

Ethical Implications of Masturbation and Sexual Revolution Crisis among Nigerian Youths

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ABSTRACT

Masturbation, a form of sexual expression, has been associated with other sexual behaviors. This makes it an important component of youth sexuality rather than an isolated phenomenon. To understand fully sexual expressions among youths, the issue of masturbation must be given a critical focus especially as there seems to be no general consensus as to its appropriateness as a way of expressing sexual urge. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify the problem with masturbation, its causes, and its ethical implications from a religious perspective and thereafter prescribe the right response. This work employed the survey method of gathering information. Seven hundred copies of questionnaires were administered to 120 churches in 10 Baptist associations in Ibadan Conference, Nigeria. Findings reveal that masturbation is a common experience among youths. Most (84.5%) of the respondents have heard about masturbation and 80.1% defined it as intentionally playing with one's sexual organ until orgasm is reached. Of the respondents, 61.7% have masturbated at least once. Many (71.1%) of the respondents strongly agreed that it is not the best way to express sexual urge. A majority (69.4%) see it as a sin a youth should avoid. This is possible by avoiding printed materials, movies, or situations that may easily stir sexual urge. The study concludes that masturbation is a subject of great confusion among religious adherents, especially youths. The study, therefore, recommends that both parents and the church be responsive in identifying with young people in their struggles with sexual problems and provide a healthy environment for them where they can develop a balanced perception about their sexuality. It also recommends that since we live in a sexually-saturated environment, every young person should be disciplined with regard to what they see and hear so as to sustain their moral values.

Keywords: Sexuality, Masturbation, Youths, Ethics and Sex Education

Introduction

One of the most dominant issues of life is sex. Interestingly, sexuality as a subject, though very broad and concerning not only genital stimulation, is one of the issues many religions have a lot to talk about. Collins (2007, p.355) expressed this concept well when he affirms that sexuality “involves people struggling with what it means to be male or female, how one relates appropriately to the opposite sex, or how to deal with sexual feelings toward people of one’s own gender.” In other words, human sexuality is a topic that includes issues of intimacy, communication, self-control, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, and gender identity. The Bible also speaks to human sexuality as a special and precious gift of God to humanity at creation: He expects us to hold it in high esteem.

Current experiences and perspectives, however, have shown that the issue about sex is one of the areas that has generated a lot of controversies, especially when it comes to the question of how it should be expressed. This is so because every man, according to Cole, “seems to possess a certain freedom with regard to his sexual activity” (Cole, 1955, p. ix). The youths are more susceptible to sexual problems because it is believed that at the youthful stage of life sexual drive is just being discovered and remains very strong throughout puberty. According to Llewellyn-Jones (1998, p.56), “at puberty, the sex hormones, testosterone and estrogen in girls and testosterone in boys, increase in quantity and ‘stimulate’ the person’s sexual drive, which has been developing slowly since infancy, so that his or her desire for sexual pleasure increases.” In fact, other scholars have noted that sexual development is a dynamic process during adolescence, and masturbation is an enduring component of sexuality (Strauss and Yarhouse, 2005).

The issue of youth reproductive health is a global concern with which Nigeria, in particular, and Africa in general, contends. The World Population Data Sheet provides a snapshot of certain critical indicators of the reproductive and sexual health of young people in

Nigeria. As of 2008, it was discovered that 23% of women 15-19 years old had given birth or were pregnant with their first child. The median age of first birth among women ages 25-49 was 20.4 years. Nearly half of Nigerian women were married by age 18; the median age of marriage among women aged 25-49 was 18.3. Twenty percent of women were sexually active by age 15; the median age at first intercourse was 17.7 years for women and 20.6 years for men. More than 40% of sexually active, unmarried women were using a modern method of FP, the most common method being condoms (35%); 37% of young women know a condom source, as do 68% of men aged 15-24; 7% of young men and women had been tested for HIV and received their result within a year. With these statistics, it shows that there is a “sexual-revolution crisis” among the youths to use the words of Arterburn and Burns (1995, p.45), in which the practice of masturbation takes a pivotal position. There is clearly a need to investigate its occurrence and significance.

This work focuses on masturbation among youths. There seems to be a general consensus that it is a practice prevalent among youths (Stafford, 1987). The questions to be asked, therefore, are: Are there side effects of masturbation? Does it have any social, ethical, spiritual and health implications for those who are in the habit? Could it result eventually in an addiction and subsequently hamper the joy of marital relationship in the future? Does it fit into the biblical standard of sexual expression? The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify the problem with masturbation, its causes, its ethical implications from a biblical perspective and to prescribe the right response.

Methodology

This work employs the survey, descriptive and analytical method of data collection. The selected population for the study is the youths in Baptist churches in Ibadan Conference of the

Nigerian Baptist Convention which comprises of 15 Baptist Associations and 294 churches. Ten Associations were selected out of which 120 local churches were picked randomly. Seven hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed randomly among 120 local churches. At the end, 588 questionnaires were returned.

Literature Review

Masturbation is a subject of great confusion and conflict among youths and a subject of much debate and disagreement among Christians. The goal of this work is to seek to understand its causes and effects as well as the biblical perspective of the problem of masturbation. Alcorn (1985, pp.215-221) approached the subject of masturbation from a Christian perspective. In answering the question, “is masturbation wrong?” he said the Bible does not discuss masturbation at all. Given that Leviticus has so much to say about sexuality, one would think it natural that the subject would be covered. This, however, is not the case. Masturbation is not specifically declared to be sinful. Nevertheless, he submits that we must be cautious to pronounce something to be sinful or not sinful when God has not discussed it. He suggested that the only thing we can do in such matter is to try and derive principles from scriptures on related sexual issues and see if we can wisely apply them to the subject of masturbation.

Applying the above rule, he espoused the following argument: First of all, sex was created by God for procreative purposes, physical enjoyment, and the demonstration of intimacy between a husband and a wife. In this context, the sexual act is intended to occur in a healthy marriage relationship between husband and wife in purity and holiness. In contrast to this, masturbation is the self-stimulation to the point of sexual release without the gifting of a spouse. It would seem that masturbation is a denial of the sexual design of God for couples. But, the bone of contention is, is it sinful? Again, answering this question he maintains that it is

difficult to answer the question because the Bible does not pronounce it as sin. Nevertheless, there is the principle of purity that is obviously true. Does masturbation, therefore fall under the category of purity?

Furthermore, Alcorn states that if masturbation involves sexual fantasies and/or pornography, then it is certainly not pure and is very sinful. He maintains that the Bible clearly teaches that our minds are as important to God as our bodies and that we are to remain pure in both. He based this argument on the statement of Jesus where he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart,” (Matt. 5:27-28). In his opinion, he felt Jesus is saying that thinking lustful thoughts is sinful. Therefore, masturbation involving sexual fantasies (at least not of one’s spouse) is undoubtedly sinful.

Furthermore, he noted that if the above position would be maintained, then another issue to deal with is the degree of sinfulness if someone masturbates with absolutely no sexual fantasy of any sort. Again, since the Bible doesn’t condemn or condone it, we cannot make dogmatic assertions. What if a person masturbates in order to reduce the sexual urge in an attempt to not commit fornication? Certainly, actual fornication would be a sin, and masturbation would be preferable in this instance. But does this mean that the person is being mastered by the flesh? If so, then that would be wrong? But, does it mean then that a self-release of sexual tension is then acceptable if it is to avoid fornication? Again, since the Bible does not declare masturbation a sin, he concludes that it will be difficult to say it is.

Looking at Alcorn’s position, one may say that he did not give a definitive answer as to whether it is right or wrong to masturbate. But one thing he made clear is the fact that masturbation definitely goes along with sexual fantasies which are founded mostly on lustful

desires. If we are to find what is wrong with masturbation, therefore, we should find out about what the Bible says about lustful desire and how sinful it is to engage in such. It is on this point that Alcorn actually hit the nail on the head when he said, “the goal of the Christian life is to be pure in thought and deed. Obviously, the issue of masturbation comes down to this. Therefore, we can assert that though masturbation under certain circumstances may not be sinful, the desire to be sexually pure and holy should move the Christian to avoid it. Instead, he or she should seek to master the body and not give in to its desires” Alcorn (1985:219).

Meier (2007), in the same vein, states that the rightness or wrongness of masturbation is one of the frequently asked questions about sexuality on college campuses among young people. She observed that we live in a sexually charged society where watching a harmless TV program assaults us with sexual content through advertisements for toothpaste, cars and tropical vacations. To her, even magazine covers at the grocery store and billboards flash images that intensify our sexual longings.

The view of Llewellyn-Jones (1998, p. 56) is that masturbation comprises a normal part of sexual development and does no physical harm whatsoever, however frequently or infrequently it takes place. Llewellyn-Jones is a professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology and so possibly speaks from a medical perspective. She argues that those who propounded that masturbation does cause some problems like producing weak people; damaging the eye-sight; causing brain decay or insanity are actually saying so because they are ignorant. To her, masturbation is one of the sexual discoveries an adolescent could make as he/she grows up as it holds a lot of positive benefits as one attains adulthood. She said through masturbation young people may learn to explore their body and not to feel shame or guilt about touching their genital area. This may help them to become aware of their response to stimulation, and to recognize the stages of their sexual

arousal. With this, she felt that masturbation enables young people to develop the physical aspects of their sexuality, which should contribute to their later sexual fulfillment. Another argument she put forward in favor of masturbation is that it is one of the ways of handling moments of separation between couples or when one of the partners dies when they become sexually interested or excited rather than seeking for a lover. To answer the question of whether it is appropriate to fantasize while masturbating, she felt it is a normal component of masturbation and there is nothing wrong as “most people-both men and women- fantasize during masturbation, that is, the person imagines a sexual situation with a lover or some other sexual situation. Some people can fantasize unaided, but others need the added stimulus of erotic literature or pictures to enhance the fantasy” (Llewellyn-Jones (1998, p. 57).) One thing, however she noted and agreed with is that “the only harm which may result from masturbation is feelings of guilt, occasioned by the Judeo-Christian religious disapproval of masturbation.” But to her, she concludes that no guilt should be experienced, as masturbation is a normal sexual outlet at any age.

In the same vein, Thornton and Camburn (1989) stretch it further that if we regard masturbation as a mere habit, then we can't entirely discount the significance of habitual masturbation as a moral issue simply because it isn't mentioned in Scripture. Their stand is that all of life's pleasures have an appropriate context. Any misuse of legitimate pleasure has bad consequences. Bringing this to sexual issue, one will conclude that the purpose of sexual pleasure is to nurture intimacy and unity between a husband and wife with reference to Genesis 2:24, Mark 10:6-8, and Ephesians 5:28-32. Sexual desire is related to our deepest longings, our profound potential for intimacy and joy. The scriptures compare sexual desire to a fire. In the right circumstances, a fire provides warmth, light, and food. In the wrong place, it has an

enormous capacity for destruction. They concluded that if masturbation is just a habit, then at what point does it become an abnormal behavior?

To Turner (1997), there is no reason to be fearful, guilty or concerned when masturbating. He argues that masturbation only becomes a problem if one is doing it so often that you hurt yourself and/or you no longer desire a healthy sexual sharing with the person you love. In other words, it is bad if it replaces the sexual act with your partner in life. He further states that masturbation becomes a problem if one found oneself preoccupied with it and or the material that goes along with it. The problem with Turner's position is its definition of how many times one needs to masturbate to make it "often" and how one can prevent entering into a habitual practice. It is the opinion of this work that it is preferable not to even make a practice of it at all as a way of preventing entering into the web of it.

Dobbins (2006), asserts that masturbation is acceptable as long as it is done with the right fantasy. He believes openly discussing masturbation and sexual fantasy with youths will help them avoid the explosive damage sexual misbehavior can bring. His prime concern is that the youths, during masturbation, will use either pornographic pictures or fantasies involving a specific person. Their brain will train itself to link the sexual stimulation with the fantasy that they use. This can cause a need for pornography to be carried over into their married life. But if they direct a fantasy towards their future spouse, he argues that there is nothing morally wrong with it. In other words, for Dobbins, there is actually nothing wrong with the act of masturbation itself but the fantasy that accompanies the activity. I think he strikes a point here by placing emphasis on the impossibility of a person masturbating without fantasizing. If this is true of the act of masturbation, then one cannot run away from the fact that masturbation is a corrupt practice that affects mostly the purity of the mind. The problem with this conclusion lies in the

fact that if masturbation results in guilt then the best option is to stop engaging in the act instead of asking God for the grace to overcome the feeling of guilt.

Dobson (1979), by contrast, was very direct in his support for masturbation. To him, masturbation is not much of an issue with God. He said this because masturbation is a normal part of adolescence which involves no one else. It does not cause disease. It does not produce babies, and Jesus did not mention it in the Bible. He maintains that he is not saying this to encourage people to masturbate but if they do then they should not struggle with guilt over it. This position however, opens a basis for enquiry into knowing how many people do masturbate without having a sense of guilt.

For Coates (1993, p.48), he concludes that compulsive masturbation, simply for the purpose of self-gratification, with other people in mind is wrong. But masturbation for the purpose of self-control is something altogether different. To him, the act in and of itself is not wrong. When someone is under pressure to the point of distraction, whether single or married, it is often better that they relieve themselves, for at that point no mental stimulation is necessary.

Still, in the same line of thought, Dean and VanDruff argue that Christians should not condemn masturbation. To them, it is a mystery that God allows masturbation to even work, and so it is reasonable to assume that it is a gift of one kind to keep ourselves from temptation. They further affirm that masturbation can be used as one of the ways that we can learn to control our bodies; not by inflaming the body with pornography or fantasies so that it can be done too often, but in using it to keep ourselves from dangerous, physical temptation when it can be done without sinning in any way.

Causes of Masturbation

Several reasons have been propounded for why people engage in the act. To understand the cause of masturbation, especially among youths, requires understanding their developmental stages and the attending consequences. Vukich and Vandegriff (2002, pp.61-63) conclude that youth's life could be divided into four developmental stages namely: Physical, mental, emotional, and social. Their own submission is that each of these developmental factors plays significant roles in shaping every teenager's view of sexuality. They submit that sex is no joke to the youths, even though they may joke about it; it is actually something deep within their hearts that they are searching for an appropriate way of expressing it. In this regard, McDowell and Hosteler (1996, pp.263-264) identified first of all psychological changes as one of the causes of masturbation. By this, they meant that the pressures and urges that lead many youths to masturbate are a natural, normal part of growing up. This becomes more intense at the adolescent stage.

Another factor they recognized borders on unhealthy and uneducated views of sexuality. They argued that some kids have been raised to view any awareness of their bodies, especially sexual awareness, as bad. This unhealthy and/or uneducated view of puberty and sexuality eventually leaves some kids unprepared for the sexual urges they encounter as adolescents. Of course, there is the third reason they advanced for the cause of masturbation which is what they called rumors and secrecy. They argued that the subject of masturbation is surrounded by so many rumors and secrecy such that many youths view the pressures and urges that often lead to masturbation as weird, perverted, or pathetic. Consequently, they avoid confiding in parents, friends, or church leaders about their struggles.

Increase in sexual promiscuity, especially the act of masturbation, among youths could also be philosophical and cultural. This is the view of Anderson (2005). He noted that in the last few

decades society has shifted from a Judeo-Christian foundation to a secular one. This goes to say that we must still go to the biblical platform to form an acceptable definition of sexual expressions. He further identified two cultural forces that have accelerated this philosophical shift. The first is what he called the entertainment media (television, movies, rock music, MTV) while the second is sex education. He argues that these two forces have transformed the social landscape of our world and made promiscuity a virtue and virginity a problem. With this, the society is now facing what he called sexuality crisis. Youths are trying sex at an earlier age than ever before.

One other factor that could influence youth's sexual behavior, especially masturbation is the pattern in which he/she grows up with respect to the kind of teaching and culture he or she is exposed to. Until we consider this factor, Haroian (2000) believes that we will not be having the view of teenager's sexuality as a complete phenomenon. In her view, a child can only grow up in any of the four cultures sexually: sexually permissive; sexually supportive; sexually restrictive or sexually repressive. A sexually *permissive* culture not only allow a less fettered expression of adult sexuality but may give little attention to the sexual behaviors of children as long as they are not blatantly displayed. Sexually *supportive* cultures, believing that sex is indispensable to human happiness, encourage early sexual expression as a means of developing adult sexual competency and positive sexual attitudes. She believes that the children in sexually permissive and sexually supportive societies display a similar developmental pattern that is not apparent in sexually *restrictive* and sexually *repressive* societies.

Ethical Implications of Masturbation

While Bridges maintains that masturbation is a normal, healthy sexual activity that is pleasant, fulfilling, acceptable, and safe, other opinions have observed and expressed concerns

that masturbation has some ethical implications that could make it an abnormal behavior. In this regard, Mackinnon (2005, p. 39) submits that masturbation is an act of **self-gratification** rather than a part of giving gratification and pleasure to one's partner which actually should be the goal of sexual intercourse. She thereafter lists the following as what constitutes the abnormality of masturbation: first, is the psychic effect. Masturbation has a tendency to isolate its captives psychologically and socially. In masturbation, the person is focused on self-alone even though he or she usually is fantasizing about someone else at the same time. St. Clair and Jones (2007, p.116) condemn this self-centeredness as far as masturbation is concerned when they submitted that "control is the ability to say no to pleasing yourself in order to please another. Masturbation pleases only one person and that is the person practicing it. It is a totally self-centered act and creates more self-centeredness." This means that the person who masturbates is selfish and lacks self-control.

Second, she mentioned **emotional deprivation**. She said it is possible for the one who is practicing this habit to experience the full extent of sex emotions. Therefore, in short-circuiting the emotions, one can easily be removed from the world of reality. By implication, it means that if one should stay with the habit of masturbation for so long, such individual will lose the natural satisfaction that should come from normal sexual intercourse.

Third, she mentioned the issue of **damaged sensitivity**. By this, she meant the habit of masturbation has a tendency in numbing the mechanism of the sexual organs if practiced excessively. This lessens the sensibility and thus detracts from normal sexual relations of married life.

Lastly, on her list, she mentioned **control of the mind**. Along with the act of masturbation comes the fantasy of the mind. When practiced often, a pattern or cycle seems to become

established within the individual's mind. Thus, perversion has a tendency to control the mind and this, in turn, initiates the action. The real danger according to her lies in the guilt that increases as the individual dwells in this world of fantasy.

There are still two more serious effects which McDowell and Hostetler (1996, pp.264-265) mentioned. They argued that since masturbation so often involves images and fantasies, it can result in the transformation of people into things. When masturbation turns a person into an object that is used to achieve orgasm, a destructive and dangerous mental process has begun. This is what they referred to as “**objectification of others.**” Commenting on this issue of objectification of others, Randy Alcorn (1985, p215) writes:

Masturbation can become an obsessive and enslaving habit fueling the fire of one's lusts and lowering people to sex object status. It can become entangled with the obsessive compulsion of pornography and can lead to increasingly perverse fantasies and desires- and possibly aggression against the opposite sex.

The last issue McDowell and Hostetler raised about the effect of masturbation has to do with **self-esteem**. They submitted that masturbation and the control it can exert over a person is one of many factors that can cause the self-esteem of a youth who is struggling to form his or her identity to falter and even crumble. Their own position is that youths who engage in masturbation sometimes hate not only their actions but themselves; they are ashamed of what they do, they feel powerless to control their urges, and their self-images are often damaged by their secret behavior.

Presentation of Results

Figure 1: Gender of the Respondents

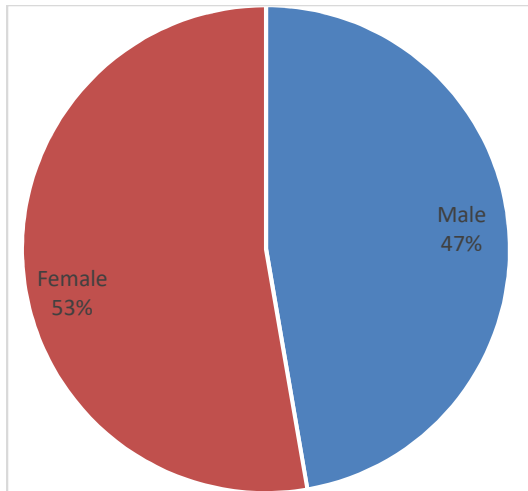


Figure 2: Sexual Experience of Respondents

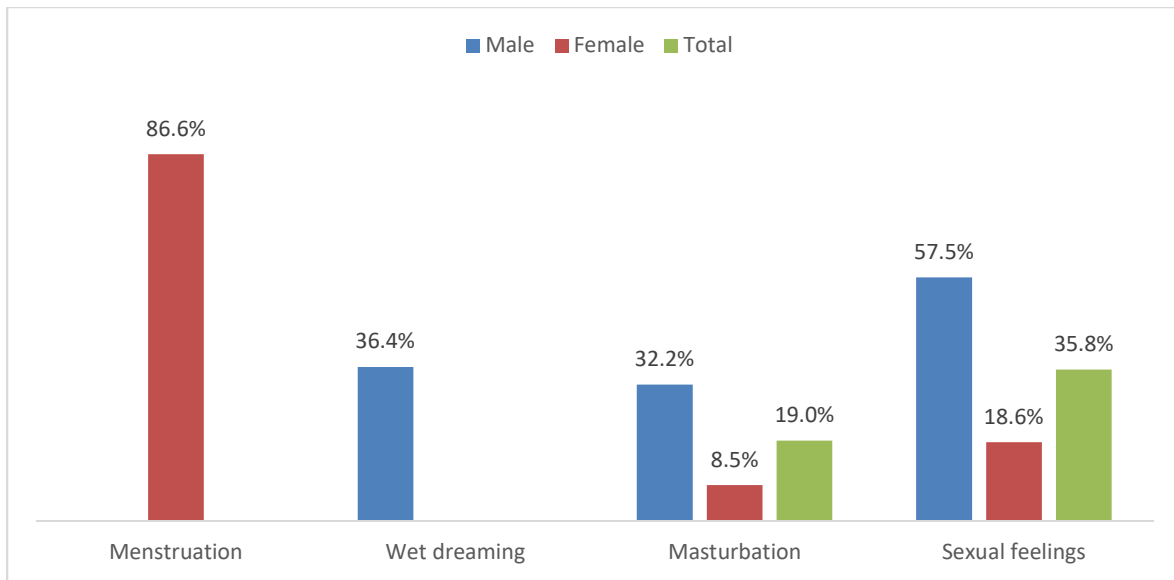


Figure 3: Perspectives of respondents to masturbation

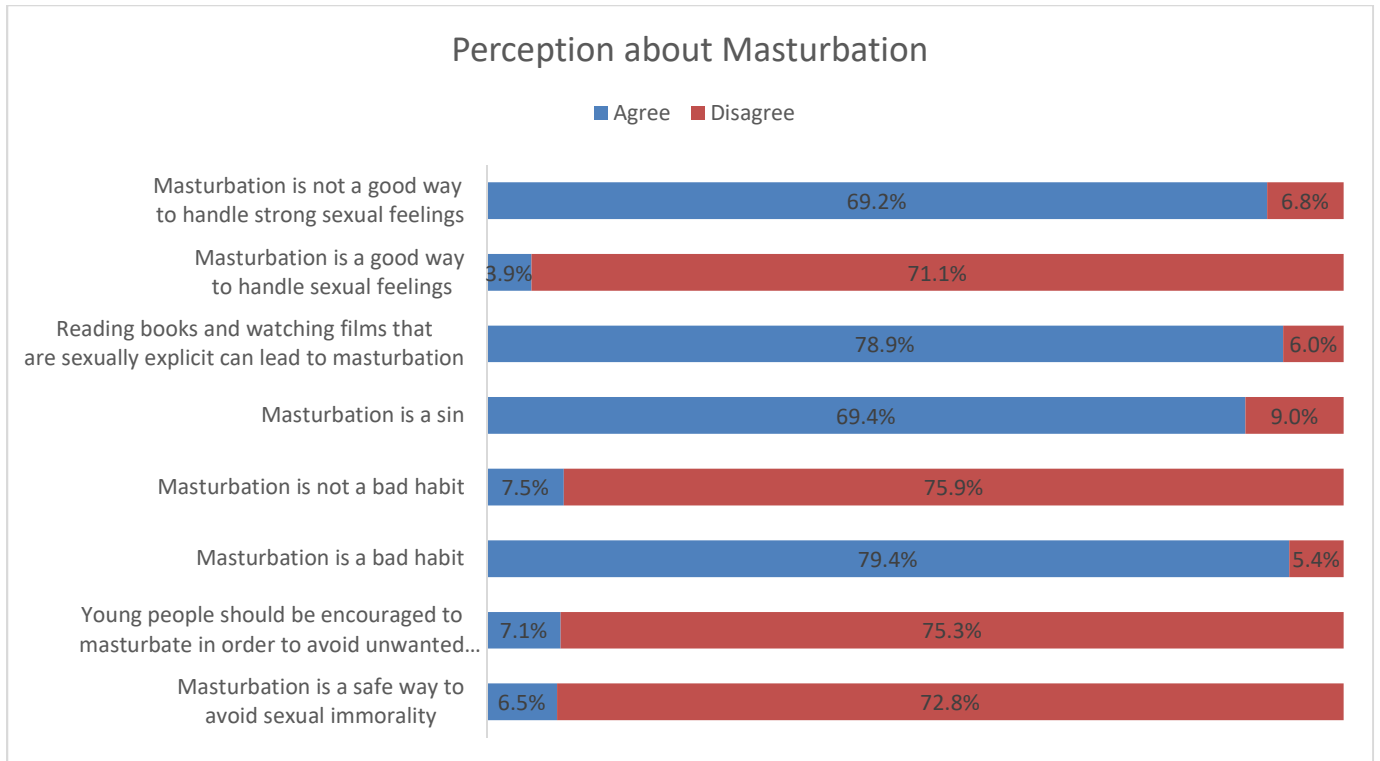


Chart is rescaled to 100% stacked bar for comparing 'Agree' and 'Disagree' responses

Figure 4: Percentage Distribution of Source of Information about Masturbation

*Totals are more than 100% because the respondents could provide more than one response.

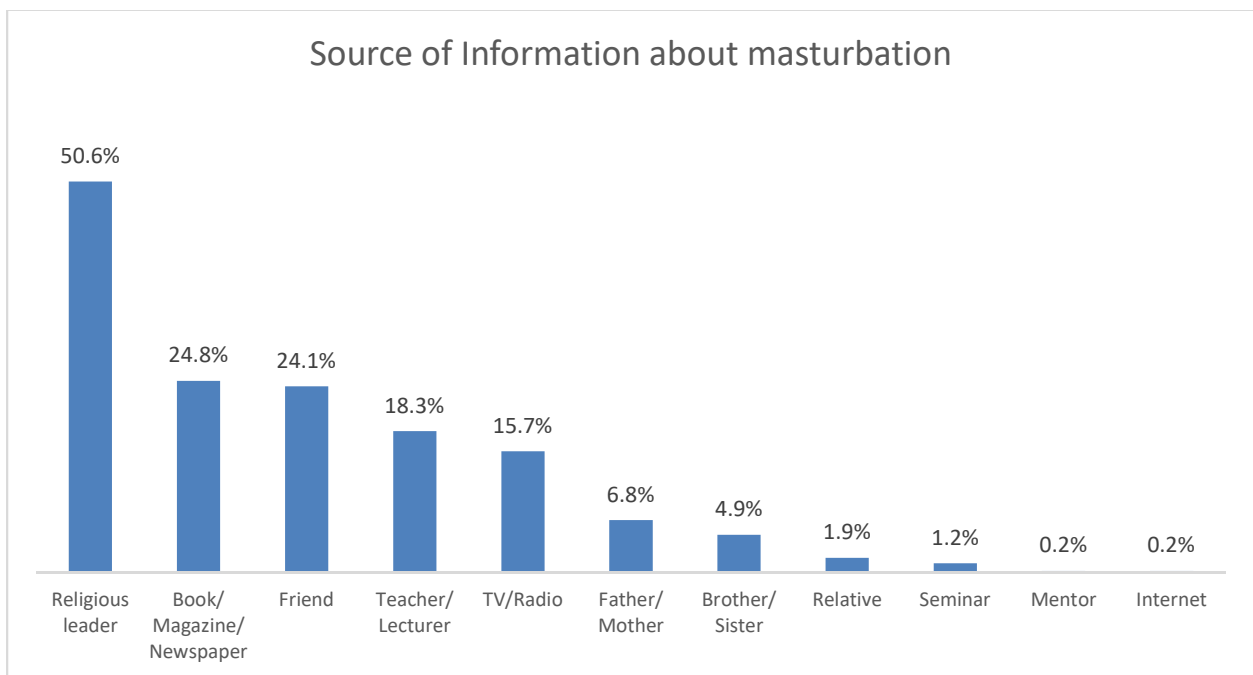


Figure 5: kinds of television Programme/Film Respondents Watch?

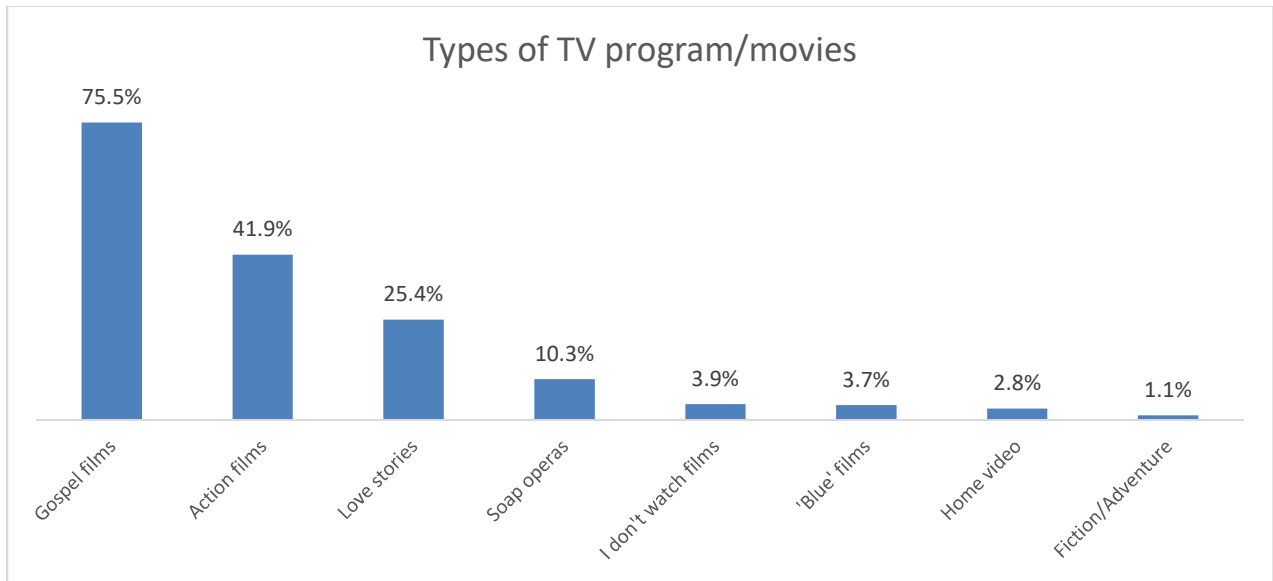


Figure 6: Kinds of Books read by Respondents

**Totals are more than 100% because the respondents could provide more than one response.*

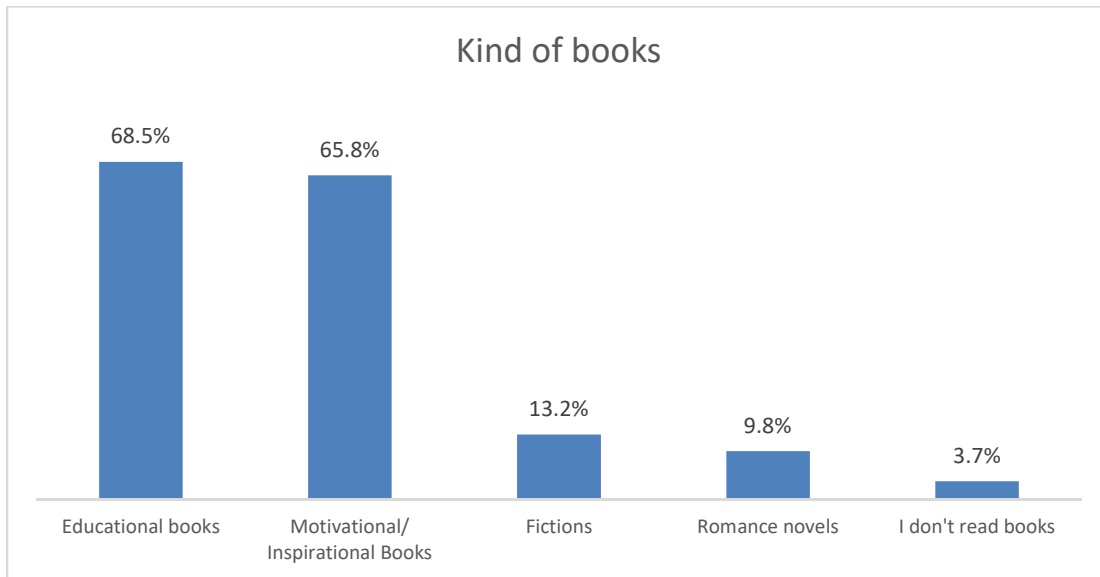
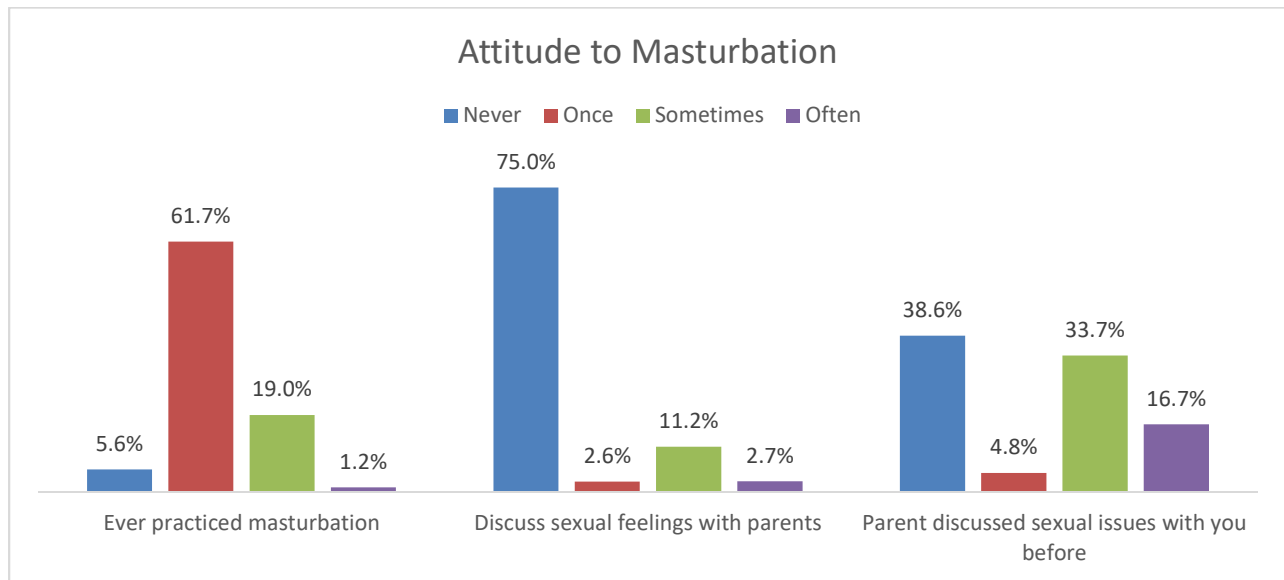


Figure 7: Attitude of Respondents to masturbation



Discussion and Conclusions

The work looks at sexual behavior among youths with respect to their experience about masturbation. The survey was conducted among Baptist youths in churches within the Ibadan Baptist Conference, Nigeria. From the sample population of 700 youths, certain facts emerged which is the focus of this section.

This work shows that the issue of masturbation concerns both genders. The fact that 72% of the respondents disagree that masturbation is a safe way to avoid sexual immorality implies that it is perceived as both a bad habit and sin among the youths. The findings also revealed that the issue of sex in its varied manifestations is not something obscured from the youths, as many of them confirmed that they have experienced one level of sexual manifestation or the other, ranging from a wet dream or nocturnal emission (for boys) to menstruation (for girls). This implies that the issue of sex is an integral part of their development and it should not be taken for

granted by parents, sacred assembly and educational institutions. It also means that adequate education on how to manage their sexuality should be given as early as possible especially by educated parents.

Proper orientation about sex is paramount to these young people. This kind of orientation becomes necessary because that will serve as a guide to help them have the right perspectives about how to handle sexual issues and develop a healthy philosophy about sex. This is supported by the findings, where a lot of respondents agreed that sexual feelings are normal for everybody, only that it should be expressed within the bound of marriage. While this position is ideal, the findings show that some of the respondents still have a problem managing their sexual urges as some of them have had sexual intercourse as early as 16 years old. Others who did not experience sexual intercourse at that age have adopted other means of expressing their sexual urge, especially through masturbation.

The findings also revealed that the respondents have a thorough knowledge of masturbation and could even describe what it is. This shows that the issue of masturbation is a common phenomenon among young people. It is surprising to note that although, 69.2% of the respondents agreed that masturbation is not a safe way to handle sexual urge yet close to 61.7% of them have masturbated at least once. This shows that to a certain degree, they know that masturbation is not a healthy habit, but they cannot do without it especially at that crucial age. Sometimes young people are erroneously taught that masturbation is one of the safe ways of avoiding unwanted pregnancy and spread of STD. Only 7% of the respondents agreed with this notion and little more than 75% disagreed with it. About 79 % of the respondents agreed that *masturbation is a bad habit* while about 5% disagreed; however, about 8% went on to agree on the converse, *masturbation is not a bad habit*, while 76% disagreed with this.

However, a greater portion of the respondents indicated what could be the predisposing factors for sexual urges such reading books and watching films that are sexually explicit could lead to masturbation while 6% disagreed with this notion. Most of the respondents (20%) suggested that young people should avoid persons or places as well as songs, parties, and chats that can arouse sexual desires in them as a way of avoiding sex abuse and masturbation.

Recommendations

In view of these facts, as discovered from this survey, that youths' development cannot be totally severed from their sexuality and that certain predisposing factors could be difficult to avoid, the following recommendations are therefore made. These recommendations will be in two parts: for parents, pastors, teachers or older people saddled with the responsibility of providing oversight on these young people on one hand and for youths on the other hand. Parents or other adults should take the initiative of discussing the issue about masturbation with youths. The truth is if the subject of masturbation has not been broached before mid-adolescence, then there is every possibility that such a young person is already struggling with masturbation especially in the case of a male. Parents, pastors and youth leaders have a lot to do in helping those prone to this habit.

In doing this, however, they must be careful to listen to them with empathy by putting themselves in their shoes. It is extremely easy for parents and other adults to forget their own adolescence period and minimize the struggles young people experience. There is the need to understand that a youth is likely to be embarrassed to discuss such matters with an adult, and even more so if he or she is uncomfortable with his or her sexuality and/or behavior. This should also be done with the view of carefully and sensitively direct the young person in a strategy that

will most help his or her specific situation. At the end, youths should be helped to formulate a specific plan, complete with actions steps that will serve as a program, or guide for behavior.

The other part of the recommendations meant for the youths have to do with the management of their mind and thought patterns. This study gave the insight that the problem with masturbation is rooted in the kind of thought pattern one maintains. There is the need to keep the gates to the mind jealously so as to keep the mind healthy. Basically, the gates of the mind are the eyes and the ears. If the eyes are not focused on the right thing, it will affect the mind. The eyes must be kept away from anything that can stir sexual urges.

Finally, there is the need for every young person to develop an accountability partner; someone to confide in to share confidential issues. This will be very appropriate if the parents could fill this gap. Parents should pragmatically develop a friendship with the children such that they can open up and be free to discuss some sensitive and confidential matters like sex.

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