



Young People, the Digital World, and their Developing Sexuality

Dr Roderick Bugeja PhD
Sexuality & Sexual Health Research Programme
University of Malta



Presentation outline

Internet and Sexuality

- 1 The internet, young people, and their overall well-being.
- 2 **On-line Sexual Activities (OSA). What are they?**
- 3 How is the digital world affecting the sexual development of children?
- 4 **Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives.**
- 5 The Positive and the Negative.

Young people and the internet

Introduction



- Youths (12-24) have become the largest population using the internet for communication purposes.
- Online sexual activities have emerged as an area of social enquiry.
- For over a decade, social scientists have sought to gather information about young people's use of the internet for sexual education and entertainment, youths' online sexual activities and how they relate to their overall sexuality and mental health.

Online Sexual Activities (OSA)

What are they?



- Refer to Internet use (including text, audio, graphic files) for any activity that involves sexuality for the purposes of recreation, gratification, entertainment, exploration, support, education, commerce, and/or seeking out sexual or romantic partners.

The Digital World

Does it play an influence on youth's sexuality?



- Provides increasingly frequent portrayals of sexuality
- Keeps sexual behaviour on public and personal agendas
- Reinforces a relatively consistent set of sexual and relationships norms (YOLO!).
- Rarely depicts sexually responsible models.
- Rarely depicts negative consequences.

The Theoretical Perspective

Cognitive Social Learning Theory



- Bandura's Social Learning Theory:
 - people will imitate behaviours of others when those models are rewarded or not punished for their behaviour.
 - Modelling occurs more readily when the model is perceived:
 - Attractive and similar,
 - and the modelled behaviour is:
 - possible, salient, simple, prevalent and has a functional value
- (Bandura, 1994).
- Thus, theory predicts that people who attend to media content that includes depictions of attractive sexual characters and behaviours that rarely suffer consequences will be likely to imitate the behaviour.

Cognitive Script Theory

Gagnon & Simon, 1974; Shank & Abelson, 1977.



- Cognitive scripts are related sequences of actions that characterize frequently experienced events and, in turn, guide expectations and behaviours in everyday situations.
- The recurring experience of a particular event creates an internalized “template” of the likely sequence of actions, participants, and props within that situation.
- E.g. What happens at the end of a first date, as the couple says ‘goodbye’ ?

Agenda Setting and Framing Theories

Kosicki, 1993.



- This theory propose that the media tell people what is:
 - a) Important in the world around them
 - b) How to think about the events and people who inhabit that world.
- Even news media help keep sexual behaviour salient!

Topics and images that are frequent and prominent in the media become topics that audiences think are important.

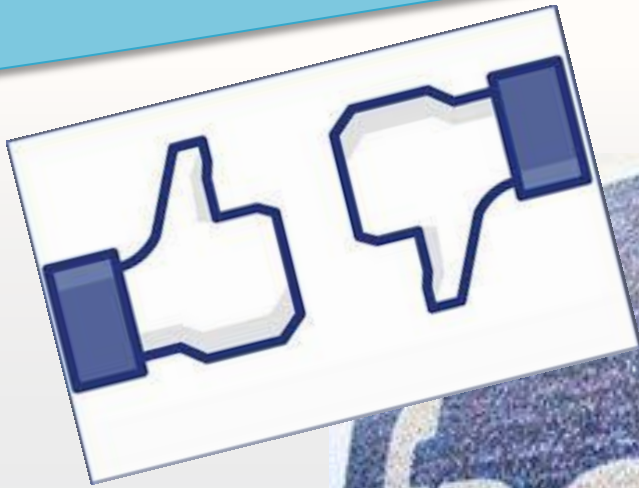
- E.g. Media coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Cultivation theory

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1994.



- “... the more time people spend "living" in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television.”
 - high school students who frequently viewed daytime soap operas were more likely than those who watched less often to believe that single mothers have relatively easy lives, have good jobs, and do not live in poverty (Larson, 1996).
 - Exposure to stereotypical images of gender and sexuality in music videos has been found to increase older adolescents' acceptance of nonmarital sexual behaviour and interpersonal violence (Greeson & Williams, 1986; Kalof, 1999).
 - Heavier television viewers also have been found to have more negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin (Courtright & Baran, 1980).



Research Evidence



- We still know relatively little about *how* the digital world affects sexual beliefs and behaviours
- Much of the empirical work done allow only speculation about its effects
- More recent research that looked into how young people select, interpret and apply sexual content suggests it may play an important role.

The Digital World

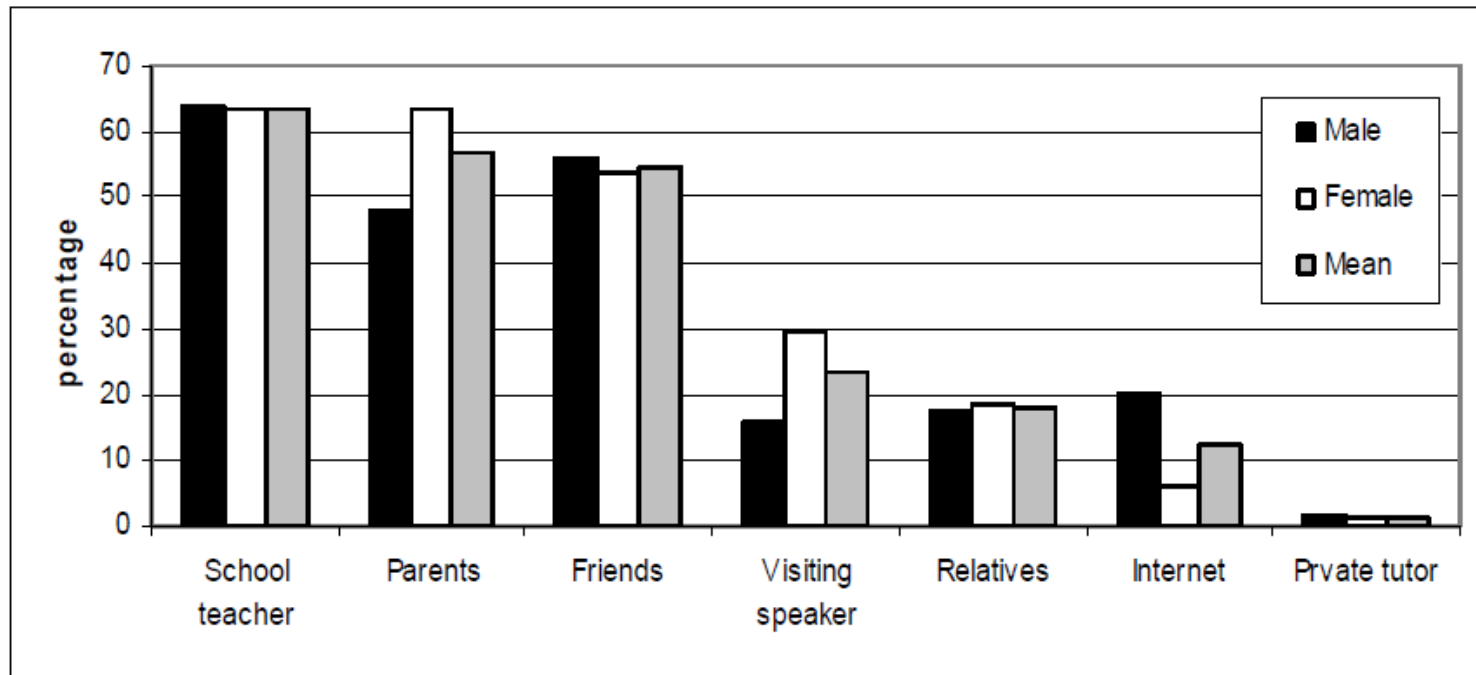
What impact? Young people's perspective



- An increasingly accessible way to learn and see sexual behaviour.
- Considered especially important for young people as they are developing their own sexual beliefs and patterns of behaviour
- “Especially as parents ... and sometimes schools ... remain reluctant to discuss sexual topics openly”
- May have both positive and negative effects on youths' developing sexuality

Bugeja, 2010

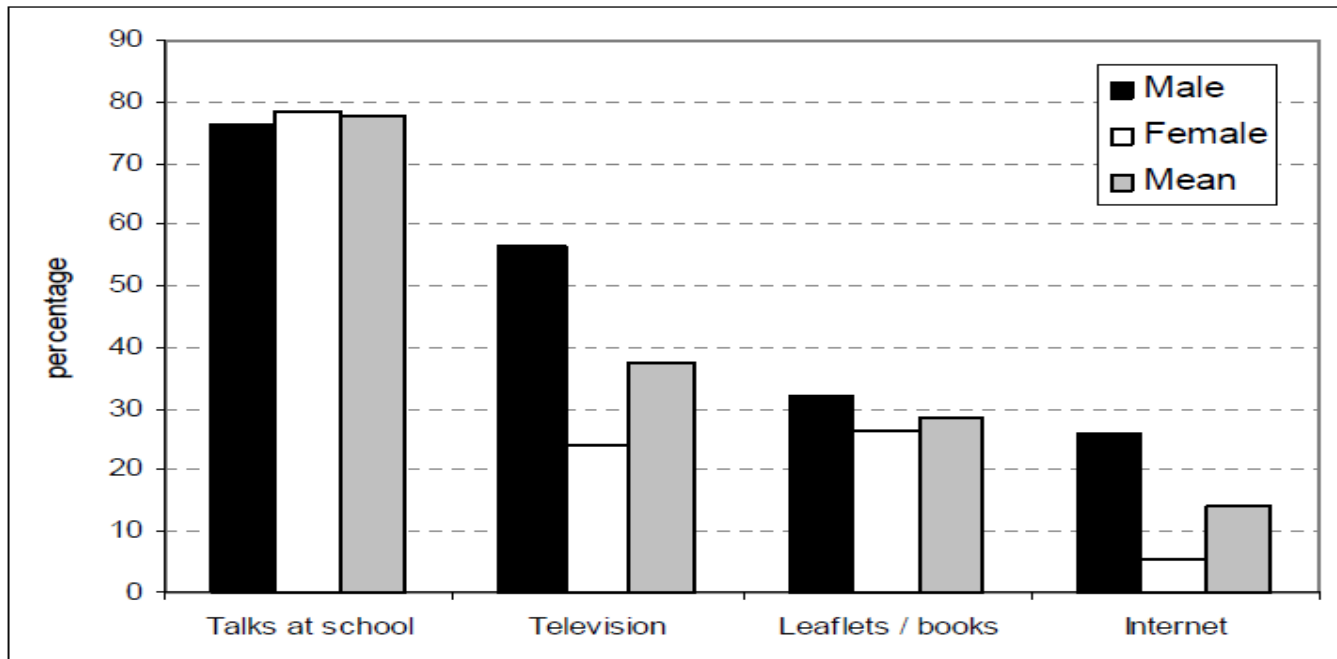
Questionnaire survey, 1310 participants, aged 14-16, $E = 2.5\%$



Actual sources of information about sexuality and sexual health

Bugeja, 2010

Questionnaire survey, 1310 participants, aged 14-16, $E = 2.5\%$



Preferred sources of information about sexuality and sexual health

More findings about youth using the internet



- While the accuracy of information found on the internet is subject to the legitimacy of its host site, many young people are likely to turn to the internet for sex education.
- Most youth do not believe that the Internet is a good medium to start or maintain deep relationships.
- The sexual revolution brought by the Internet is offering young people new opportunities to engage in exploratory activities, such as accessing sexually explicit material for entertainment and masturbation (Boies, 2002; 2004).

Decreased social integration?

Weiser (2000)



- Data collected from an Internet Attitude Survey (N=506)
- OSA reflected affiliative needs.
- Many young people described social benefits of their OSA, including experiencing connection with others, and establishing some form of intimacy.
- However Weiser reported a high risk of decreased social integration.
- Yet, Shaw and Gant (2002) revealed positive effects of internet usage on depression, loneliness, self-esteem and social support.

Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor (2005, 2007)

Journal of Paediatrics



- telephone survey, 1500 youths, aged 10 – 17yrs, United States:
 - 90% have access to internet
 - 42% exposed to internet pornography, of which,
 - 66% reported unwanted exposure
 - Unwanted exposure was higher among more vulnerable teens
 - Who reported being sexually harassed on-line
 - Who were Interpersonally victimized off-line
 - Who reported feeling depressed on a Child Behaviour Checklist

THANK YOU!