means of denying their children extra upkeep, yet it is this kind of neglect that acts as a precipice to clandestine relationships. A little illustration can clarify the point; Assuming that a Kenyan student is given a loan of Ks. 40, 000 p.a. For regulation purposes, the Higher Education Loans Board only remit half of the amount to the students per semester (that is Ksh. 20, 000). Out of this amount, a student is expected to pay around Ksh. 15, 000 as tuition fee plus an average of Ksh. 3000 for accommodation. This means she is

left with Ksh. 2000 for food, travel and other basic upkeep for four months semester. When such a student is not supported financially, the possibility that she will have to look for extraneous illicit ways of getting money is high especially if they do not have sufficient life skills like critical thinking, assertiveness and proper decision-making skills. Entering into prostitution and *sponsor-sponsee* relationship is an easy bailout for students who might find it a bit hard to think a little more and for those whose moral upbringing inclines towards Permissiveness. As such parents still have an obligation to extend the care of their sons and daughters at the University for Post Adolescence Guidance. Financial and material support is necessary, especially for those who come from low-income families. A fourth-year student is in much need of financial counselling as does a grade seven pupil. The freshmen stage is a necessary transition from a custodial culture characterized by high school monitoring and consistent presence of the teacher and the parent in the learner's life, to a semi-autonomous one. To avoid culture shock at the University, these former high school students still need help because they are not fully autonomous.

Guided freedom: The transition from high school lifestyle to university lifestyle is replete with a lot of sociological challenges. Learners, parents and the University must involve themselves in helping the learners transit smoothly beyond orientation day. The high school culture in Africa is that of close monitoring, characterized by a fully occupied day with consistent presence of the teachers. In University the culture is a bit relaxed with little follow-ups from adults and lecturers. This newly acquired freedom may be a shocker to young people who are used to being watched over and monitored closely. The tendency is to become over creative and explore the untapped areas of freedom like 'freedom to have sex', 'freedom to taste drugs', 'freedom to exploit social media and porn', 'freedom not to attend lectures' among others. It is at this point that the slogan " my life my choice " is adopted not knowing the immediate opposite side could also be 'my death my choice'. Consequently, it can be inferred that the newly-acquired freedom must necessarily be channeled towards productivity with support of the members of the wider university community and the society at large.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay has outlined selected causes of the illicit sexual relationships between adults for monetary reasons and possible mitigation measures. Some of the causes include Poverty, Dysfunctional Marriages among adult perpetrators and Deficiency in life skills, Permissiveness and peer pressure. It outlines the role of the University, of parents and counselling in helping out victims of 'Sponsor' relationships. We opine that though it might not be possible to eradicate the vice, it is a lesser evil to attempt some solutions than to assume nothing is wrong. Loss of moral campus is a precipice to social disorder.