

Illustrating links between exposure to pornographic movies and sexual activity among youth in urban poor Accra

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Introduction

Several studies indicate that a number of factors explain adolescent sexual behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa (Gupta and Mahy, 2002; Marston and King, 2006; Blum, 2007). Adolescent¹ sex, whether premarital or within marriage, is plagued with health consequences (Ringheim and Gribble, 2010) which are further exacerbated among urban poor residents in this region (Zabin and Kiragu, 1998; Dodoo et al, 2007). It is imperative that this phenomenon is fully understood so that reproductive ill-health among adolescents can be improved.

Exposure to pornography, as well as other forms of sexually explicit media, is one of the factors that have been found to impact the sexual health of adolescents (Flood, 2007; Flood, 2009; Hollander, 2009; Atwood et al, 2010). Whether seen through print, television, film or the internet, pornography is recognized as a contributor to adolescent sexual activity (Flood, 2007; Flood, 2009; Hollander, 2009; Atwood et al, 2010). While researchers on adolescent sex in sub-Saharan Africa continue to study the sexual behaviour and reproductive health challenges of young people in the sub-region, their studies have scarcely acknowledged the youths' exposure to sexually explicit material. This issue must especially be researched among urban poor youth who are the group most likely to have the access to these forms of media. This present study therefore aims to examine the relationship between watching and enjoying pornographic movies and the pre-coital and coital experiences of the urban poor youth in Accra, the capital city of Ghana.

The study is underpinned by the social disorganization theory as it relates to adolescent and premarital sex (Meekers, 1994; Djamba, 1997), which suggests that the “disorganization” in our societies, made evident by adolescent and premarital sex, is due to the influence of modernization, education, urbanization, the media, and so on. Therefore,

¹ The Ghana Adolescent Reproductive Health Policy includes 10-24 year olds in their definition of an adolescent since older adolescents and 20-24 year olds behave similarly. This study uses the words ‘adolescent’, ‘youth’, and ‘young person’ interchangeably and defines such as a person between 12 to 24 years.

pornography, a phenomenon introduced into our societies through various forms of media, can influence young people into sex to the detriment of their traditional ideals.

Data and Methods

Quantitative data were obtained through questionnaires that were administered to 12-24 year old youth in two urban poor localities in Accra (James Town and Ussher Town) under RIPS' Urban Health and Poverty Project. The research instrument was administered to a total of 343 young people, and through listwise deletion adolescents with missing data were filtered out, resulting in a final sample size of 320 youth. Data were analysed with the statistical software package STATA and analysis techniques used include cross-tabulations and binary logistic regression models.

The dependent variables were ever had sexual intercourse with a member of the opposite sex, and ever kissed or fondled or ever been fondled by a member of the opposite sex. The independent variables included whether adolescents had ever watched a pornographic or "blue" movie and whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "I would enjoy watching a pornographic movie". The control variables consisted of their demographic characteristics which were the current age and sex of the respondent. The socio-economic characteristics included highest educational level attained and the respondent's occupation. Cultural characteristics were their ethnicity, religion, the number of religious services attended in the past month, and locality. Finally, family characteristics consisted of the five quintiles of household wealth ranging from poorest to richest, living arrangements, parents' current marital status, as well as their highest educational levels attained. Other control variables included any negative sexual experiences² faced, and to eliminate any interviewer biases the interviewer's sex was also included.

Qualitative data were obtained from eight focus group discussions with adolescents in the same community. Groups were segmented by age (12-14 and 15-19), sex (males and females), and school attendance (in and out of school). The adolescents were asked about the various factors that influenced sexual initiation in their community. Only the four FGDs with males mentioned pornography as an influencer of sex in the community, hence only these four transcripts were analysed for the study.

² Negative sexual experiences include instances where respondents were ever forced to have sexual intercourse or were forced in a sexual act (which did not necessarily involve sexual intercourse).

Characteristics of the Surveyed Respondents

The respondents were mostly females (55%) with a mean age of 18.4 years. Socio-economic characteristics show the respondents as typically students with some level of junior high school education. Cultural characteristics reveal that about 60 per cent were from the Ga/Dangme ethnic group and resided in Ussher Town. Also, over four-fifths were Christians and most had attended a religious service once or more than once a week in the month preceding the survey. The analysis of the family and household characteristics show that more than a quarter of the respondents were from the poorest households (29.2%) and they lived with either one or both parents. The majority of the respondents had parents with middle school education. Under 50 per cent of the youth had ever had sex, while more than half had pre-coital experiences of kissing and fondling or being fondled by a member of the opposite sex. Close to 30 per cent had ever been forced in a sexual act or forced to have sex. Also, nearly half of the adolescents stated that they had ever watched a pornographic movie, while over a quarter said they would enjoy seeing a pornographic movie.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Bivariate analysis between sexual experiences, both pre-coital and coital encounters, and ever watched pornographic movies and agreement to enjoy watching a pornographic movie show significant relationships. Higher proportions of respondents who had watched a “blue” film and enjoyed it had been sexually active. The regression results (see Table 1) confirm that ever watched pornographic movies is related to both pre-coital and coital experiences. However, youth who enjoyed the movies were more likely to engage in kissing and/or fondling but not sex. Thus, whether enjoyed or not, pornographic movies may be a contributing factor to sexual activity. Studies conducted among US, Australian, Singaporean and Thai youth found similar strong associations (Brown and Witherspoon, 2002; Flood, 2007; Hollander, 2009; Atwood et al, 2010). Nevertheless, causal relationships cannot be inferred from these results. Additional results show that older adolescents and males are significantly more likely to have ever watched a pornographic movie (table not shown).

During focus group discussions, adolescent boys alluded to some of the following, that:

1. Their peers get aroused after watching these movies and then “*go in search for girls*” (14 years old, in school).

2. Some adults in the community may promote adolescents' exposure to pornography. More specifically, some parents watch it with their children present, while distributors of pornographic movies show them to adolescents in the community for money.
3. The phenomenon is "*prevalent among those who use the internet*" (18 years old, in school).
4. Peer pressure influences their exposure to pornography.
5. Avoiding access to pornography can prevent adolescents from initiating sex early.

Although this study solely observes the medium of pornographic movies, investigating exposure of the youth to multiple forms, such as magazines and websites, may provide a clearer understanding of the links between exposure to pornography and sexual behaviour. In addition, understanding the motivations behind the exposure (whether it was deliberate, accidental, for sex education purposes, among others) is necessary to identify means of restricting access to their exposure, especially for younger adolescents. Albeit a controversial issue, this subject requires more attention from researchers and adolescent sexual and reproductive health advocates in sub-Saharan Africa, which will enable a thorough examination of pornography's true effect on sexual engagement of the youth.

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Appendix

Table 1: Binary logistic regression models predicting ever engaged in pre-coital and coital experiences

	OR			[95% CI]		
	Pre-coital Experiences			Sexual Intercourse		
Ever Watched a Pornographic Movie (Reference Category=No)						
Yes	6.51***	2.69	15.75	9.81***	3.11	30.91
Would Enjoy Watching a Pornographic Movie (Reference Category=Disagree)						
Neutral	2.86	0.68	12.09	0.94	0.18	5.01
Agree	4.01**	1.43	11.25	1.39	0.47	4.11
Negative Sexual Experience (Reference Category=No)						
Yes	10.75***	3.76	30.76	7.55***	2.59	21.99
Age	1.35**	1.13	1.61	1.96***	1.53	2.51
Gender (Reference Category= Male)						
Female	2.80*	1.12	6.99	6.57**	2.19	19.73
Occupation (Reference Category=Student)						
None	2.48	0.63	9.76	4.28	0.98	18.65
Sales/Services	8.22**	1.92	35.15	19.85**	3.48	113.36
Other	8.14**	1.96	33.85	5.80*	1.38	24.29
Ethnicity (Reference Category=Akan)						
Ga/Dangme	6.51**	2.07	20.48	1.13	0.33	3.87
Other	0.68	0.10	4.52	0.06*	0.01	0.62
Religion (Reference Category=Orthodox Christian)						
Pentecostal/Charismatic/Other	1.76	0.66	4.72	3.01	0.96	9.44
Moslem	1.47	0.27	7.96	26.85**	3.10	232.86
Traditional/Spiritual/Other/None	4.26	0.58	31.41	2.94	0.40	21.68
Locality (Reference Category=Ussher Town)						
James Town	0.24**	0.10	0.60	0.22**	0.08	0.63
Mother's Education (Reference Category=None)						
Primary	0.78	0.13	4.63	3.36	0.50	22.42
JHS/JSS/Middle	0.66	0.14	2.99	1.86	0.39	8.86
SHS/SSS/Higher	1.23	0.16	9.27	11.98*	1.40	102.78
Don't Know	0.42	0.09	2.09	5.79+	0.93	36.06
Interviewer's Gender (Reference Category=Male)						
Female	0.15***	0.05	0.41	0.57	0.21	1.57
Constant	0.00***	0.00	0.00	0.00***	0.00	0.00

Pre-coital Experiences -- Pseudo R² = 0.5764; Sexual Intercourse -- Pseudo R² = 0.6577

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<0.10