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# EXAMINING THE MODERATING ROLE OF EMBARRASSABILITY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE AND RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

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## Abstract

Recently, the proliferation of social media has brought about so many things both good and bad; such as, the way we share information, form relationships, as well as cybercrime; resulting from maladaptation. This study examined the moderating role of embarrassabilty in the relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduate. Three hundred and eighty four (384) undergraduates that were selected using multistage sampling method participated in this study. Their age ranged from 18 to 29 years; with a mean age of 23.4, and standard deviation of 2.7. Sexual Risk Survey (SRS), Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME), and Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale (SES) were used for data collection in this study. The study used a correlational research design, and moderated regression statistics was adopted as the statistical tool for data analysis. The findings reveal that there is a relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. Hence, the first hypothesis was

accepted at β=.58, t=2.591, p<.05. However, a negative relationship was found between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. As such, the second hypothesis was rejected at β=.11, t=.371, p>.05. A negative relationship was also found between embarrassability and risky sexual behaviour. Thus, the third hypothesis was accepted at β= -.27, t= -2.603, p<.05. Furthermore, embarrassability was found to moderate the relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour; hence, the fourth hypothesis was accepted at β= -.18, t= -2.730, p<.05. Based on the researchers' findings, the researchers recommended that parents should inculcate embarrassability in their children as they grow up, so as to avoid their involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

**Keywords:** Moderating role, Embarrassability, Media exposure, Risky Sexual behaviour, Undergraduates

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## Introduction

Recently, the proliferation of social media has brought about so many things; both good and bad (Okafor et al., 2024). Such as, the way we share information, form relationships, and even cybercrime; resulting from maladaptation. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have become integral to the daily lives of millions; particularly, among adolescents and young adults (Mayo Clinic, 2024). This demographic is often characterized by quest for identity, peer acceptance, and exploration of social norms; making them particularly susceptible to the influences of social media. As these platforms facilitate the sharing of personal experiences; including those related to sexuality, they also create an environment where risky sexual behaviours may be normalized or glamorized (Mayo Clinic, 2024). Thus, could influence youth's involvement in risky sexual behaviour; which has likelihood of resulting to public health challenges, such as: wild spread of sexually transmitted infection, and unintended pregnancies. These implications of risky sexual behaviour makes such maladaptive behaviour a significant public health concern that needed attention; aimed at identifying psychological factor(s) that predisposes one to such behaviour, or factor that has the potency of inhibiting such behaviour.

According to Maya Clinic (2024), social media can serve as a double-edged sword in shaping both positive and negative behaviours. At one end, it can provide a platform for sex education and awareness, while on the other; it can promote risky behaviours through the normalization of sexualized contents. According to Primack et al. (2017), adolescents that frequently views sexual contents on social media, are more likely to engage in sexual activity with multiple sexual partners, and are highly inconsistent in condom use. This suggests that social media do not only influences the types of sexual behaviours individuals engage in, but also, their attitudes towards those behaviours. Studies have also suggested that exposure to sexual contents on social media can lead to increased sexual permissiveness, and a higher likelihood of engaging in risky sexual practices (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among adolescents who are still developing their sexual identity, and may be more susceptible to peer influence, and social norms portrayed online (Kohler et al., 2008). However, such influence by peers is dependent on one's personality; such as their level of embarrassability.

Embarassability referees to an individual's tendency to feel self-conscious or anxious in social situations, and could play a critical role in the relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. According to Emekpor et al. (2024), embarrassability is the tendency for a person to feel embarrassed, and is an important aspect of one's personality characteristic. However, inasmuch as there are some individuals that are easily embarrassed, there are others who do not feel embarrassed even after breaking a major social norm that was publicly observed by others; making the interplay between embarassability, and risky sexual behaviour a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. According to Miller (2010), some situation that makes one person embarrassed, could not be embarrassing for another. By implication, embarrassability is subjective to individual differences. Since embarrassability is a personality factor that could influence one's choice of action, with regards to others evaluation, justifies the rationale for the

examination of the likely potency of embarrassability in moderating the relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates.

***Statement of the problem***

The use of social media has become increasingly prevalent among young people. Most times, how they use the social media is not regulated by their parents and caregivers. As such, placing them at risk; due to their tendency of experimenting with practically everything they learn. According to Weir (2023), during adolescent stage, the brain region that is associated with attention and feedback is reinforced by the sensation of belongingness. However, the part of their brain that regulates self-control is not completely matured at this stage, placing them at risk of disaster. Furthermore, studies has also shown that exposure to sexual contents on social media is associated with increased sexual risk taking, which is detrimental to one's health, as it could result to wild transmission of HIV, and other sexually transmitted infection, and could result to death.

Notable, several recent studies have shown some psychological factors that are associated with maladaptive behaviours in this part of the world, which include: peer pressure (Adeniyi & Jinadu, 2021), personality traits (Nnadozie et al., 2022), parental styles (Tobih et al., 2024; Onuoha et al., 2024 & Okeke et al., 2024), self-esteem (Onuoha, 2024; Onuoha et al., 2024), and, embarrassability (Emekpo et al., 2024). However, the role of social media exposure and embarrassability in influencing maladaptive behaviour; such as risky sexual behaviour is yet to be explored, and documented, with proper empirical evidence among undergraduates in this part of the world. Although, Ajiboye (2023) found an association between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among tertiary institution students in Kwara State, Nigeria, none to the best of the researchers' knowledge investigated the moderating role of embarrassability in relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates in South Eastern part of Nigeria. Hence, the need for this study that examined the moderating role of embarrassability in the relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates; aimed at filling the observed gaps, and adding novel literature, and empirical evidence, in respect to the study variables.

***Theoretical Framework/ Empirical Review***

Theoretically, this study was anchored on social learning theory of Bandura (1997) which explains the possible relationship that exists among the study variables (social media exposure, embarrassability, and risky sexual behaviour). According to the theory, social media exposure can shape knowledge, and expectation of an undergraduate as regards to sexual behaviour, through modeling. In this sense, when an undergraduate views sexual activities Online, and internalizes it as normal, and acceptable, such individual could model, and try to replicate such

behaviour, leading to risky sexual activities. However, the theory can also be used to explain the rationale behind the moderating potency of embarrassability. For instance, in situation where an undergraduate's level of embarrassability is high, knowing that the society frowns at certain behaviour could deter an undergraduate from involving in a socially disapproved behaviour, in other to avoid the embarrassment that could result from such behaviour. Thus, high embarrassability could deter undergraduate student that possesses such trait from indulging in such maladaptive behaviour.

Empirically, there are some studies that have delved into this area of study; aimed at finding answers to the factors associated with risky sexual behaviour; studies such as: Boer et al. (2021) that investigated social media use intensity, social media use problems, and mental health among adolescents and found an association between social media problem and reduced mental wellbeing. Purba et al. (2023) found that young people who frequently engage in anti-social media contents reported higher rates of risky sexual behaviour. Moreover, Burnay et al. (2022) in their study found that social media contents that are not antisocial (neutral), are not associated with maladaptive behaviour. Furthermore, Emekpo et al. (2024), Obi-Nwosu et al. (2017), and Obi-Nwosu et al. (2014) examined the relationship between embarrassability, and maladaptive behaviours and found a negative relationship between embarrassability and maladaptive behaviours.

***Hypotheses***

Three hypotheses were postulated to guide this study, they include:

1. There will be a positive and significant relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour.
2. There will be a positive and significant relationship between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour.
3. There will be a negative and significant relationship between embarrassability and risky sexual behaviour.
4. Embarrassability will moderate the relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour.

This study gears towards examining the moderating role of embarrassability in the relationship between social media exposure, and risky sexual behaviour. Hence, the findings will provide empirical evidence on psychological factors that when enhanced, or reduced, will bring about reduction in risky sexualities among youths in our society, as well as the spread of sexually transmitted infection, and related diseases.

## Method

### *Study Design*

This study is a survey research that utilized a correlational approach in investigating the moderating role of embarrassability in the relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. In other to test the four postulated hypothesis of the study, moderated regression analysis was adapted as the statistical tool for analysis; using statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

### *Participants*

A total of 384 undergraduates from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka participated in this study. They were selected using multistage sampling method, from four Departments in Awka campus of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 23.4, and standard deviation of 2.7.

### *Instruments*

Three instruments were used in this study for data collection. They include: Sexual Risk Survey (SRS), Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME), and Susceptibility to Embarassment Scale (SES).

### *Sexual Risk Survey (SRS)*

The Sexual Risk Survey (SRS) was developed by Turchik and Garske (2009). It consists of twenty-three (23) items, structured to elicit sexual behaviors, and risk factors. The SRS is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater sexual risk. It has been validated in several populations, including men who have sex with men, college students, and young adults, and has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of risky sexual behaviour, with good internal consistency, and test-retest reliability.

a. Reliability: Makinde and Adebayo (2020) in a study, reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87 among Nigerian’s populations; indicating that the instrument is highly reliable.

***Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME)***

The Content-based Media Exposure (C-ME) was developed byden Hamer et al. (2017). The C-ME measures the frequency, and duration of exposure to violent, sexually explicit, substance-related, and pro-social content. This scale assesses how different types of media (e.g., television, movies, video games) influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, particularly in relation to aggression, violence, and other social issues. The scale contains seventeen (17) items that respondent rates based on their frequency of exposure to specific types of media content, using a 5- point Likert scale.

a. Reliability: den Hamer et al. (2017) reported a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.87 for antisocial media exposure, .82 for neutral, and .72 for the total scale
b. Validity: Trait aggressiveness was positively correlated with exposure to antisocial media for boys, and girls at (r ¼ 0.43, p < 0.001), and (r ¼ 0.41, p < 0.001) respectively (den Hamer et al., 2017)

***Susceptibility to Embarassment Scale (SES)***

The Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale is a 25-item instrument developed by Kelly and Jones (1997) which uses personality trait-based statements, rather than situations, to measure a person's vulnerability to embarrassment. It is scored on a 7-point likert scale; ranging from 1= completely disagree to 7= completely agree. Some of the items were scored in reverse direction to ensure consistency (4, 18 and 25). The score range for the susceptibility to embarrassment scale is 25 to 175. The mean score for college students is 92, with higher scores indicating higher degrees of embarrassability.

a. Reliability: Kelly and Jones (1997) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .92.
b. Validity: a convergent validity of .66 was found between SES and Modigliani's Embarrassability Scale. Also, a divergent validity of .07 was found between SES and emotional empathy (Kelly & Jones, 1997).
c. Emekpo et al. (2024) reported a reliability coefficient of .71 among Nigerian population; indicating that the instrument is reliable and can be used for data collection in this present study.

***Inclusion Criteria***

To be part of the study, participant must meet this inclusion criteria, prior to the commencement of the study; the participant:

1. Must be a student of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
2. Must be a student in any of the selected Departments
3. Must be among the selected participants
4. Must have reached the age of consent, and agree to be part of the study by signing a consent form

***Procedure***

From the nine faculties in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Campus, four faculties, namely: Biosciences, Management Sciences, Environmental Science, and Social Sciences were randomly selected by the researchers using simple random sampling method. They included: Sociology, Pubic Administration, Architecture, and Parasitology and Entomology. The researchers then obtained a letter of introduction from the Head of Department of Psychology, introducing them to the selected department for easy identification, and for the purpose of this study's data collection. After the introduction letter was collected, the researchers went to the lecture halls of the selected departments. With the help of the course reps, 100 participants that agreed to be part of this study, and signed informed consent form were selected from each of the four departments, using purposive sampling method, and were administered the copies of the questionnaire. In all, 400 copies of the questionnaires were administered to the four selected departments. However, 392 copies were returned, and 384 copies were properly filled, and were selected, and coded in SPSS for data analysis.

***Statistics***

This study is a survey research that utilized a correlational research design. In other to test the hypothesis, moderated regression statistics was adopted as the statistical tools for data analysis, using statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

**Results**

***Table 1: Summary table of moderated regression analysis for the role of embarrassability in the relationship between antisocial media exposure, and neutral social media exposure on risky sexual behaviour***

| Variables | $R^2$ | Df1(df2) | F | B | SE | T | LLCI | ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Model 1** | .058 | 3(380) | 8.672 | | | | | |
| **ASME** | | | | .582 | .365 | 2.591 | .137 | 1.301 |
| **Model 2** | .067 | 3(380) | 9.057 | | | | | |
| **NSME** | | | | .156 | .114 | .371 | .3804 | 1.0678 |
| **EMBRAS** | | | | -.273 | .195 | -2.603 | -.6570 | -2.1098 |
| **EMBRAS*RSB** | | | | -.182 | .147 | -2.730 | -.0363 | -1.6232 |

*Note: ASME= Antisocial media exposure, NSME= Neutral social media exposure, RSB= Risky sexual behaviour, and EMBRAS= Embarrassability. Furthermore, level of significant is at .05.*

The result from table 1 above indicated that a positive relationship existed between aggressive dimension of social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. Hence, the first hypothesis of the study was accepted at β=.58, t=2.591, p<.05. This indicated that, as antisocial media exposure increases, risky sexual behaviour increases as well. Also, it was observed from table 1 that there was no relationship between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. Thus, the second hypothesis of the study was rejected at β=.11, t=.371, p>.05. This indicated that there was no association between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. A negative relationship was as well observed between embarrassability and risky sexual behaviour. Therefore, the third hypothesis of the study was accepted at β= -.27, t= -2.603, p<.05. This finding means that, as embarrassability increases, risky sexual behaviour decreases. Furthermore, the outcome of the result from table 1 further revealed that embarrassability moderated the relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates at β= -.18, t= -2.730, p<.05. This indicated that an undergraduate with high level of embarrassability will avoid involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

**Discussion**

This research investigated the moderating role of embarrassability in the relationship between social media exposure, and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. The study assessed responses from three hundred and eighty four (384) students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University to test the formulated hypotheses that guided this study. These hypotheses were tested using moderated regression statistics, with aim of determining the moderating role of embarrassablity in the relationship between antisocial media exposure and neutral media exposure on risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. From the analysis conducted, a relationship was observed between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. However, no relationship was found between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviours. Also, a negative relationship was found between embarrassability and risky sexual behaviours. Furthermore, it was observed that embarrassability moderated the relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. Hence, hypothesis one, of this study was accepted, showing that as undergraduate's exposure to antisocial media increases, his or her risky sexual behaviour increases as well; which has a devastating health implications.

This finding is theoretically supported by the Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1997) which mapped the relationship between background factors that triggers the engagement in risky sexual behaviours. The theory posited that individuals learn behaviours through observation and imitation of others, especially, those they considers as role models. Exposure to antisocial contents on social media platforms can normalize risky behaviours, making undergraduates more likely to engage in them. For instance, if an undergraduate observed peers, or celebrities engaging in risky sexual behaviours without negative consequences, they may perceive such behaviour as acceptable, or even desirable. Hence, could increase their tendency of involving in such behaviour. This finding is also links to Bushman and Anderson (2002) desensitization theory which posited that repeated exposure to stimuli can lead an individual into become less

sensitive to them over time. In essence, when individuals are frequently exposed to graphic or explicit contents, they may become less likely to regard risky sexual behaviours as harmful, potentially increasing their likelihood of engaging in such behaviour themselves.

Furthermore, Nova et al. (2024) in their study found out that social media exposure does not just influence risky sexual behaviour, but also influences one's sexual orientation. Similar, Purba et al. (2023) that investigated the relationship between social media use, and health risk behaviours; they found that young people who frequently engage in anti-social media contents reported higher rates of risky sexual behaviour. More so, Boer et al. (2021) found an association between social media problem and reduced mental wellbeing.

Hypothesis two of this study was rejected; indicating that there was no association between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. This implied that when an undergraduate's exposure to neutral media contents does not influence their involvement in risky sexual behaviours. This explanation is further explained by Cultivation theory of Stacks and Spaulding (2015) which stated that long-term exposure to media contents can shape perceptions and beliefs about the world, and that neutral media might not have enough impactful contents to influence the rates of risky sexual behaviour. The finding is also linked to uses and gratifications theory by Katz et al. (1973) which suggests that individuals actively select media that fulfills specific needs and desires. In other words, neutral media exposure may not address or fulfill any desire related to sexuality. Thus, could account for the reason why there was no relationship between neutral media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the finding in the second hypothesis of this study was in consonance with that of Burnay et al. (2022) that found that social media contents that are not antisocial (neutral), are not associated with maladaptive behaviour.

Hypothesis three of the study was accepted, indicating that embarrassability has negative impact on risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. This means that individuals who are more prone to the feeling of embarrassment are less likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours. The outcome of the third hypothesis is in correlation with that of Ajzen (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, which holds that an individual's intention to engage in a behavior is influenced by their attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this context, higher levels of embarrassability may negatively affect the perceived social norms surrounding risky sexual behaviour, leading to a decrease in such behaviours. For instance, if an individual feels that risky sexual behaviour is frowned upon socially, and become sensitive to embarrassment that could result from such behaviour, they are less likely to engage in such behaviours.

More so, the outcome of the third hypothesis is in line with that of Emekpo et al. (2024) that found that low embarrassability is associated with tendency of reoffending. Thus, high

embarrassability, reduces such tendency. Obi-Nwosu et al. (2017) found that as embarrassability increases, tendency to repay debt increases. Thus, in other to avoid embarrassment, a debtor with high embarrassability will pay off debt more, compare to one with low embarrassability. Furthermore, Obi-Nwosu et al. (2014) found that as embarrassability increases, tendency for exam misconduct decreases.

Furthermore, hypothesis number four was accepted, indicating that embarrassability moderated the relationship between antisocial media exposure and risky sexual behaviour. By implication, when an undergraduates' embrassability is high, the undergraduate's tendency of indulging in risky sexual activities reduces as a result of the fear of embarrassment that could result from such behaviour.

### *Implications of the Study*

The findings of this study have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it has brought to bear the association that existed between social media exposure on risky sexual behaviour. It also added to the body of knowledge, that one's level of embarrassability is a factor in reducing risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. Furthermore, the findings in this study validated the social learning theory of Bandura (1997). Thus, could be used to further elaboration the theoretical framework of the study.

Practically, this study showed the antecedents of risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. This will help health care providers and educators to provide necessary assistance to undergraduates who engaged in risky sexual behaviours for timely intervention. Also, it will help school psychologist to plan activities or programs that are geared towards educating students on the implications of antisocial media exposure. It will also serve as directive to school psychologist on the need to enhance embarrassability when dealing with undergraduates at risk of indulging in risky sexual practices.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made in line with the research findings:

1. There is need for programs that will enhance media literacy among adolescents; so as to be able to recognize and critically evaluate social media contents, and there implications.
2. Parents should be encouraged to interact with their children on the impact of media contents they consume, and there potential impact on their behaviour.
3. Parents should inculcate embarrassability in their children as they grow, so as to avoid involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

**Limitations of the study**

The findings of this study were timely and informative. However, the researcher feels that caution should be used in the generalization of the research findings in other diverse cultural contexts or demographic groups. Furthermore, since the data collection was done using questionnaire that depend on self-reportage, there is tendency that participant might have responded in ways that will make them socially acceptable, thus, negatively impacting the research outcome. However, they were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information; which is expected to increase their transparency while responding to the research instruments.

**Conclusion**

This study focused on factors influencing risky sexual behaviour; emphasizing on the detrimental effects of antisocial media exposure and the protective role of individual traits such as embarrassability. The study explored the youth's behaviour that places them at risk of sexual behaviour such as engaging in sexual activities without protection, having many sexual partners, and watching people who engage in sexual activities. Some of the above listed factors contribute to risky sexual behaviours. Furthermore, it was observed that the higher an undergraduates' embarrassability, the lower the likelihood of indulging in risky sexual behaviour.

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