Influence of Mass Media on Teenage Sexuality in Ika North-East L.G.A

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[0190] Abstract

This study explores the influence of mass media on teenage sexuality among social media users in Ika North East Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on the Social Learning Theory as its guiding framework and employed mixed-methods research design. The population of the study comprised 200 teenagers aged 14-19 from secondary schools in Ika North-East Local Government Area using a stratified random sampling procedure. The instruments used in gathering data for the study include a structured questionnaire which was used in gathering quantitative data, and in-depth interviews which were conducted to gather qualitative insights. The study analyzed quantitative data using descriptive (frequencies, percentages) and inferential statistics (chi-square) and qualitative data using thematic analysis. The findings revealed widespread media use among respondents, with 87% reporting frequent consumption, predominantly television (70%) and social media (60%). A majority (65%) acknowledged that media influenced their perceptions of sexual behavior. Specifically, 57% believed television normalized relationships based on physical attraction. While 60% gained useful sexual health information from media, 45% felt crucial information on unsafe practice consequences was lacking. The study concluded that mass media significantly shapes teenage sexual attitudes, contributes to some health awareness, and can promote unrealistic norms related to teenage sexuality. The study recommended the implementation of formal sexual education programmes, both in schools and through community initiatives to counterbalance the negative effects of media portrayals and ensure that adolescents receive accurate and reliable information regarding sexuality.

Keywords: Ika North East, Media Influence, Mass Media, Sexual Health, social media, Teenage Sexuality.

Introduction

The mass media encompass an array of communication channels designed to reach a large audience. According to Dominick (2009), these channels include traditional platforms such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, as well as newer digital platforms like the Internet and social media. Thompson (1995) notes that mass media are characterized by their capacity for widespread dissemination of information, the impersonal nature of their communication, and the one-way flow of information from producer to consumer. Lasswell (1948) outlined three primary functions of mass media to include surveillance of the environment (providing news and information), correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment (interpreting information and prescribing conduct), and transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next (education and socialization). Beyond these, McQuail (2010) points out that mass media also serves to entertain, persuade, and provide a platform for public discourse, thereby playing crucial roles in shaping societal norms, values, and understanding.

The pervasive nature of mass media naturally leads to questions about its influence on various aspects of human development, particularly during impressionable periods such as adolescence. Exposure to mass media content, which often includes portrayals of relationships, intimacy, and sexual behaviour, can intersect with the development of teenage sexuality. Teenage sexuality, as defined by Planned Parenthood Federation of America (2023), constitutes a blend of biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to an adolescent's sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviours. This period is characterized by hormonal changes, identity exploration, and the development of romantic and sexual interests. Constituent elements of teenage sexuality include understanding one's sexual orientation, developing values around sex and relationships, experiencing sexual arousal and fantasies, and engaging in sexual activities.

The influence of mass media on teenage sexuality is a widely researched area, with many studies suggesting a significant impact. According to a comprehensive review by Strasburger, Wilson, and

Jordan (2014), media, including television, movies, music videos, and online content, often presents glamorized, unrealistic, or risky sexual behaviours with minimal depiction of negative consequences. This exposure can shape teenagers' perceptions of what is considered normative sexual behaviour, influence their attitudes towards sex, and hasten the onset of sexual activity. Brown, L'Engle, Pardun, Guo, Kenneavy, and Jackson (2006) assert that frequent exposure to sexual content in media is associated with earlier initiation of sexual intercourse and increased likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviours. The mechanisms of this influence are varied; media can provide sexual scripts, normalize certain behaviors (like casual sex or unprotected sex), contribute to peer norms by portraying certain behaviours as common or desirable among young people, and influence body image and expectations in romantic or sexual relationships. Moreover, the interactive nature of social media can amplify these influences through peer-to-peer sharing of sexualized content and online social pressures (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Considering the body of research on mass media's influence on adolescent sexual development in various contexts, it raises questions about the situation for teenagers in Ika North-East Local Government Area of Delta State. While global media trends are pervasive, local cultural norms, access to different forms of media, and parental or community mediation can shape the extent and nature of this influence. One might wonder if the portrayals of sexuality in television programmes, music videos, and online platforms equally shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of teenagers in Ika North-East as reported in studies from Western countries or even other urban areas in Nigeria. If such influence exists, what specific components of the mass media are most salient in facilitating this influence among teenagers in Ika North-East L.G.A? Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the perceived influence of mass media on the sexuality of teenagers in Ika North-East Local Government Area.

Literature Review
Influence of Various Forms of Mass Media on Teenage Sexuality: Mass media exerts a considerable influence on young people, acting as an agent of socialisation regarding norms, values, and behaviours, including those related to sexuality. Different forms of media convey sexual content in distinct ways and shape how teenagers perceive intimacy, relationships, and sexual activity. According to Strasburger, Wilson and Jordan (2014), various media platforms, from traditional television to digital online spaces, frequently feature sexual themes, often without portraying potential negative outcomes. This ubiquitous presence means adolescents are regularly exposed to media messages that can impact their understanding of sexuality. Television remains a dominant source of media exposure for many adolescents, and its content frequently includes sexual portrayals. Studies indicate that genres popular with teenagers, such as soap operas and reality shows, often depict sexual relationships and encounters. Brown, L'Engle, Pardun, Guo, Kenneavy and Jackson (2006) assert that frequent viewing of sexual content on television is associated with a greater likelihood of initiating sexual intercourse and engaging in risky sexual behaviours. The narratives presented can normalise certain actions, influence teenagers' expectations about relationships, and contribute to their sexual scripts.

In addition, social media platforms represent an increasingly influential domain in adolescents' lives, offering different avenues for exposure to sexual content and the formation of sexual attitudes. Valkenburg and Peter (2013) point out that the interactive nature of social media allows for peer-to-peer sharing of sexualised material and involvement in discussions about sex and relationships, which can further shape individual perspectives. Adolescents may encounter explicit content, discussions about sexual experiences, and visually suggestive material, often outside the guidance of adults, which can influence their understanding and normalise certain behaviours. Beyond television and social media, other forms of mass media also influence teenage sexuality. Music, movies, and magazines often feature sexual themes in lyrics, visuals and storylines. Wright, Tokunaga, Black and Manning (2013) suggest that exposure to sexual content across various media forms contributes to a greater acceptance of casual sex and can influence attitudes towards relationships.

Also, media serves as a source of information about sexual health for adolescents. While some content might address topics like contraception or sexually transmitted infections, studies show this information is frequently inaccurate, incomplete, or sensationalised. Bleakley, Manganello, Contente and Fishbein (2008) state that adolescents often report learning about sexual health from media, yet this exposure does not consistently translate into accurate knowledge or safer behaviours, highlighting the potential for misinformation to shape their understanding of risks and precautions. Media portrayals also influence adolescents' attitudes towards diverse sexualities and relationship structures, which can

affect their own identity development and acceptance of others. Exposure to media featuring LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships, or non-traditional family structures can either promote understanding and acceptance or perpetuate stereotypes and stigma, depending on the nature of the portrayal. Hart (2017) describes how representation in media influences adolescents' normalisation and perception of various identities and relationships, and how it impacts their attitudes beyond just heterosexual behaviours. The impact of media on body image and self-esteem is another crucial aspect linked to teenage sexuality. Media frequently presents idealised and often unrealistic body types, particularly in the context of sexual attractiveness. This exposure can lead adolescents to develop negative feelings about their own bodies, affecting their confidence, sexual self-esteem, and willingness to engage in intimate relationships. Grabe, Ward and Hyde (2008) assert that media consumption, particularly of content emphasising idealised appearance, is associated with body dissatisfaction among adolescents, which can have implications for their sexual well-being and experiences.

Furthermore, the rise of streaming services and on-demand media consumption has altered how adolescents engage with sexual content. Peter and Valkenburg (2018) note that unlike scheduled programming, these platforms allow for repeated viewing and easy access to a wide range of content at any time. This increased control over media consumption means adolescents can seek out and repeatedly expose themselves to specific types of sexual portrayals, thereby intensifying their influence compared to more sporadic exposure through traditional broadcast media. The affordances of online platforms enable selective and intensive exposure to content, including sexual material, with potentially amplified effects on attitudes and behaviours.

Effects of Peer Pressure and Social Norms Perpetuated by Media on Teenage Sexual Behaviour: Adolescence is a critical period for social development, during which peer relationships and the adoption of social norms play a powerful role in shaping behaviour. Brown and Theobald (1998) articulate that adolescent are highly attuned to the attitudes and behaviours of their peers, seeking acceptance and striving to fit in. This susceptibility to peer influence extends to decisions and behaviours related to sexuality, as teenagers navigate social expectations within their peer groups. Mass media play a vital role in the formation and reinforcement of these social norms related to sexuality among adolescents. By depicting certain sexual behaviours, relationship dynamics, and appearances as common, desirable, or expected, media content can influence what teenagers perceive as normative within their social circles. Gerbner (1998) corroborates this stance further, noting that repeated exposure to media portrayals cultivates perceptions of social reality, which suggests that consistent media messages about sexuality can shape adolescents' beliefs about what is normal or prevalent behaviour among their peers.

Moreover, social media platforms can directly facilitate peer pressure related to sexuality. The interactive nature allows for the rapid dissemination of content and trends among peers (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten, 2006). Online interactions and the desire for social validation can pressure teenagers to conform to certain behaviours or attitudes presented online or shared by friends. This can lead to engagement in risky sexual activities or adopting distorted views on relationships. Moreover, the public nature of some social media interactions can amplify feelings of pressure to align with perceived peer norms.

Notably, the media also influence the expectations adolescents hold about relationships and sexual encounters, which in turn can affect how they respond to peer influence. When media portrays relationships centred on physical attraction or casual encounters without emotional depth, it can create unrealistic expectations. Ward and Friedman (2006) points out that media provides unhealthy sexual scripts that teenagers may internalise and feel pressured to follow to be seen as experienced or desirable by their peers. This can lead to engaging in sexual behaviours not necessarily aligned with their personal values but driven by a desire for social acceptance or perceived maturity. Online influencers and celebrities, amplified by media platforms, play a significant role in shaping peer norms related to sexuality. Adolescents often look up to these figures and may adopt their styles, attitudes, and even relationship approaches as portrayed in media. Raggatt, Wright and Bonello (2018) highlight how the behaviours and relationships depicted by popular online personalities can quickly become aspirational or normalised within peer groups, influencing discussions and expectations about sexuality among adolescents.

Moreover, media exposure can also normalise specific risky sexual behaviours within peer discussions and expectations. When unprotected sex, casual encounters, or objectification are depicted without negative consequences, these portrayals can lower perceived risks and make such behaviours seem more acceptable or commonplace. Tokunaga (2015) states that frequent exposure to media

showcasing risky sexual activities without realistic outcomes is associated with adolescents perceiving these behaviours as less risky and more normative, which can be reinforced through peer conversations influenced by media. Social media challenges and trends related to sexuality can directly drive peer pressure and participation in certain behaviours. Platforms like TikTok or Instagram often feature viral challenges or trends that may involve suggestive dancing, revealing clothing, or discussions of sexual topics. These trends create immediate social pressure to participate to gain likes, followers, or simply to fit in, leading adolescents to engage in behaviours they might otherwise avoid. According to Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, Harvey, Kelso, and Kendall (2013), the performative nature of social media, driven by peer interaction and visibility, can compel young people to participate in potentially sexualised trends to maintain their social standing.

Furthermore, the media often perpetuate gendered expectations regarding sexual behaviour, which are then reinforced within peer groups. Media might portray boys as expected to be sexually assertive and experienced, while girls might be presented as objects of desire or expected to be more passive or focused on relationships over sex. This influences the roles adolescents feel pressured to play within sexual contexts and relationships, shaped by both media messages and the peer norms that reflect them (Ward, 2020). This can contribute to traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, as well as impact how adolescent boys and girls perceive their own sexuality and the expectations placed upon them by peers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Learning Theory. Social Learning Theory (SLT), primarily developed by Albert Bandura in the mid-1960s and extensively refined throughout the 1970s, offers a psychological perspective on how individuals acquire new behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions. The theory diverges from earlier behaviorist approaches by emphasizing the crucial role of observational learning, imitation and modeling. It posits that learning is a cognitive process that occurs within a social context and can take place purely through observation, even in the absence of direct reinforcement or personal experience. According to Bandura, individuals learn by observing the behavior of others, who serve as models, and by observing the consequences that follow these behaviours in the environment. This observational learning allows individuals to acquire complex patterns of behaviour and anticipate outcomes without having to perform the behaviour themselves or experience the consequences directly.

The core tenets of Social Learning Theory revolve around several interconnected concepts. Observational learning is the central mechanism and suggests that people learn through watching others. This process involves several key steps: Attention (the observer must pay attention to the model's behaviour and its consequences), Retention (the observer must be able to remember and store the observed information), Reproduction (the observer must have the physical and cognitive ability to reproduce the observed behaviour), and Motivation (the observer must be motivated to perform the behaviour, often influenced by anticipated reinforcement or punishment observed in the model's outcomes). The theory also incorporates the concept of self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their own ability to successfully execute a behaviour, and reciprocal determinism, which suggests a dynamic interaction between an individual's behaviour, cognitive factors (beliefs, attitudes), and environmental influences. Therefore, Social Learning Theory is relevant in understanding the influence of mass media on teenage sexuality in Ika North East L.G.A because it provides a framework for explaining the process by which teenagers can learn about sexuality through observation of media models. It highlights that mass media serve as formidable sources for learning, and influence not just overt sexual behaviours, but also the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and perceived social norms surrounding sexuality among teenagers in Ika North-East L.G.A.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from adolescents in Ika North East Local Government Area (LGA). The mixed-methods design was chosen to provide a good understanding of media consumption patterns and their influence on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviours. By integrating both numerical data and personal narratives, the study aimed to capture the complexity of media influence on teenage perceptions and behaviours related to sexuality. The population of the study comprised 200 teenagers aged 14 to 19 years, drawn from several secondary schools within Ika North East L.G.A. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different schools and socio-economic backgrounds. The sample was

divided into two groups; 150 adolescents participated in a structured survey to provide quantitative data, while 50 adolescents were selected for in-depth interviews to offer qualitative insights. This division allowed for a balanced exploration of both statistical trends and individual experiences.

To gather quantitative data, a structured questionnaire was designed to assess adolescents' media consumption habits, including the types of media accessed, frequency of exposure, and perceived impact on sexual attitudes and behaviours. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions and was self-administered under the supervision of trained research assistants to minimize response bias and ensure clarity in understanding the questions. The qualitative data collection process involved interviews with 50 participants to gain deeper insights on how teenagers interpret sexual content in media and how such portrayals influence their attitudes and practices. The interviews explored their perceptions of media portrayals of relationships, their engagement with sexual content on social media, and their views on the adequacy of sexual health information provided by media. Each interview was conducted in a confidential setting to encourage honest responses, and sessions lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection and analysis. Data collected from the survey were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize media consumption patterns, while chi-square tests were applied to examine associations between media exposure and sexual attitudes. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes based on recurring patterns in participants' responses.

Results: The findings of this study reveal that 87% of the respondents reported frequent media consumption, with television being the most popular medium (70%), followed by social media (60%) and print media (40%). Among those who consumed media content, 65% acknowledged that it influenced their perceptions of relationships and sexual behaviour. These findings suggest that media plays a significant role in shaping adolescent views on sexuality, relationships, and social norms in Ika North East L.G.A. The findings also indicate that television is the dominant media among adolescents, with soap operas and reality shows being the most frequently watched genres. Many respondents reported that these programmes often portray sexual relationships in ways that normalize certain behaviours, such as casual sex and relationships based primarily on physical attraction rather than emotional connection. 57% of respondents believed that television media reinforces the idea that relationships are centered on sexual attraction rather than deeper emotional bonds. This suggests that television content contributes to unrealistic expectations about relationships, and influence how teenagers in Ika North-East L.G.A perceive intimacy and commitment.

It was also found that social media also played a significant role in shaping adolescent sexual attitudes, with 52% of the respondents admitting to engaging with sexual content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Peer pressure and the desire to conform to social norms were among the ways in which the media influence teenage sexuality in Ika North-East L.G.A. Regarding sexual health, 60% of respondents stated that they had gained useful information about sexual health from media sources. However, 45% felt that media does not provide enough information on the consequences of unsafe sexual practices. While some television programmes and social media influence discuss topics such as contraception and sexually transmitted infections, the information is often fragmented or sensationalized. This gap in comprehensive sexual health education suggests that adolescents may not be receiving balanced and accurate information about the risks associated with sexual activity, which prompts the need for formal sexual education programs to supplement media exposure.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role that mass media plays in shaping adolescent sexuality, even in rural settings like Ika North East L.G.A. Media exposure provides information about sexual health and also influences sexual attitudes and behaviors, often in ways that may not align with healthy sexual norms. Adolescents are highly impressionable, and the portrayal of relationships and sexuality in media can shape their perceptions, expectations, and behaviours. In addition, television and social media, in particular, serve as primary sources of information for many teenagers, but the content is often sensationalized or incomplete. Television programmes frequently depict relationships as being driven by physical attraction rather than emotional connection, while social media exposes adolescents to explicit content without adequate context or guidance. These portrayals may lead to unrealistic expectations about relationships and sex, influencing adolescent decision-making and behaviours. The findings align with the work of Ward and Friedman (2006), who highlighted that the media often promotes unhealthy sexual scripts that teenagers may internalise and feel pressured to follow to be seen

as experienced or desirable by their peers. This suggests that media literacy programmes should be integrated into school curricula to help adolescents critically analyze and interpret media messages.

In line with this study, social learning theory helps explain how adolescents may model behaviours observed in the media. When sexual relationships are portrayed without consequences, teenagers may be encouraged to engage in similar behaviours without fully understanding the risks involved. The normalization of casual sex and the lack of emphasis on emotional connection in media portrayals may contribute to risky sexual behaviors among adolescents. Given the influence of media on adolescent sexual attitudes, parents, educators, and policymakers must work together to provide guidance and promote responsible media consumption. Encouraging open discussions about media portrayals of sexuality can help adolescents develop a more balanced and informed perspective. Furthermore, while media provides some information on sexual health, it is not always comprehensive. Many adolescents rely on media for sexual health education, yet the information they receive is often fragmented or misleading. This underscores the importance of formal sexual education programmes, both in schools and through community initiatives to counterbalance the negative effects of media portrayals. Comprehensive sexual education should address topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and healthy relationships to ensure that adolescents receive accurate and reliable information.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that mass media significantly influences teenage sexuality in Ika North-East L.G.A and affect both their attitudes and behaviours. While media serves as a source of sexual health information, it often presents unrealistic portrayals of relationships and sexuality, which may lead to risky behaviors. To mitigate the negative impact of media, it is crucial to integrate sexual education programme that can help address the gaps left by media representations. Further research should explore the long-term effects of media exposure on adolescent sexuality in rural areas, and more community-based interventions are needed to educate teenagers about healthy sexual behaviors.

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