

Peer Pressure and Sexual Attitudes of Adolescents in Nepal: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Nepalese youth are subjected to shifting sexual norms initiated by globalization, the media, and youth culture. Peer pressure is well established as a catalyst of youth behavior, but very little research has been conducted in Nepal to look into how it affects sexual attitudes and practices qualitatively. This qualitative research investigates the effect of peer pressure on the sexual attitudes of Nepalese youth. The aim of this study was to study the effect of peer pressure on sexual behavior and attitudes of Nepali adolescents, with particular reference to gendered experience and normative socialization. Through the perceptions of 20 adolescents aged 15-18, the study records how direct and indirect peer pressure shapes sexual norms, attitudes towards premarital sex, and gender roles. Participants were sampled on purpose by gender, level of education, and social class to create as much diversity as possible. Data were analyzed thematically. The study's key findings emphasize that peer influence is critical in the sexual behavior of adolescents in Nepal. Interventions will need to address not just individual knowledge but also peer group processes and gendered norms. Peer-based, gender-sensitive sex education can be a useful strategy in promoting healthy and well-informed sexual choices in adolescence. The study shows that though peer pressure is a significant driver of sexual behavior, it overlaps with media, social, and cultural influences in creating sexual norms among Nepalese adolescents. The study of international literature reveals similarities and differences in how peer pressure affects sexual attitudes of adolescents globally. The study emphasizes the need for culturally targeted sexual education interventions and policy changes in Nepal to combat these pressures and promote healthy sexual development among youth.

Keywords: peer pressure, sexual attitudes, adolescence, gender roles, sexual health

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage during which individuals construct sexual attitudes and beliefs. In Nepal, a country that holds firm cultural values and sexually

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conservative viewpoints, peer pressure can considerably influence adolescent sexual attitudes (Bhandari, 2021). Adolescents are strongly vulnerable to peer influence since they are attempting to establish their identities, and peer pressure can lead to both positive and negative sexual encounters (Sharma & Giri, 2019). Understanding how peer pressure affects sexual attitudes in the nation of Nepal, where culture and media contact intersect, is key to the successful development of sexual health education programs.

Peer pressure has been found to be a general significant determinant of adolescent sexual behaviors (Rimal & Chalise, 2020). According to research, peer groups typically set norms for sexual conduct, so that they pressure adolescents to follow such sexual behavior, beliefs, and attitudes, which may not be their own personal values (Khan, 2019). Even though peer pressure is a sexual attitude determinant everywhere, its specific influence in Nepal is not well addressed. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the way peer pressure intersects with Nepalese adolescent sexual attitudes and comparing results to international literature.

Literature Review

Sexual attitudes and behaviors among adolescents are shaped by various factors, including family background, cultural norms, peer pressure, and the media. Pre-marital sex, being a taboo in Nepal, can be stigmatized, and adolescents have been known to get confused regarding sexual issues (Thapa & Karki, 2018). Peer pressure in the context of direct or indirect support of particular behavior can oppose the conservative moral values about sex in Nepalese culture (Pandey, 2019).

Global research also indicates that adolescent sexual attitudes in many cultures are influenced by peer pressure strongly. For example, research in America has established that peer influence is implicated in shaping adolescents' sexual permissiveness attitudes and facilitating early sex experimentation (Schaub & Chia, 2018). Conversely, studies from more conservative countries like India highlight the point that peer pressure via social conformity is likely to lead teens to delay sexual initiation due to the social stigma associated with it (Kumar & Singh, 2020). In Nepal, however, where tradition intersects with global influence, teens have to deal with unique challenges while navigating sexual expectations from peers.

Statement of the Problem

Adolescence is a period of development during which peer influence strongly shapes sexual attitudes and behavior, even more so in contexts like Nepal where sexuality remains a cultural taboo and sex education is limited. Peers are thus often a proximal source of information and pressure that influences adolescents' beliefs, choices, and risk-taking behaviors (Paudel et al., 2023; Shrestha & Maharjan, 2023). Cross-cultural data also show that adolescents' perceptions of peer approval and peer sexual activity are strongly linked with their own sexual behavior (van de Bongardt et al., 2015). However,

it remains unknown how gender roles, cultural norms, and coping styles interact with peer influence in Nepal, representing a critical gap in building effective, culturally responsive interventions to enhance healthy adolescent sexual development.

Research Questions

Major Research Question:

- How do peer pressures influence the sexual attitudes and behavior of Nepalese adolescents?

Sub-questions:

- What influence do peers have on adolescents' sex-related attitudes and beliefs?
- What is the nature of peer pressure adolescents encounter on sexual behavior?
- Do adolescent girls and boys differ in their perception of peer pressure with regards to sexuality?
- How do cultural and social environments within Nepal affect how adolescents respond to peer pressure?
- How do adolescents utilize means to negotiate or resist peer pressure for sex?

Objective

More generally, the objective of the study is to examine how peer pressure influences Nepalese adolescents' sexual behavior and attitudes. In particular, the study attempts to identify how peer groups influence adolescents' attitudes and beliefs on relationships and sex, and identify the sources and type of peer pressure influencing sexual behavior. It also tries to investigate gender differences in experience and reaction to peer pressure with regard to sexuality. Lastly, the research is interested in learning about how social and cultural norms can be acting as moderators of peer influence on the sexual attitudes of adolescents as well as for assessing the coping strategies adolescents employ in an effort to manage peer pressure in making sexual choices.

Methodology

Philosophical Paradigm

This study is based on Interpretivism or constructivism paradigm because these paradigm understanding the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attach to their social world. This study explores how adolescents perceive and experience peer pressure and its influence on their sexual attitudes, something deeply personal, cultural, and context-specific. The goal is not to generalize, but to understand in-depth individual experiences within their sociocultural context (e.g., Nepalese adolescents navigating traditional and modern values).

Research Design

This study employed qualitative design in examining the complex dance of sexual attitudes and peer pressure. So, this study is based on phenomenology with thematic analysis. Phenomenology helps explore the lived experiences of adolescents and how they make sense of peer pressure and sexual norms. Qualitative study allows participants' experiences and opinions to be examined in detail and hence is suitable to witness the complexity of sexual development among Nepalese adolescents.

Participants

The sample consisted of 20 adolescents, 10 males and 10 females, between 15–18 years of age, purposively sampled from urban and rural Nepal. A representative sample of adolescents with different socio-cultural backgrounds was decided upon. Adolescents willing to provide information on peer pressure and sexual attitudes were the inclusion criteria.

Data Collection

Information was collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided some leeway without losing sight of the overall themes. The interviews, conducted in Nepali, were on peer influence of sexual activity, perceptions of premarital sex, gender roles, and the influence of media. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were taped with consent from the respondents.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data because it is flexible, suitable for constructivist paradigms and helps identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. It enables the researcher to code data inductively, generating themes that reflect participants' lived realities. The transcripts were analyzed extensively to find recurring themes regarding peer pressure and sexual attitudes. The major themes that were identified were peer influence, gender expectations, the role of the media, and teens' attitudes toward sexual activity.

Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the research committee of Department of Psychology, Padmakanya Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University. All participants provided verbal informed consent, which was approved by the ethics committee as a part of the study protocol. The research followed all the necessary ethical consideration i.e informed consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, autonomy, justice, social and cultural sensitivity, and ethical approval for this study. Similarly the author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Results and Discussions

Peer Pressure and Sexual Attitudes

The interview results are that peer pressure is a significant factor in sexual attitudes among Nepalese teens. Direct and indirect peer pressures were both noted to be powerful. The majority of the participants stated they were pressured by their peers in order to perform some sexual norms, namely premarital sex. One of the female participants commented:

"I feel like I have to do what my friends say about boyfriends and sex, or else I feel left out."

Male participants, on the other hand, demonstrated how they were prompted to do masculinity by talking about sex. As quoted by one male participant:

"I feel like I have to talk about girls or sex with my friends, because if I don't, they think I'm weak. It's like I have to show that I'm a real man."

The interview results indicate that peer pressure strongly influences sexual attitudes among Nepalese adolescents. Such findings support cross-national studies indicating peer pressure to act as a mechanism of validating sexual norms among adolescent peer groups (Paudel et.al, 2023; Smith & Williams, 2019; Van, 2015).

Peer Influence as Normative Sexual Identity Formation

Adolescents expressed sexual attitudes beliefs regarding virginity, condom use, and timing of sexual initiation as "learned by osmosis" in the peer culture. One girl states, "If my friends are saying virginity is shameful, you begin to believe it too". Another reported, "He boasted he'd slept with three women so I felt I had to keep pace". These discussions are not necessarily overt pressure; rather, the language represents more general socialization into mainstreamed sexual conduct.

Side by side with these findings, studies carried out in Ethiopia found that young people acquire sexual norms for belonging, and they become internalized as identity elements during identity formation (Baraki & Thupayagale Tshweneagae, 2024). The practice aligns to "sexual arena" of peer culture, where normative behavior is mutually reinforced among networks. This mirrors that normative peer influence is a powerful yet often insidious force for sexual attitudes in teenagers. A study by Adhikari et al. (2018) in Pokhara revealed that peer influence is a major determinant in initiating sexual activities among adolescents. The study found that adolescents with friends who engaged in premarital sex were more likely to adopt similar behaviors, highlighting the impact of peer norms on sexual conduct. Similarly, a nationwide study by Dahal et al. (2019) reported that adolescents who perceived their peers as sexually active were more likely to engage in premarital sex themselves, suggesting that peer behaviors and attitudes significantly influence individual sexual decisions.

Gendered Expectations

The study also showed gendered differences in sexual attitudes which were subject to peer pressure. The female respondents indicated that they felt a lot of pressure to remain sexually pure or risk being stigmatized socially. One of the female respondents explained:

"If I talk freely about boys or sex, people think I'm a bad girl. That's not acceptable in our society"

In contrast, male participants typically felt that they needed to engage in sexual talk and practices as a way of performing masculinity. These are consistent with studies carried out in other countries such as India, whose gendered expectations remain the same (Kumar & Singh, 2020). The effect of local gender norms is, however, further magnified by the internationalized mass media, which provides alternative conceptions of sexuality. A study by Shrestha et al. (2025) analyzed data from 7,122 individuals aged 15–24 years in Nepal, revealing that male youths were significantly more likely to engage in premarital sex compared to their female counterparts. This gender disparity underscores the influence of traditional gender norms, where male sexuality is often valorized, while female sexuality is subject to stricter societal controls. Such findings align with your study's observations that female adolescents feel pressured to maintain sexual purity to avoid social stigma, whereas male adolescents experience pressure to conform to masculine sexual norms. Furthermore, the study highlighted that peer pressure, along with factors like substance use and media exposure, plays a crucial role in shaping sexual behaviors among youth. This supports your findings that peer influence is a significant determinant in sexual attitudes and behaviors among Nepalese adolescents.

Pressure to Fit in Spins Dangerous Sexual Activity

Respondents explained such episodes of explicit peer pressure name-calling, teasing, or joking about being virgins, condom use, or lack of sexual experience. A boy recalls teasing as a virgin and coaxed into an affair to avoid jokes. Another reported peers offering "no-condom sex" to look more grown-up, with protection used to describe weakness.

This is comparable to South African youth observations, where peers tease condom use and shame abstainers. Nigerian and Ethiopian quantitative studies had highly significant odds of sexual initiation or more than one partner when peers were sexually involved or pressurizing them (Negeri, 2014). These observations suggest that open peer pressure may lead adolescents to unprotected or early sexual behavior.

Gendered Norms and Negotiation of Peer Influence

Girls recorded a double standard: sexual experience was admired in boys but condemned in girls. A girl said she felt shame for not "seeing what the world is about," but would

be judged immoral if she did so. Boys, on the other hand, derived pride and status from sex, with condoms testifying to fearfulness or weakness. A male student said, "Using condoms is like saying you're scared nobody wants to be that guy."

This is a statement of a developmental feminist model: girls internalize sexual expectations in other ways, objectifying themselves from society (Baraki & Thupayagale Tshweneagae, 2024). Boys in Ethiopia had more negative sexual norms, which gave them status through sexual conquest. These gendered pressures are associated with Nepal's broader patriarchal norms, where virginity and sexual reputation are highly gendered commodities (Adhikari & Tamang, 2009).

Media and Indirect Peer Pressure

Media's impact on sexual attitudes of teenagers emerged as another major theme. Some participants discussed sexual exposure through social media and films, which portrayed idealized relationships and sex. One of the teenagers said:

"You see films and social media where people are dating and partying. It makes you feel like you need to do the same to be accepted."

Global studies have also indicated that media can lead to unrealistic sexual demands and exacerbate peer pressure among youths (Levine, 2018). The role of media in Nepal has been more dominant over the last few years, particularly with the growth of social sites like Facebook and Instagram. In Nepal, the influence of media has grown substantially in recent years, especially with the widespread use of social networking platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, further shaping teenagers' sexual attitudes (Bhandari, 2021).

Discussion

The findings from this research are that peer pressure is an essential element in the development of sexual attitudes for adolescents in Nepal. Peer group pressure comes directly and indirectly through processes such as interactions in which sex is talked about and also through media depictions of ideal sex relationships. Findings from these results conform to cross-national studies, which show that peer groups impact the sexual norms of adolescents (Schaub & Chia, 2018).

But the research also points to particular cultural context in Nepal, with coexistence between old sexuality values and modern influences. Saturated gender-role orientation in Nepal engenders differential pressure for men and women, with men supported in presenting sexual experience and women under pressure to conform to chastity ideals.

The comparison with global studies indicates that while peer pressure is a worldwide phenomenon, its influence on sexual attitudes differs based on cultural, social, and media influences. In countries like Nepal, where sex is more tied to social standing and gender roles, peer pressure can both positively and negatively influence teenagers into delaying

or engaging in sexual encounters in a way that is not necessarily in alignment with their values.

Participants tended to explain sexual norms as being inscribed quietly in peer interactions and conversations. The norms set the terms in which teenagers build up their sexual identities. This is in line with Baraki and Thupayagale Tshweneagae (2024), who found that Ethiopian teenagers had learned sexual behavior as normal or normative through peer group participation and relational interactions. Adolescents in our study described how understandings of virginity, relationships, and "readiness" for sex were less determined by didactic directives and more by peer shared beliefs.

This addresses the idea of peer culture as a "sexual socialization agent," emphasized by Adhikari and Tamang (2009), who determined that Nepali male university students were prone to imitating sexual choices of peers, especially in a situation of absence of open parent child conversation. Internalization of those norms does not usually become aware to the adolescents themselves, illustrating the extensive impact of peers on sexual identity formation.

Some of the respondents admitted being pressured into having sex or not wearing protection in order to be accepted by their peer group. In most instances, the pressure was triggered by teasing, name-calling, or exclusion. These forms of explicit peer pressure encouraged some teenagers to engage in risky sexual behaviors in an attempt to avoid stigmatization or appear "mature."

This finding is in agreement with a study conducted by Negeri (2014) that determined teenagers in Western Ethiopia who experienced higher peer pressure were more inclined to engage in sex at an early age and engage in unprotected sex. Both studies indicated the fear of social rejection, whereby teenagers' peer acceptance is more valued than their safety.

Moreover, Baraki and Thupayagale Tshweneagae (2024) also have it that teens perceive the conduct of their peers as points of reference for sex. Such "benchmarking" behavior among both Ethiopian and Nepali teens is a sign of a shared regional pattern by which peer group norms override parental or institutional controls.

Research also found gendered perceptions of coping with peer pressure. Male youths were reported to be glamorized over sexual conquest, while the messages to girls were mixed—to be sexually aware and yet harshly criticized if they did something about it. This double standard is illustrative of patriarchal cultural norms in which male sexuality is connected to status and women's sexuality to morality (Adhikari & Tamang, 2009).

Baraki and Thupayagale Tshweneagae (2024) have also seen these gendered dynamics, wherein boys are seeking masculinity verification through sex and girls facing shame and self-doubt. This shows that gender is not just the source of the experience of peer

pressure, but also the way in which adolescents experience and navigates sexual expectations.

These findings highlight the relevance of examining sexual health education from a gendered perspective. Such programs have the potential to reinforce unhealthy stereotypes and ignore special issues that adolescent girls encounter if they fail to confront these norms.

Conclusion

The current study finds strong support for the tremendous influence of peer pressure on Nepalese adolescents' sexual attitudes. The findings indicate that peer groups, media, and gendered expectations are central to measuring sexual norms. The study also advocates for the need to have comprehensive sexual education programs in Nepal to address both themes of peer pressure as well as the cultural nuances that affect adolescent sexuality. By equipping adolescents with the tools through which they can critically assess peer pressure, these programs can help them develop healthier sexual attitudes and behaviors. The study highlights the multifaceted dynamics involved in peer influence on adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior in Nepal. Peers are not just influencers but also normative belief enforcers, sometimes endorsing behavior in opposition to health public messages. This suggests interventions need to go beyond individual level education to counter peer dynamics and gendered social scripts. Peer-led and gender-sensitive approaches might be particularly helpful in restructuring risky norms and fostering healthy, self-directed sexual decision-making.

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