

LGBTQ GROUPS ON INSTAGRAM AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUALITY PREFERENCE IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, has created new spaces through which young people access information, form identities, and engage with diverse communities. In Nigeria, where conservative cultural and legal frameworks restrict open discourse on sexual orientation, Instagram has emerged as an alternative environment in which young people encounter LGBTQ+ content and communities. This study examined the influence of LGBTQ groups on Instagram on the sexuality preferences of young people in Abia State, Nigeria, guided by Social Learning Theory. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from a sample of 384 respondents drawn through multi-stage sampling across three senatorial districts of Abia State. Findings revealed that young people in Abia State are highly exposed to LGBTQ groups and content on Instagram. However, their attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations remained largely unfavourable, and the majority retained traditional heterosexual preferences despite their exposure. While Instagram exposure prompted some reflection on personal sexuality and broadened understanding of diverse preferences, it did not translate into behavioural or attitudinal change. The study concludes that cultural, religious, and legal factors continue to mediate the influence of social media on young people's sexuality preferences in Nigeria and recommends sustained digital literacy initiatives to support safe and critical engagement with online content.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Instagram, sexuality preferences, social media, young people.

Introduction

The emergence and growth of social media platforms have dramatically reshaped how young people access information, form identities, and express their beliefs. Among these platforms, Instagram has become particularly influential, offering a visually and textually driven, interactive space where users connect, share, and discuss ideas including global issues of LGBTQ+. For LGBTQ+ communities worldwide, Instagram has provided a significant platform for self-expression, support, and advocacy. In countries with conservative societal norms, such as Nigeria, where topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity are often stigmatized, Instagram has become a relatively safe space where individuals can explore and express their identities in ways that may not be possible offline. This study seeks to explore how LGBTQ groups on Instagram may influence the sexual preferences and self-identification of young people in Abia State, Nigeria. In the context of Nigeria, discussions around LGBTQ+ identities are often contentious. Nigerian society is shaped by conservative cultural and religious beliefs that view heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation, and any deviation from this norm is frequently condemned. The Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014, which criminalizes same-sex relationships, reflects the country's restrictive stance on LGBTQ+ issues. This law has heightened the stigmatization and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, making open discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity difficult and often dangerous. Consequently, Nigerian youths who are questioning their sexuality or seeking to learn more about diverse identities may turn to online spaces like Instagram, where they can access information and connect with supportive communities without fear of immediate repercussions (Obinna & Adejumo, 2019).

The impact of LGBTQ groups on Instagram extends beyond personal empowerment. These groups often serve as educational resources, providing information on topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health, and LGBTQ rights. The content shared by these groups frequently includes stories of self-acceptance, information on LGBTQ history, and advice on navigating relationships and identity exploration. For young people who may have limited access to sex education in Nigeria, where discussions of sexuality are often taboo, these Instagram groups provide critical knowledge and help normalize discussions about sexual health and identity. According to Robinson and Cutforth (2020), social media exposure to diverse sexual orientations can broaden young people's understanding of sexuality and reduce misconceptions, potentially leading to more inclusive attitudes over time.

Understanding how online interactions with LGBTQ groups on Instagram impact young people's views and choices regarding sexuality is crucial, as it provides insight into the evolving social dynamics within Nigerian society. The concept of sexuality preference is complex and shaped by multiple factors, including cultural norms, individual experiences, and media influence. Studies on social media and identity formation suggest that online communities provide an important psychological and social resource, allowing individuals to find a sense of belonging and resilience in the face of societal adversity (Breslow et al., 2015).

Statement of the Problem

The influence of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, on young people's beliefs, behaviours, and identities has raised significant questions among scholars, parents, and policymakers. Instagram, with its visually appealing and interactive format, has become a central platform for LGBTQ groups to build communities, promote self-expression, and advocate for inclusivity. In conservative societies like Nigeria, where topics on sexual orientation are often stigmatized, Instagram serves as an alternative, allowing young people to explore diverse perspectives that may contrast with traditional beliefs. However, this digital interaction raises questions about the effects and implications of such exposure on young people's sexuality preferences, attitudes, and identity formation.

Despite the increasing visibility of LGBTQ communities online, the impact of such exposure on young Nigerians' sexuality preferences remains largely unexplored. Questions arise regarding whether regular interaction with LGBTQ content on Instagram leads to shifts in sexual identity, influences acceptance of diverse orientations, or affects young people's attitudes toward their own sexuality preferences. Additionally, this influence may vary depending on individual factors such as level of exposure, personal attitudes, and societal pressures to conform. This study therefore seeks to examine the influence of Instagram LGBTQ groups on young people's sexuality preferences in Abia State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how LGBTQ groups on Instagram have affected young people's sexuality preferences in Abia State. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i. Assess the level of exposure of young people in Abia State to LGBTQ groups on Instagram.
- ii. Determine the attitude of young people in Abia State toward different sexuality orientations after exposure to LGBTQ groups on Instagram.
- iii. Investigate the sexuality preferences of young people in Abia State after exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram.

Research Questions

To guide this study, the following research questions are posed:

- i. To what extent are the young people in Abia State exposed to LGBTQ groups on Instagram?
- ii. What is the attitude of young people in Abia State toward different sexuality orientations on Instagram?
- iii. What are the sexuality preferences of young people in Abia State after exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram?

Literature

LGBTQ+ Representation on Social-Media

LGBTQ+ representation on social media has grown significantly over the past decade, transforming platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok into influential spaces for LGBTQ+ visibility, community-building, and advocacy. In societies where LGBTQ+ topics are often stigmatized or censored, social media offers an alternative space where individuals can connect, express themselves, and find representation. According to McInroy and Craig (2017), social media has become a crucial outlet for LGBTQ+ youth who might lack access to supportive communities in their immediate surroundings. Through social media, they can explore diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, providing them with a sense of belonging and validation.

Representation on social media often takes various forms, including personal storytelling, advocacy posts, educational content, and celebratory depictions of LGBTQ+ culture. Popular platforms like Instagram enable LGBTQ+ users and organizations to reach broad audiences, sharing content that challenges negative stereotypes and provides positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ identities. Hashtags such as #LoveIsLove, #TransVisibility, and #Pride have garnered millions of posts, creating a digital environment that normalizes LGBTQ+ identities and issues. Research by Clark and Blackburn (2019) found that such hashtags promote inclusivity and encourage users to engage with LGBTQ+ topics, even if they might not typically encounter these conversations offline.

Social Media and Identity Formation

Social media plays a profound role in identity formation, especially among young people, who are among the most active users of these platforms. Identity formation is the process by which individuals come to understand, define, and express their personal and social identities. As a dynamic, interactive environment, social media allows users to experiment with different aspects of their identity, including gender, sexuality, cultural affiliation, and personal values. Boyd (2014) argues that social media platforms offer a space where young people can interact with peers, explore multiple identities, and test new forms of self-expression without the immediate pressures of offline societal expectations.

The role of social media in identity formation is influenced by its accessibility, anonymity, and interactivity. Unlike face-to-face interactions, social media allows individuals to construct and present carefully curated versions of themselves, enabling them to experiment with identity without the fear of immediate judgment. According to Turkle (2015), this curated self-representation provides users with a unique space to reflect on and refine their identities based on feedback from their online communities. For LGBTQ+ youth, who may face challenges in expressing their identities openly due to societal stigma, social media platforms offer a space to explore sexuality and gender identity in a supportive and relatively anonymous environment.

Instagram plays a significant role in visual identity formation, as it relies heavily on images, stories, and video content. By sharing images, videos, and captions, young people can express their identities in creative, multi-dimensional ways, allowing them to experiment with appearance, pronouns, relationship labels, and personal beliefs. The visibility of diverse role models and communities also plays a key role, as young people can learn from and be inspired by others who openly share their experiences.

Sexuality Preferences and Identity Development

Sexuality preferences and identity development are complex, deeply personal processes influenced by various social, cultural, and psychological factors. Sexuality preference refers to an individual's attraction to a particular gender or genders, encompassing orientations such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and other diverse identities. For young people, especially those in conservative societies like Nigeria, exploring sexuality and forming an authentic identity can be challenging, as cultural norms often restrict open discussion or expression of non-heteronormative orientations. According to Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, adolescence and early adulthood are key stages for identity exploration, where individuals actively seek to understand their values, preferences, and social roles.

Sexuality preference is shaped by a combination of biological, environmental, and social factors. While biological influences, such as genetics and hormonal factors, play a role in determining sexual orientation, social influences such as cultural expectations, family attitudes, and media representation also contribute significantly to how individuals perceive and express their sexuality. Diamond (2012) notes that individuals may experience shifts in their sexuality preferences over time, especially as they encounter new information or environments that encourage self-acceptance and exploration. In recent years, social media has provided a transformative space for individuals to explore and express their sexuality preferences in ways that were previously difficult.

Social Media Influencers and Role Models

Social media influencers and role models are individuals who have gained popularity and credibility within specific online communities and use their platforms to inspire, guide, or influence their followers' thoughts, behaviours, and lifestyle choices. For young people navigating identity, sexuality, and self-expression, influencers and online role models can play a significant role in shaping attitudes and choices. Social media influencers in the LGBTQ+ community often provide visibility, validation, and support for followers exploring their sexuality and identity. According to Abidin (2018), influencers serve as cultural intermediaries who shape audience perceptions by normalizing diverse lifestyles, values, and identities through relatable, personal content. Influencers and role models on social media have a unique ability to impact followers through authenticity and relatability. Unlike traditional celebrities, social media influencers interact directly with their followers, often sharing personal stories, challenges, and experiences that create a sense of intimacy and trust. Research by McCracken and Roth-Cohen (2019) shows that exposure to LGBTQ+ influencers helps reduce feelings of isolation and stigma among LGBTQ+ youth, providing them with role models who have successfully navigated similar experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), which posits that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and values through observation, imitation, and modelling. Bandura's theory emphasizes that people can acquire new behaviours and beliefs by observing the actions of others,

particularly when these behaviours are reinforced by rewards or positive outcomes. The theory suggests that role models, whether family members, peers, or media figures, influence individuals by demonstrating behaviours that may be emulated, especially if these behaviours align with the observer's goals or values.

Social Learning Theory is highly applicable in the context of social media, where young people are frequently exposed to influencers, activists, and community figures who shape their attitudes and behaviours. For LGBTQ+ youth who may lack access to relatable role models in their immediate environment, social media offers a wealth of LGBTQ+ figures who provide both representation and validation. By observing how these role models openly express their identities, advocate for inclusivity, and celebrate diversity, young people can adopt similar behaviours, beliefs, and values. Studies have found that LGBTQ+ youth who follow LGBTQ+ influencers and activists on social media report greater self-acceptance and confidence, as they learn from others who have successfully navigated similar identity journeys (Craig, McInroy, & Austin, 2018).

Social Learning Theory also highlights the importance of positive reinforcement in behaviour adoption. When young people observe LGBTQ+ influencers or role models who receive positive feedback, support, or success, they may be more inclined to embrace similar behaviours and attitudes. This is particularly relevant in conservative societies like Nigeria, where expressing non-heteronormative identities can be challenging. For young people in Abia State, observing LGBTQ+ role models who confidently embrace their identities online can offer reassurance and encouragement, helping them to overcome societal stigma and explore their sexuality preferences in a safe environment.

In addition, social media facilitates direct interaction with these role models, allowing young people to ask questions, seek advice, and build connections. Instagram enables users to comment on posts, participate in live sessions, and send direct messages to influencers, allowing LGBTQ+ youth to gain a deeper understanding of identity and self-acceptance. However, Social Learning Theory also points out potential risks associated with modelling, as individuals may imitate both positive and negative behaviours. Anderson and Jiang (2018) suggest that young social media users need to develop media literacy skills to differentiate between empowering and potentially harmful content. This framework therefore provides a robust basis for understanding how young people in Abia State learn about identity, sexuality, and self-expression through their interactions with LGBTQ+ content on Instagram.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design to obtain quantitative data from young people in Abia State who use Instagram. The survey method, as Owuamalam (2012, p. 103) notes, enables the researcher to assess the opinions, behaviours, and attitudes of a defined population through structured data collection. Opinions were treated as verbal expressions of attitude, consistent with Ihechu and Ukaegbu (2018). The population of the study comprised young people in Abia State between the ages of 15 and 35, estimated at 1,496,072, derived from a baseline of 1,096,828 (NBS & FMYD, 2012) adjusted for a 2.8% annual population growth rate to 2025. A sample size of 384 was computed using the online sample size calculator at [surveysystem.com](https://www.surveysystem.com). A multi-stage sampling technique was employed: the population was first clustered into the three senatorial districts of Abia State (Abia North, Abia Central, and Abia South); two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were then randomly selected from each district through balloting; two busy locations were identified within each LGA; and simple random sampling was used to select individual respondents, ensuring equal probability of inclusion. This procedure yielded 12 sampled communities with 32 respondents each, as summarised in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Summary of the Distribution of the Sample

District	Sampled LGAs	Sampled Locations	Sample Units
Abia North	Bende	Item	32
		Bende	32
	Isuikwuato	Uturu	32
		Umuobiala	32
Abia South	Ukwa East	Akwete	32
		Obohia	32
	Aba North	Eziukwu	32
		Ogbor	32
Abia Central	Isiala Ngwa South	Omoba	32
		Mbutu	32
	Umuahia North	Umuda Isingwu	32
		Umuawa Alaocha	32
Total	6	12	384

Results

A total of 365 questionnaires were returned and found usable, representing 95 percent of the entire sample, and considered adequate and representative. In this chapter, the data are presented and analysed in relation to the research questions, and discussions are situated within the reviewed literature and theoretical framework.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

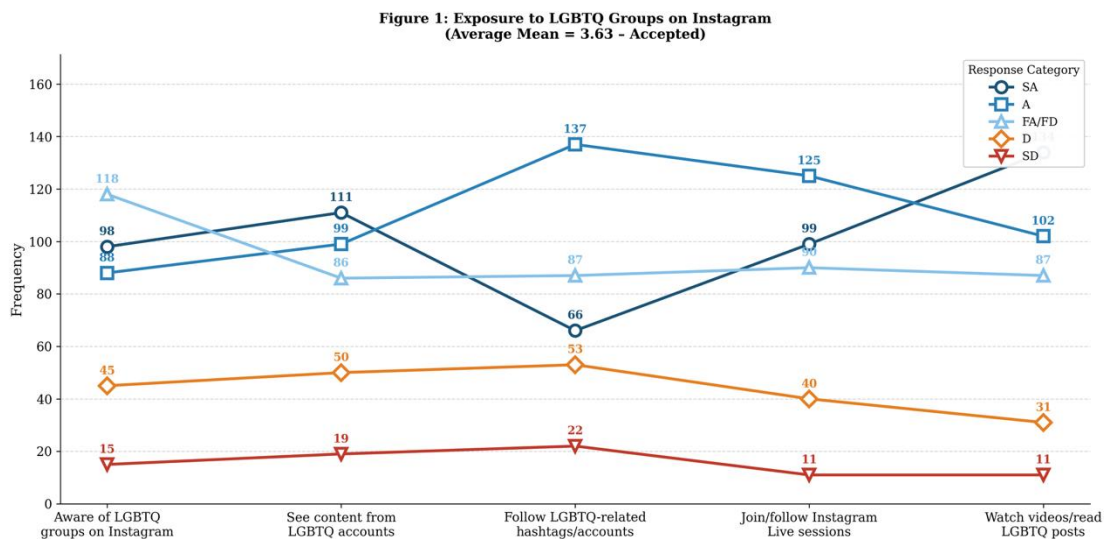
Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Strata	Categories	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	168	46
	Female	197	54
	Total	365	100
Age Group	15–20	44	12
	21–25	139	38
	26–30	117	32
	31–35	65	18
	Total	365	100

Out of 365 respondents, 197 (54%) were female while 168 (46%) were male. This result reflects the general observation that females patronise Instagram more than males. In relation to age, the majority of users fell between the ages of 21 and 30 (70%), consistent with the Gen-Z cohort that constitutes the most active social media communities.

Research Question 1: To What Extent Are Young People in Abia State Exposed to LGBTQ Groups on Instagram?

Respondents were asked to rate their level of exposure to LGBTQ groups on Instagram. The mean scores of the measurement indices are presented in Figure 1 below.

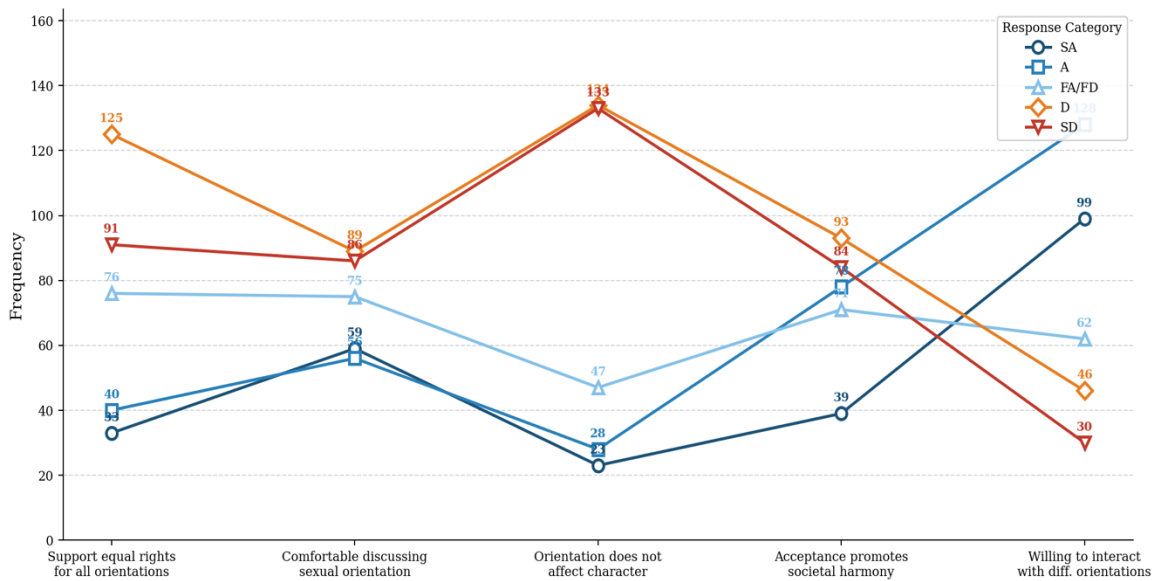


All five indices returned mean scores above the 3.0 decision threshold and were accepted. The highest mean score was recorded for watching videos or reading posts related to LGBTQ topics on Instagram (mean = 3.87; 76%), followed by joining or following Instagram Live sessions hosted by LGBTQ groups or influencers (mean = 3.71; 74%), seeing content from LGBTQ accounts or influencers (mean = 3.64; 73%), awareness of LGBTQ groups on Instagram (mean = 3.57; 71%), and following LGBTQ-related hashtags or accounts (mean = 3.47; 69%). The overall average mean score of 3.63 indicates that young people in Abia State are, to a great extent, highly exposed to LGBTQ groups and content on Instagram.

Research Question 2: What Is the Attitude of Young People in Abia State towards Different Sexuality Orientations?

Respondents were asked to state their attitudes towards different sexuality orientations. The mean scores are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Attitude towards Different Sexual Orientations
 (Average Mean = 2.8 - Rejected)



Four of the five indices fell below the 3.0 threshold and were rejected. Respondents did not support equal rights for people of all sexual orientations (mean = 2.45; 49%), felt uncomfortable discussing topics related to sexual orientation (mean = 2.76; 55%), did not believe that sexual orientation does not affect a person's character (mean =

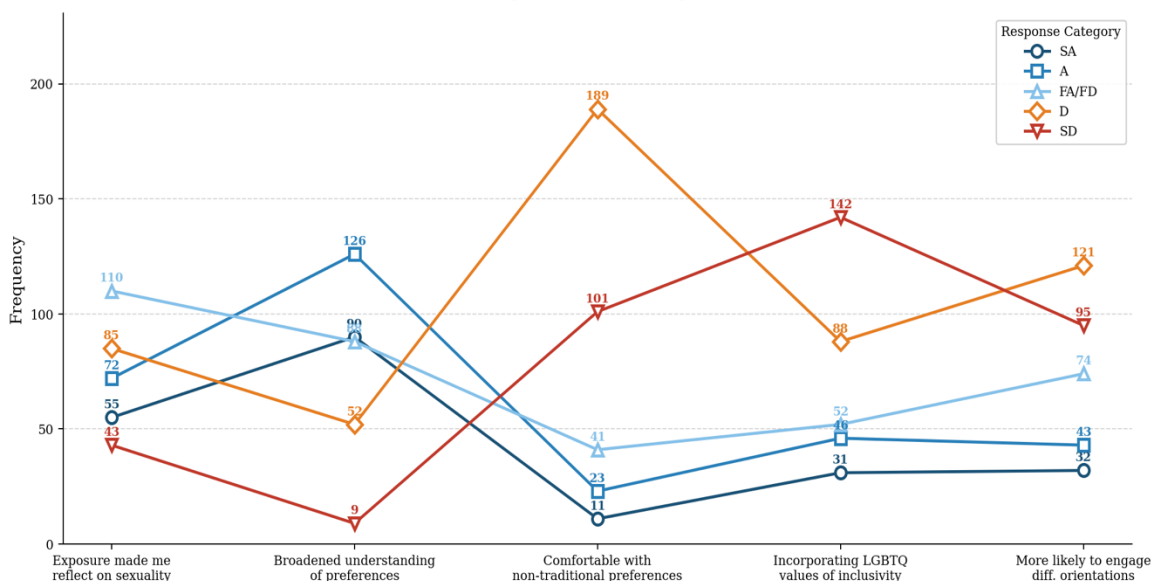
2.11; 42%), and did not believe that acceptance of different sexual orientations can promote societal harmony (mean = 2.71; 54%). However, respondents indicated willingness to interact with individuals who openly identify with different sexual orientations (mean = 3.60; 72%), the only accepted index. The overall average mean score of 2.80 suggests that young people in Abia State do not hold favourable attitudes towards diverse sexual orientations.

Research Question 3: What Are the Sexuality Preferences of Young People in Abia State after Exposure to LGBTQ Communities on Instagram?

Respondents were asked to state their sexuality preferences after exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram.

The mean scores are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Sexuality Preferences after Exposure to LGBTQ Communities on Instagram
 (Average Mean = 2.68 - Rejected)



Two indices were accepted. Respondents agreed that exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram made them reflect on their own sexuality (mean = 3.03; 61%), and that such exposure broadened their understanding of potential preferences (mean = 3.64; 73%). However, the remaining three indices were rejected: respondents did not feel comfortable accepting non-traditional sexuality preferences (mean = 2.05; 41%), had not started incorporating LGBTQ values of inclusivity and diversity into their social interactions (mean = 2.26; 45%), and were unlikely to engage with people of different sexual orientations after interacting with LGBTQ content (mean = 2.44; 49%). The overall average mean score of 2.68 indicates that the majority of young people in Abia State retain traditional sexuality preferences despite their exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: Exposure to LGBTQ Groups on Instagram

Findings from the analysis revealed that young people in Abia State are highly exposed to LGBTQ groups on Instagram. The majority affirmed awareness of LGBTQ groups and communities on the platform, saw content from LGBTQ accounts and influencers, followed LGBTQ-related hashtags, joined Instagram Live sessions hosted by LGBTQ groups, and watched videos or read posts on LGBTQ topics. This finding corroborates the observation of Parker and Gagnon (2017), who noted that social media platforms are increasingly becoming spaces where LGBTQ individuals raise awareness about their communities and challenge societal norms regarding gender and sexuality.

According to McInroy and Craig (2017), social media has become a crucial outlet for LGBTQ+ youth who lack access to supportive communities in their immediate surroundings, providing them with a sense of belonging and validation. Craig, Eaton, and McInroy (2021) further revealed that platforms like Instagram remain essential for LGBTQ visibility and advocacy. This finding is also consistent with Velasquez and LaRose (2015), who found that online activism through campaigns such as #LoveIsLove and #TransRightsAreHumanRights raises awareness and challenges discriminatory beliefs. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2018) similarly assert that social media platforms allow youth to participate in LGBTQ+ discourse and educate themselves on global LGBTQ+ rights movements.

Research Question 2: Attitude towards Different Sexuality Orientations

Findings revealed that young people in Abia State do not hold favourable attitudes toward different sexuality orientations. They did not support equal rights for people of all sexual orientations, felt uncomfortable discussing topics related to sexual orientation, did not believe that sexual orientation affects a person's character positively, and did not believe that acceptance of diverse orientations promotes societal harmony. Only their willingness to interact with individuals who openly identify with different orientations returned an accepted score.

This finding does not align with Livingstone and Mason (2018), who reported that exposure to positive LGBTQ+ representation on platforms like Instagram fostered open-mindedness and acceptance among adolescents. The divergence may be attributable to the distinctive cultural and legal context of Nigeria. Noble and Roberts (2018) highlighted the importance of digital literacy in helping youth critically assess social media content, and the current findings suggest that although young people in Abia State are not lacking in digital access, cultural, religious, and legal factors continue to shape their dispositions. This is consistent with Epprecht and Nwoye (2017), who found that cultural and religious norms strongly influence participants' views on sexuality among African youth.

Research Question 3: Sexuality Preferences after Exposure

Findings revealed that the majority of young people in Abia State retain traditional heterosexual preferences despite their exposure to LGBTQ communities on Instagram. While respondents acknowledged that exposure made them reflect on their own sexuality and broadened their understanding of potential preferences, they did not feel comfortable accepting non-traditional preferences, had not begun incorporating LGBTQ values of inclusivity into their social interactions, and were unlikely to engage with people of different sexual orientations going forward.

This finding suggests that Instagram exposure serves an informational and reflective function without necessarily producing attitudinal or behavioural change in this context. Epprecht and Nwoye (2017) observed that cultural and socio-economic factors play a profound role in shaping individuals' sexuality preferences and attitudes toward sexual orientation. Cultural values, religious beliefs, social norms, and economic conditions collectively influence how individuals, especially in Nigeria, perceive sexuality and how openly they can express their preferences. The findings of this study therefore reinforce the moderating role of context in determining the behavioural outcomes of social media exposure.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ issues remain largely censored and stigmatized within Nigerian society, and the legal and cultural environment limits the capacity for public LGBTQ+ advocacy. Social media platforms, however, have given young people in Nigeria open access to participate in LGBTQ+ discourse and educate themselves on global LGBTQ+ rights movements. Relying on the findings of this study and guided by Social Learning Theory, this study concludes that while exposure to LGBTQ+ representation on Instagram fostered reflection and a broadened understanding of diverse preferences among young people in Abia State, it did not translate into meaningful attitudinal or behavioural change. Cultural, religious, and legal constraints remain powerful moderating forces that limit the extent to which social media exposure reshapes sexuality preferences and identity among Nigerian youth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. With the widespread adoption of social media platforms including TikTok and X (formerly Twitter), Instagram should be recognized as an influential tool for raising awareness, mobilizing supporters, and challenging established norms, and its role in youth identity formation should be given greater scholarly and policy attention.
2. Advocacy and awareness-raising efforts should be undertaken by stakeholders aimed at reducing prejudice among broader audiences who may have limited exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals in their everyday lives.
3. Policymakers should promote digital literacy among young people in the eastern part of Nigeria, with particular focus on safe and critical engagement with LGBTQ+ content online.

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