

Tuned In, Turned On: Exposure to Pornographic Materials as a Correlate of Early Sexual Initiation among Filipino Adolescents

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This study tackles the issue of how the media affect the sexual behavior of people. Using data from the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality survey (YAFS3) and through bivariate and logistic regression analyses, it specifically examines the possible influence of exposure to pornographic media content on the Filipino adolescents' sexual initiation. Results of the analyses show substantial level of premarital sex involvement among the youth, as well as a significant difference between the males' and females' level and timing of premarital sex. Findings also indicate that to a certain extent, exposure to pornographic media is indeed associated with early initiation into sex.

Introduction

The increasing influence of mass media among young people has been observed over the past decades. In fact, many people believe that nowadays, the mass media exert greater influence than other social institutions, such as the family, on the adolescents' behaviors and attitudes, particularly on matters related to their sexuality. There is a widespread perception that the media are among the principal factors behind the Filipino youth's changing attitudes towards sex and sex-related issues.

Undoubtedly, today's youth are far more exposed to the media than the youth of the past generations. The McCann-Erickson 1992 study of Metro Manila youth aged 12-21 years established that these young people took in an average of 30 hours of broadcast media weekly. In a similar study conducted in the United States, it was estimated that an average American teenager would have spent 15,000 hours of TV viewing by the time s/he graduates from high school compared with only 12,000 hours spent in the classroom (Pediatrics 2001). In addition, the advent of new media technologies such as video, cable TV, and the Internet has reinvented the social world of adolescents and has made it increasingly difficult to monitor their media usage.

It cannot be denied, too, that young people today are less conservative in their views and practices concerning sex than the youth of the older generations. In 2002, a nationwide survey of Filipino adolescents found that 23 percent of youth 15-24 years old have engaged in premarital sexual activities (PMS). Thirty-four percent approved of a man having PMS while 22 percent approved of a

woman engaging in PMS. Fifteen percent, on the other hand, said it was alright for a woman to get pregnant out of wedlock while 37 percent are willing to support a bill to legalize divorce in the country (Ventura & Cabigon 2004). The same survey also found a significant level of young people who admitted to having been exposed to pornographic materials in various forms (Natividad & Marquez 2004; Raymundo et. al. 2004).

Are these findings reasons enough to be concerned about the state of the Filipino youth's moral values? Unfortunately, regardless of the answer, society is too quick to point an accusing finger at the mass media as the arbiter of all things evil in modern times. But just how influential are mass media on young people?

The difficulty of contending with a rapidly changing social and economic environment, coupled with either absentee parenting or the experience of living away from home, has somehow forced adolescents to seek alternative sources of information needed to cope with stresses and problems associated with adolescence. The media, together with peers, are the most common refuge of young people. However, it cannot be denied that sexual content is common in everyday media sources. Images and messages that are meant to tantalize are found in advertising, billboards, music videos, soaps, and movies (Thornburgh & Lin 2002). To what extent do these contribute to young people's knowledge on sexuality and relationship?

This paper attempts to partly answer this question by evaluating the possible link between exposure to pornographic media and early sexual initiation among Filipino youth. It also describes the level and timing of exposure to sexually explicit materials, on the one hand, and early sex, on the other.

Sex and the Media: A Review of Related Literature

Sexual development is part of adolescent development. The decision to engage in sexual activity is influenced by a complex web of factors, among which are the adolescents' sex and age. Patterns found in both developed and developing countries highlight the more adventurous nature of males when it comes to sex than females, thus the higher prevalence of premarital sex among young males than females (Herald, Valenzuela & Morris 1992; Newcomer & Udry 1985; Raymundo, Xenos & Domingo 1999). Age is also a consistent predictor of sexual initiation; specifically, PMS prevalence among young people increases with age (Diaz 1999; Raymundo, Xenos & Domingo 1999).

There are also influences coming from the adolescents' social environment. For instance, more recent studies reveal the increasing importance of the peer group in the adolescents' sexual behavior (Billy & Udry 1985; Dusek 1996). Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg (1989), in their analysis of American youth sexual behavior, found that those with sexually-active friends are likely to be sexually active themselves. This is because adolescents tend to form sexual standards close to their peers' standards (Dusek 1996). On the other hand, in her study of the impact of demographic changes on the Filipino family, Raymundo (in Medina 1991) brings to the fore the predisposing role of migration to cities and exposure to urban areas in the young and single females' propensity to engage in premarital sex. A more focused analysis of the effect of urbanization on premarital sex in the Philippines was conducted by Frias (2000) using the 1994 Young Adults Fertility and Sexuality Study. The study found that compared to their rural counterparts, the youth in urban areas have higher exposure to all forms of mass media, greater access to recreation and leisure activities, and lower level of family religiosity. These differences in the socialization experience of the two groups of young adults are important predictors of premarital sex behavior, with the urban youth showing greater propensity for PMS than the rural youth.

Efforts to understand how the media affect sexual behavior have been undertaken both locally and internationally. However, the findings are not conclusive and vary according to the methodologies used.

In 1979, the National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in the United States found no strong evidence of the harmful effects of pornography on any population they studied (Sparks 2002). Similarly, the British Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship in 1979 concluded that "the role of pornography in influencing the state of society is a minor one" (Home Office 1979: 95). A review report of McKay & Dolff (1984) for the Department of Justice of Canada essentially found the same thing: "there is no systematic research evidence available which suggests a causal relationship between pornography and the morality of Canadian society... [and none] which suggests that increase in specific deviant behavior, reflected in crime trend statistics (e.g., rape), are causally related to pornography." In contrast, Zillman & Bryant (1988) found that exposure to pornography promotes attitudes of sexual callousness toward women.

In terms of television's influence on adolescent sexual attitudes and practices, several studies found interesting results. Brown & Newcomer (1991) and Peterson, Moore & Furstenberg (1991) reported correlations between watching television programs high in sexual content and early initiation to sexual intercourse among adolescents. Courtright & Baran (1980), on the other hand, found that

heavy television viewing is predictive of negative attitudes toward virginity. More recently, Bryant & Rockwell (1994) showed that teens who had just viewed television dramas with sexual content were likely to rate casual sex encounter less negatively than those who had not viewed any sexual material.

Local studies on the influence of the mass media on the youth's views and practices related to sex and sexuality also have conflicting findings. Villanueva (1974) and Trinidad (1979) found that there is no conclusive relationship between exposure to sex literature and engagement in premarital sex among single college females. Periquet's study (1988) on the effect of pornographic films on male students found that although almost all respondents considered pornographic films as effective sexual stimulants, very few admitted that the arousal they felt led to sexual activity with a partner. Corroborating Periquet's conclusions is the study of Biasbas (1991), which found that regardless of gender, sexual behavior is not significantly influenced by exposure to sexual content in the media. However, majority of the males admitted that exposure caused sexual stimulation. Unlike these three studies, Sarne (1991) found that exposure to sexually explicit materials in tabloids appeared to influence students' attitudes on sex.

Other studies have sought to establish the amount and nature of sex-related messages in the mass media. In a content analysis of primetime US programs viewed by children and adolescents, Ward (1995) found that nearly 30 percent of all interactions in an episode contained references to sexual issues. It was also observed that sex portrayals between non-married couples were objectionable to other characters. Kunkel (1999) found that only 10 percent of programs that depicted sexual intercourse mentioned sexual risks or responsibility; similarly, Thorburgh & Lin (2002) determined that the dominant message depicted in TV shows suggests that sexual behavior does not have the consequences with which intercourse may be associated in real life.

Such findings on the portrayal of sex in the media are a cause for concern, especially when seen vis-à-vis research results that show that the youth depend on the media for information about sexuality. A 1997 study, for instance, found that more than half of the high school boys and girls interviewed said that they learned about birth control and contraceptives from television and magazines (Sutton et. al. in Brown 2002). The potential of the media as sources of information on various social and health issues such as contraceptive methods, HIV/AIDS, family planning, domestic violence, and girl trafficking was likewise highlighted in the analysis of mass media exposure among the youth in the urban areas of Nepal (Thapa & Mishra 2001).

Data and Methods

This paper uses data from the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS3) conducted by the Demographic Research and Development Foundation and the UP Population Institute. YAFS3 is a nationwide study involving a sample of 19,728 Filipino adolescents and young adults aged 15-27 years. The study employed a two-stage, self-weighting design with regions as main domains.¹

Variables, measures, and analysis

The dependent variable is the experience of premarital sex and early sexual intercourse. Premarital sex is sex episode that occurred prior to marriage or cohabitation. Three questions were used to determine this variable. One is a direct question, “*Have you ever had sexual experience?*”. The other two questions were framed within the context of dating. Those who reported going out on a single date were asked about the circumstances and the partner, culminating in the question, “*On your first single date, did you...*” – with yes/no responses to four items – “*hold hands*”, “*kiss*”, “*pet*” and/or “*go all the way?*”. Lastly, respondents were asked if they have a boy/girlfriend. Those who responded affirmatively were asked questions that culminated in the same set of items as above. An affirmative response to any of the three is used as an indicator that the respondent has had premarital sex experience.

To further qualify the premarital sex experience, a separate focus is given on early sex or those premarital sexual encounters that occurred before age 18 years, the mean age of first sexual intercourse among Filipino youth.

Exposure to pornographic materials was measured by asking if the respondent had ever experienced watching x-rated movies and videos (including those from the Internet), and/or if s/he had read pornographic or sexually explicit materials. The definition for pornography was left entirely to the respondents’ own interpretation. This exposure variable is the main independent variable for the analysis. Other background variables considered as factors for premarital sex are age, sex, residence, poverty status, educational attainment, and family living arrangement.²

The method of analysis includes several steps. First is the generation of a descriptive profile of the respondents according to identified background characteristics. The life-table technique was used to estimate the age-specific probability of exposure to pornographic media and premarital sex. The life table method is the mostly commonly used in analyzing waiting times and life expectancies (Bloosfeld, Hamerly & Mayer 1989). Respondents are considered to belong to a synthetic cohort, thus the timing of their media exposure and

sexual initiation serves as basis for estimating the probabilities of the event occurring in the future if succeeding cohorts of adolescents are to follow the pattern found in the 2002 survey.

Second, both premarital sex experience, and later on, early sex initiation were cross tabulated with background characteristics in order to identify the variations in PMS experience among the Filipino youth. The chi-square test of significance was used to identify the factors that significantly explain the variance in PMS experience.

Finally, to determine the effect of the independent variables in the estimation of probability for early sex, logistic regression was applied. Logistic regression is used in predicting a phenomenon that has a binary outcome. In this case, the respondent either experienced or did not experience premarital sex. The values of predictors are transformed into probabilities by a logistic function. The estimated probabilities lie between 0 and 1. Thus, compared with the linear nature of ordinary least square (OLS), logistic function takes an S curve. The equation for the logit of the prevalence of PMS is:

$$\text{Logit (Y)} = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k$$

where logit (Y) refers to the dependent variable, ever had sex; β is the regression coefficient; while X represents the covariates such as age, sex, residence, poverty status, educational attainment, and family living arrangement. The odds of having PMS at specific age is computed as:

$$P(Y = 1) = \left\{ \frac{P(Y = 1)}{[1 - P(Y = 1)]} \right\}$$

The analyses were conducted using the STATA 8 software package.

Findings

The respondents

The YAFS3 study covered all 16 regions of the country, with a total of 19,728 respondents in the age range 15-27 years. In terms of demographic distribution, there were slightly more females than males (53% vs. 47%). Likewise, there were more respondents that came from rural areas than urban areas (54% vs. 46%). Majority of the respondents were raised by both parents from birth up to age 15 years. In terms of educational attainment, results suggest that females fared better than males as a higher proportion of them were found to have attained at

least secondary education. At the time of survey, majority of the respondents were students. A significant proportion, however, admitted to be neither working nor studying. This is particularly high among males (19%). Using several indicators (such as possession of household durables and appliances, educational attainment of parents, employment status of parents, type of materials used for houses) to measure economic status, majority can be classified as belonging to the non-poor economic category.

About 6 in 10 young people aged 15-27 years had been exposed to pornographic materials, with males showing a higher prevalence than females. Visual media are preferred over print, with only nine percent admitting to have read sexually explicit materials. Twenty-eight percent said they had exposure to both print and visual media (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to individual background characteristics

Background characteristics	Male		Female		Both sexes	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Residence						
Urban	4033	43.8	4979	47.3	9012	45.7
Rural	5167	56.2	5549	52.7	10716	54.3
Total	9200	100.0	10528	100.0	19728	100.0
Raised by both parents						
Yes	7841	85.2	8731	82.9	16572	84.0
No	1357	14.8	1797	17.1	3154	16.0
Total	9198	100.0	10528	100.0	19726	100.0
Educational attainment						
Elementary	1354	14.8	1021	9.8	2375	12.1
High school undergraduate	2783	30.4	2777	26.5	5560	28.3
High school graduate	2693	29.4	3327	31.8	6020	30.7
College	2315	25.3	3352	32.0	5667	28.9
Total	9145	100.0	10477	100.0	19622	100.0
Main activity						
Studying	3979	43.3	4566	43.4	8545	43.3
Working	2593	28.2	1542	14.6	4135	21.0
Doing housework	845	9.2	3174	30.2	4019	20.4
Idle	1780	19.3	1246	11.8	3026	15.3
Total	9197	100.0	10528	100.0	19725	100.0
Poverty status						
Poor	2020	32.8	2800	32.9	5270	32.9
Non-poor	5057	67.2	5706	67.1	10753	67.1
Total	7527	100.0	8506	100.0	16033	100.0
Exposure to porn material						
No exposure	2020	22.0	5473	52.0	7493	38.0
Exposed to both video &	3929	42.7	1609	15.3	5538	28.1
Video only	2808	30.5	2062	19.6	4870	24.7
Print only	443	4.8	1384	13.2	1827	9.3
Total	9200	100.0	10528	100.0	19728	100.0

Timing of exposure to pornographic media and engagement in premarital sex

Retrospective report on the timing of exposure to either print or video adult materials showed that for some young people, this could occur very early, such as at age 5. At age 10, about three percent of males and one percent of females said they had accessed sexually explicit materials. The probability of exposure increases with age such that by age 16, more than half of young males have already been exposed to adult materials. Expectedly, the timing for girls is slower; it is only when they reach age 20 that more than half of them have been exposed to such materials. On the average, young men's first exposure to adult media occurs at age 15 while young women's is at a year later (see Figure 1).

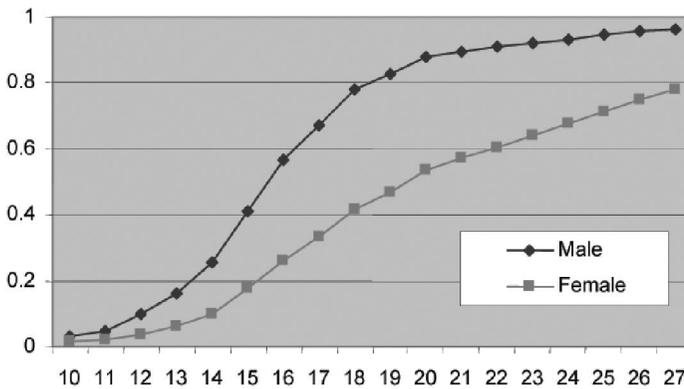


Figure 1. Probability of exposure to adult media, by sex

The timing of sexual initiation likewise displays the same gender disparity. Aside from higher level of PMS, males also have higher probability of earlier sexual initiation than females. Figure 2 shows that the probability of PMS engagement starts to pick up for males at age 15. At this age, about five percent of males already have PMS compared with two percent among females. PMS experience accelerates further at older ages. By age 22, more than half of males have already engaged in sex compared with 30 percent among females.

Variations in level of premarital sex

About a fourth of youth aged 15-27 years have engaged in premarital sex and the level varies significantly across selected background characteristics. Except for poverty status, all factors are significantly associated with experience of premarital sex. The youth from urban areas have a higher level of PMS experience compared with rural youth. In the same manner, a higher level of PMS is found among those who were not raised by both parents compared with those who grew up with their parents.

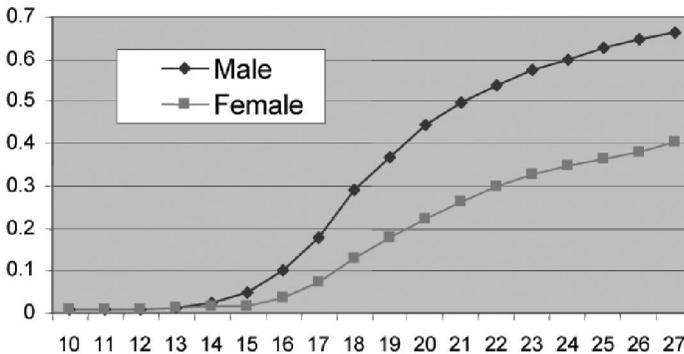


Figure 2. Probability of sexual initiation, by sex

PMS level by educational attainment shows an irregular pattern and does not seem to support the argument that high education is a protective factor against the probability of engaging in premarital sex. In fact, a high level of PMS is found among the highly educated respondents. This could be attributed to the fact that the respondents who have attained college education are older and the probability of engaging in PMS increases with age. A lower level of PMS is found among those who were students at the time of the survey compared with youth who were either working, doing housework, or doing nothing.

Relative to the youth who have no exposure to pornographic materials, those who have been exposed are more likely to have engaged in PMS (see Table 2).

Predicting the probability of premarital sex among Filipino youth

The bivariate analysis explores possible associations between premarital sex and selected background variables by looking at the differences in the proportions engaging in PMS across the different categories of the background variables. The logistic regression, on the other hand, models these proportions as functions of the explanatory variables. This identifies the factors that are likely to predict the odds or the probability that an individual will engage in PMS.

There are various reasons why young people engage in early sex. The factors included in this analysis are in no way exhaustive of all possible explanatory variables; however, all of them have been found to be significantly associated with PMS in previous studies (Raymundo & Cruz 2004; Raymundo, Xenos & Domingo 1999). Perhaps, an interesting contribution of the present analysis is the inclusion of exposure to pornographic media as a factor in the premarital experience of Filipino youth. Because of the obvious difference in the PMS experience of males and females, logistic models were estimated separately for both males and females.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents reporting PMS experience, by selected background characteristics

Background characteristics	% with PMS
Residence***	***
Urban	27.7
Rural	22.9
Raised by both parents***	
Yes	24.2
No	29.7
Educational attainment***	
Elementary	26.2
High school undergraduate	18.3
High school graduate	26.7
College	29.6
Main activity***	
Studying	10.7
Working	36.3
Doing housework	37.8
Idle	33.6
Poverty status	
Poor	25.2
Non-poor	24.2
Exposure to pornographic materials**	
No exposure	11
With exposure	33.4

*** p>.001

Table 3 presents the summary logistic results for both males and females. Among males, the odds of engaging in PMS are about five times more likely when one is exposed to pornographic media than when one is not. High education increases the probability of PMS by 63 percent while not engaging in productive work or being idle increases the odds of PMS by 50 percent. Being raised by both parents, in contrast, appears to be a protective factor as results suggest that this decreases the odds of engaging in PMS by 21 percent. Contrary to findings of earlier research, urban residence among males decreases the probability of PMS by 14 percent.

Among females, only exposure to pornographic media and being raised by both parents are significant predictors of PMS. Those exposed to pornographic media are 1.9 times more likely to engage in PMS compared with those who have not seen nor read any sexually explicit material. Being raised by both parents decreases the probability of PMS among females by 29 percent.

Table 3. Logistic regression estimates predicting likelihood of premarital sex (Relative odds ratio and statistical significance), Philippines, 2002

Background characteristics	Males	Females
	Odds/ S.E.	Odds/S.E.
Background characteristics		
Urban	0.86 (.046)**	0.98 (.058)
Poor	0.92 (.056)	0.92 (.056)
Raised by both parents	0.79 (.057)**	0.71 (.051)***
With at least high school education	1.63 (.090)***	0.99 (.062)
Idle	1.50 (.097)***	1.07 (.096)
Exposed to pornographic media	5.71 (.565)***	1.92 (.110)***
R² (Nagelkerke)	0.0793	0.0197

***p<.000 **p<.001 *p<.05

The early sex experience

This section focuses on early sex experience among those who have engaged in premarital sex. More than the premarital sex experience per se, much concern should be given to the fact that a lot of young people are getting into sexual activity at much younger ages. This has important social and health implications on young people. Early introduction to sex increases the possibility of engaging in riskier sexual practices such as having multiple sex partners. In addition, most PMS experiences of young people are unprotected since they lack the necessary knowledge on sexuality issues as well as the skills needed to negotiate with their partners regarding safe sex practices.

Of the total respondents who have engaged in PMS, 4 in 10 did so before they reached age 18. The difference in the timing of sexual initiation between males and females is again highlighted by looking at the proportion who engaged in sex before age 18. Among males, 44 percent of those with PMS admitted that their first sex occurred before age 18 compared with only 32 percent among females. In general, the same pattern found in premarital sex level holds for early sexual initiation. Particularly, pornographic media exposure leads to a higher proportion of young people engaging in early sex. Among those with PMS, 4 in 10 of those who have been exposed to pornographic materials had sex before they were age 18.

Early occurrence of PMS among males is a function of the following variables: residence, family set-up while growing up, education, and exposure to pornographic media. Among females, only exposure to pornographic media and education are significant predictors of early sex occurrence.

Results show that young males from urban areas, with higher or at least high school education, and were raised by both parents have lower probability of engaging in early sex. Among young females, having at least high school education reduces the likelihood of engaging in early sex. On the other hand, both male and female young adults exposed to pornographic media have about 1.3 times likelihood that they will engage in sex before age 18 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Logistic regression estimates predicting likelihood of early sex (Relative odds ratio and statistical significance), Philippines, 2002

Background characteristics	Males	Females
	Odds/ S.E.	Odds/S.E.
Background characteristics		
Urban	0.73 (.062)***	0.86 (.103)
Poor	0.93 (.082)	0.92 (.056)
Raised by both parents	0.72 (.078)**	0.82 (.114)
With at least high school education	0.60 (.054)***	0.23 (.028)***
Idle	0.89 (.088)	1.07 (.096)
Exposed to pornographic media	1.34 (.257)***	1.32 (.162)*
R² (Nagelkerke)	0.0168	0.0197

***p<.000 **p<.001 *p<.05

Summary and conclusion

The findings show a significant level of premarital sex experience among Filipino youth aged 15-27 years. The analysis also underscores the different factors that affect adolescents’ sexual behavior, such as premarital sex and early sexual initiation.

Results of the analysis consistently showed a significant difference between the males’ and females’ level and timing of premarital sex. Furthermore, the findings established that to a certain extent, exposure to pornographic media is indeed associated with premarital sex experience and early sex occurrence as shown in the bivariate analysis and the logistic regression models.

Unfortunately, the study cannot establish any causality in the perceived association between exposure to pornographic media and sexual initiation. At best, the results can only come up with an assumed linear association between exposure to pornographic materials and sexual behavior of Filipino youth.

Notes

- ¹ Simple random sampling was used in selecting the sample barangays, from which the sample households came from. Having regions as main domains imply that analysis can be conducted at the regional level.
- ² These variables have been found as important predictors of premarital sex among Filipino youth. Please refer to Raymundo, Xenos & Domingo 1999; Raymundo & Cruz 2004.

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