

Influence of LGBTQ Social Media Contents on Cultural Representation of Young Abia Residents

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become central to how young people encounter, interpret, and negotiate ideas about identity, sexuality, and belonging, and this is particularly true in societies where such conversations are restricted offline. This study examined how LGBTQ-related contents on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp influences the cultural representation of young people in Abia State, Nigeria. Anchored on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the study adopted a survey research design and drew a sample of 384 respondents through multi-stage sampling across the three senatorial districts of Abia State. A structured questionnaire captured respondents' exposure to LGBTQ contents across the four platforms, their attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations, the extent to which their cultural representation had shifted following exposure, and the factors that motivate such shifts where they occur. Findings show that exposure to LGBTQ contents is high across all four platforms, though it is unevenly distributed, with video-based and image-based contents on YouTube and Instagram driving most of the engagement. Attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations remained largely unfavourable, and while exposure encouraged reflection and broadened respondents' understanding of the range of identities that exist, it rarely translated into a shift in personal cultural representation. Where representational change did occur, it was more often linked to relatable influencer contents and peer discussion within closed groups than to formal advocacy messaging. The study concludes that religious conviction, family expectation, and the criminalised legal status of same-sex relationships in Nigeria continue to mediate whatever influence social media exposure might otherwise carry, and recommends that digital literacy interventions in the region be designed with this mediating context in mind rather than assuming that exposure alone will shift attitudes.

Keywords: Abia State, LGBTQ+, Social Media, Cultural Representation and Young people.

Introduction

A young person in Abia State who opens Instagram today is likely, within a handful of scrolls, to encounter a post, reel, or comment thread touching on LGBTQ identity, whether framed as advocacy, entertainment, controversy, or condemnation. The same is true, in different registers, of Facebook groups, YouTube videos, and the forwarded messages that circulate through WhatsApp. What was once confined to whispered conversation or outright silence in much of Nigerian public life now arrives, unsolicited and repeatedly, through the platforms young people use every day. Ukonu, Anorue, Ololo, and Olawoyin (2021) found that Nigerian social media users on Facebook and Instagram were, despite a broadly unfavourable climate of opinion, increasingly willing to discuss homosexuality, cultural disvalued systems, a departure from african moral and customary upbringings, a willingness the authors attributed less to a softening of underlying attitudes than to the sheer visibility the topic had acquired online. That visibility is the starting point for this study.

The difficulty is that visibility does not, by itself, tell us what young people do with what they see and communicate on social media. A considerable body of international research treats social media exposure to LGBTQ contents as broadly formative, capable of expanding tolerance and supporting identity exploration where offline environments cannot (Berger et al., 2021; Woods & Hardman, 2021). Much of this literature, however, was produced in North American and European contexts where legal recognition of same-sex relationships coexists, however unevenly, with public discourse on sexuality. Nigeria presents a markedly different backdrop. The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 criminalises same-sex relationships and

associated advocacy, and religious and cultural institutions across the country treat heterosexuality and other social relationship related vices as the only legitimate orientation (Bankole, Uye, & Olapegba, 2023). Ellis (2025) argues more broadly that the relationship between digital connectivity and queer visibility is not straightforwardly liberating in jurisdictions where that visibility can expose individuals to legal or extralegal risk, a caution that applies directly to a Nigerian setting where online expression and offline criminal liability are not neatly separated. Okeke, Mudambi, and Weege (2025), examining Nigerian reactions to a viral Instagram video featuring an openly gay Nigerian cleric, documented how quickly online discourse mobilised to frame queerness as alien to Nigerian identity, drawing on colonial-era religious morality to police who counts as authentically Nigerian. If exposure to LGBTQ contents operates so differently across contexts, claims about its liberalising effect drawn from Western samples cannot simply be transposed onto Abia State.

What remains largely unexamined is how this tension between high exposure and resistant attitudes plays out among Abia youth specifically, and whether it plays out the same way across the platforms on which LGBTQ contents circulates. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp are not interchangeable channels; they differ in format, in the anonymity they afford, and in how publicly or privately contents is consumed. Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024), in a systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development, note that most existing research treats platforms as broadly equivalent delivery mechanisms for identity-relevant contents, a simplification the review itself flags as a limitation given how differently platforms are structured. A YouTube video reaches a viewer through algorithmic recommendation and can be watched in isolation; a WhatsApp forward arrives embedded in an existing relationship of trust or suspicion; an Instagram post is shaped by visual aesthetics and public commentary in ways a private message is not. Existing Nigerian scholarship on LGBTQ social media discourse has tended to concentrate on Twitter and, to a lesser extent, Instagram and Facebook (Onanuga, 2020, 2021, 2024; Alichie, 2022; Oyebanji, 2025), leaving open how a deliberately multi-platform, state-wide sample would respond. This study addresses that gap by examining, across all four platforms at once, the extent of exposure among young people in Abia State, their attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations, the degree to which their cultural representation has shifted as a result, and the specific factors that account for such shifts where they occur.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addresses can be stated plainly: young people in Abia State are exposed, routinely and across multiple platforms, to LGBTQ-related contents, yet the region's cultural and religious environment remains one of the more conservative in Nigeria regarding sexual orientation. What happens at the point where high exposure meets an unreceptive cultural climate is not well understood. It is possible that exposure produces no meaningful change at all, that attitudes harden defensively against contents perceived as culturally intrusive, that a private layer of reconsideration occurs without any accompanying public shift, or that change occurs selectively, taking hold among some young people while leaving others unmoved. Each outcome would carry different implications for media literacy policy and for how advocacy contents ought to be designed, and existing research does not allow one to distinguish clearly between them for this population.

Part of the difficulty lies in how the question has previously been framed. Studies asking only whether respondents have become more accepting of diverse sexual orientations risk missing subtler shifts, such as a young person who continues to reject non-heteronormative relationships in principle while becoming more willing to interact socially with someone who identifies differently. Zaid, Shin, Kteish, Fedtke, and Ibahrine (2021), studying gendered self-representation among Emirati college students, another context where public discourse on sexuality is tightly constrained, found social media functioning as a genuinely liberating force for gendered self-expression, which raises the comparative question of whether a similarly liberating effect should be expected, and found, among young people in Abia State, or whether the Nigerian legal and religious context produces a more constrained pattern instead. Cultural representation, understood here as how young people position themselves in relation to prevailing norms around gender and sexuality, is a broader construct than attitude alone, and it is this broader construct the present study is designed to capture. A further gap concerns platform specificity: where a respondent encounters LGBTQ contents, whether in the relative privacy of a WhatsApp group or the public visibility of an Instagram comment section, plausibly shapes how it is processed, yet Nigerian studies have rarely compared platforms directly within a single sample. This study closes that gap by treating platform as a variable in its own right, and by examining not only what young people in Abia State believe about diverse sexual orientations but what, if anything, moves them from one position to another.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how LGBTQ contents on social media, specifically Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, has affected the cultural representation of young people in Abia State. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i. Assess the level of exposure of young people in Abia State to LGBTQ contents on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp.
- ii. Determine the attitude of young people in Abia State toward different sexual orientations encountered through LGBTQ contents on social media.
- iii. Investigate the cultural representation of young people in Abia State following exposure to LGBTQ contents on social media.
- iv. Identify the factors that motivate change in cultural representation among young people in Abia State who have been exposed to LGBTQ contents on social media.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. To what extent are young people in Abia State exposed to LGBTQ contents on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp?
- ii. What is the attitude of young people in Abia State toward different sexual orientations encountered through LGBTQ contents on social media?
- iii. What is the cultural representation of young people in Abia State following exposure to LGBTQ contents on social media?
- iv. What factors motivate change in cultural representation among young people in Abia State who have been exposed to LGBTQ contents on social media?

Literature Review

Social Media, LGBTQ contents, and Cultural Representation

The claim that social media has changed the terms on which LGBTQ identities become visible is now well established across a range of national contexts, though what that visibility accomplishes is less settled. Are, Talbot, and Briggs (2024) surveyed 120 LGBTQIA+ social media users and found that platform affordances, meaning the specific features and design logics of each platform, shaped both the opportunities for self-expression and the risks of exposure to abuse, with older users exercising more caution about how openly they presented themselves than younger cohorts. This complicates a simple exposure-equals-liberation narrative: even among LGBTQ users themselves, visibility is managed strategically rather than embraced uniformly, a calculation Soto-Sanfiel and Sánchez-Soriano (2023) suggest is complicated further by the tendency of mainstream platforms to distort or flatten LGBTQ+ self-representation even when queer users attempt to author their own narratives.

In the Nigerian setting, the picture is shaped as much by resistance to visibility as by visibility itself. Ukonu et al. (2021) documented a climate in which Facebook and Instagram users were increasingly willing to discuss homosexuality but did so within a persistently unfavourable frame, reinforced by socio-cultural institutions and political rhetoric rather than dislodged by online discourse. Oyebanji's corpus-based research on Nigerian Twitter (2021, 2024) extends this picture, showing how pro-gay expression online tends to provoke organised linguistic opposition, and how terms of derision directed at gender-nonconforming figures circulate with considerable reach. Amodu (2024) frames this dynamic as one of "sex panics," in which queer counterpublics attempt to sustain community online even as they face periodic waves of hostile public attention. What these studies share is a picture of Nigerian social media as a site of contest rather than straightforward normalisation, which sits in some tension with Oz, Yanik, and Batu's (2023) finding, drawn from LGBTQ social media activists operating under politically and culturally restrictive conditions elsewhere, that sustained online visibility can still, over time, shift the terms of public discussion even where it does not immediately shift underlying acceptance.

Platform-Specific Dynamics: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp

Treating social media as a single undifferentiated category obscures meaningful differences in how LGBTQ contents is produced, encountered, and discussed across platforms. Facebook's group and page architecture has historically supported the kind of sustained community formation that Agobe and Koffi (2024) documented among Woubi communities in Côte d'Ivoire, where groups offered organisational continuity that more ephemeral platforms do not easily replicate. Rodriguez, Peterson, Benhayoun, and Liu (2025), using sentiment analysis of Facebook comments, found that recruitment posts for LGBTQIA+ research encountered measurable

hostility, a reminder that Facebook's public commentary features can expose such contents to direct confrontation in ways more curated platforms sometimes avoid.

Instagram's visual, algorithmically curated format produces a different dynamic. Souza, Lutz, and Turner (2025) analysed curated LGBTQ+ contents on Instagram and found that the platform's recommendation systems privilege certain kinds of queer representation over others, meaning exposure is not evenly distributed even among users who follow LGBTQ-related accounts. Barroso-Moreno, Rayón-Rumayor, Bañares-Marivela, and Hernández-Ortega (2023), comparing Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, found that LGBT contents on Instagram provoked more polarised emotional reactions than on the other platforms studied, a pattern linked to Instagram's blend of personal narrative and public visibility. Nurhidayah, Waskito, and Verawati (2025), examining Instagram-based cultural identity among Indonesian Generation Z, point to the platform's particular suitability for identity performance through curated imagery, a dynamic plausibly relevant to how Abia youth encounter LGBTQ contents framed as personal storytelling rather than explicit advocacy. Sookpornasawan, Kiatrungrit, Seree, Korpaisarn, and Arunakul (2024), studying Thai secondary school pupils, found that greater exposure to gender and sexual diversity in media, much of it encountered on Instagram-style visual platforms, was associated with more favourable attitudes toward LGBT individuals, a correlational pattern that stands in useful contrast to the Nigerian findings discussed later in this paper.

YouTube's long-form, searchable format sets it apart again. Rodriguez (2022) examined how YouTube's recommendation and monetisation systems manage LGBTQ diversity, arguing that platform business incentives shape which kinds of queer contents receive algorithmic amplification and which remain marginalised despite being technically permitted. Li, Kim, and Baek (2026) analysed YouTube comments responding to LGBTQ-themed advertising and found audience reactions varied considerably depending on how explicitly the contents foregrounded LGBTQ identity, so the same platform can produce quite different reception patterns depending on framing. Gissena (2025), studying LGBTQ representation in animated YouTube Kids contents, raises a further point relevant to youth research: exposure may begin well before the age range typically sampled in attitude surveys, shaping baseline familiarity in ways a cross-sectional survey of older adolescents cannot fully capture.

WhatsApp occupies a distinct position because it operates through closed groups and private messaging rather than public posting, and the literature specifically addressing LGBTQ contents on WhatsApp is considerably thinner than for the other three platforms. What can be drawn from adjacent research on closed and semi-private digital spaces suggests that anonymity and restricted audience size matter for how sensitive contents is shared; Seyidov and Pentzold (2025), studying LGBTQIA+ visibility management in a politically restrictive setting, found that users calibrated disclosure carefully according to the perceived reach and permanence of a given platform, favouring more contained spaces for contents they judged too risky for open posting. Whether this extends to WhatsApp specifically, where group membership is usually drawn from existing offline relationships rather than anonymous strangers, is a question this study can speak to empirically even where the literature offers only indirect guidance, and the WhatsApp findings reported later in this paper should be read against that thinner comparative base.

Online Communities and Sociocultural Influence

Beyond individual pieces of contents, the communities that form around LGBTQ social media use carry their own influence on cultural representation. McInroy, Zapcic, and Beer (2021) describe LGBTQ+ fandom communities as networked counterpublics, spaces where marginalised identities are actively discussed and reworked by participants rather than simply consumed. Berger et al. (2021), in a qualitative study of LGBTQ adolescents, found that such support networks provided a sense of belonging that unsupportive offline environments failed to offer, though a later systematic review by Berger (2022) cautions that the well-being benefits are not uniform and depend on moderation quality and the presence of hostile members within otherwise supportive spaces.

For contexts where public LGBTQ community is legally and socially constrained, as in Nigeria, online spaces take on heightened importance precisely because offline alternatives are foreclosed. Okeke, Allen, Ibiwoye, Mbaye, and Okeke (2025) examined how Nigerian gay men used social media to exchange sexual health information in the absence of accessible offline resources, documenting peer-to-peer support that filled a gap left by health services reluctant to engage openly with LGBTQ populations. This introduces a complication relevant to the present study's sample: the young people surveyed here are not necessarily themselves LGBTQ-identifying, and their engagement with such communities is more likely to be as observers than as members

seeking support, a distinction the exposure literature does not always draw clearly but one that bears directly on how this study's findings ought to be interpreted.

Online communities are also not uniformly protective. Seyidov and Pentzold (2025) note that LGBTQIA+ social media users frequently navigate hostile scrutiny alongside supportive interaction within the same spaces, a pattern Rodriguez, Peterson, Benhayoun, and Liu (2025) confirm quantitatively in their sentiment analysis of Facebook comments responding to LGBTQIA+ research recruitment posts. Yekple and Mitkov (2024), running a field experiment in Ghana on whether trusted authority figures could shift anti-LGBTQ norms, found that message source mattered considerably more than message contents alone, a finding that complicates any account of online influence resting purely on exposure volume rather than who is doing the communicating. For young people in Abia State encountering LGBTQ contents primarily as bystanders, this dual character of online spaces, supportive for some and hostile toward the same contents from others, plausibly shapes the ambivalence this study anticipates finding.

Social Media Influencers, Role Models, and Sociocultural Modelling

The influence of individual contents creators on cultural representation operates somewhat differently from the influence of communities as a collective. Yan (2025), studying Chinese media, found growing acceptance of LGBTQ identities associated specifically with the visibility of LGBTQ social media influencers, distinguishing the effect of an identifiable, relatable individual from the more diffuse effect of exposure to LGBTQ contents in general. Safdar, Mohamed, Osman, and Abdelhafiz (2026) make a related point, arguing that social comparison processes drive much of how young audiences respond to influencers, a mechanism Noon et al. (2021) found to be moderated by age, with younger adolescents drawing stronger identity-relevant comparisons from Instagram contents than emerging adults did, a detail worth bearing in mind given the present study's sample spans both age groups. Barsigian, Howard, Quintero Davalos, Walsh, and Manago (2023), in a study of LGBTQ+ youth's engagement with both mainstream and alternative online narratives of gender and sexuality, found that young people did not simply absorb whichever narrative they encountered most; they actively weighed competing representations against one another, a pattern that complicates any assumption that exposure alone determines which narrative eventually takes hold.

Bandura's (1977, 2020) account of observational learning offers the clearest theoretical anchor for this dynamic, applied across settings as varied as classroom character education (Khozin, Tobroni, & Rozza, 2024) and health promotion (Islam et al., 2023). Its core claim, that individuals acquire attitudes partly through observing others, particularly when those others are perceived as similar to the observer or their modelled behaviour appears rewarded, translates directly to how an Abia youth watching an LGBTQ influencer navigate identity online might internalise, resist, or remain indifferent to what is modelled. Bates, Hobman, and Bell (2020), in a qualitative study of LGBTQ+ youth themselves, found participants frequently resented having their online identity presentation dictated by platform norms or audience expectation, a finding that cautions against assuming modelling operates uniformly even among the users who might seem its most direct audience.

For an audience largely not LGBTQ-identifying, as this study's sample is expected to be, the modelling dynamic works differently again. Coker, Quinn, O'Neil, and Ruppel (2023) describe how LGBTQ+ social media users construct authenticity and self-presentation for a mixed audience that includes unsupportive observers, meaning the young people surveyed here are encountering contents already shaped by the influencer's awareness of a potentially unsympathetic viewership. Whether such contents shifts cultural representation among unsympathetic or neutral observers, rather than simply reinforcing existing identity among those already receptive, is precisely what observational learning theory predicts should depend on perceived similarity and reward, both plausibly weaker for a Nigerian audience encountering contents produced for communities operating under very different social and legal conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), later elaborated as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2020), which holds that individuals acquire new behaviours, attitudes, and values substantially through observing others rather than solely through direct experience. Central to the theory are the processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation: an individual must notice a modelled behaviour, retain some memory of it, be capable of reproducing it, and be motivated to do so, motivation being shaped considerably by whether the observed behaviour appears to result in reward or punishment for the model. Grusec (2020) traces the theory's development from earlier behaviourist accounts and credits Bandura with insisting that learning could occur vicariously, through observation alone, without the learner needing to perform the behaviour or receive reinforcement directly.

Applied here, the theory suggests that a young person in Abia State who repeatedly observes LGBTQ individuals presenting their identities online, particularly where that presentation appears met with support or social reward, has some basis for adjusting their own attitudes or self-understanding accordingly. The theory does not, however, predict this process is automatic or uniform. Reproduction and motivation depend on factors external to the observed contents itself, including the observer's own social environment, the perceived risk or reward of adopting the modelled attitude within it, and the degree of perceived similarity between observer and model, a dependency Wang (2021) illustrates in an educational setting where modelled behaviour was adopted only when students judged the model to be credible and the behaviour socially rewarded within their own peer environment, rather than simply because the behaviour had been observed. Maulianza, Sarwoprasodjo, and Gani (2026), reviewing the theory's application to behaviour-change communication, caution that while the framework explains individual-level psychological mechanisms of modelling and self-efficacy reasonably well, it is considerably less equipped to explain resistance rooted in structural or deeply embedded social norms, a limitation directly relevant to a context where religious and legal norms operate as more than incidental background. This matters considerably where the offline consequences of publicly modelled acceptance differ sharply from the consequences typically depicted in the Western contents most readily available. Social Learning Theory, in other words, predicts observation and reflection as plausible outcomes of exposure even where it does not predict behavioural or attitudinal conformity, a pattern consistent with what the Introduction anticipated finding among Abia youth.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design, a method well suited to capturing the opinions, attitudes, and self-reported behaviours of a defined population on a topic of current social relevance. Survey research enables the investigator to work directly with the characteristics and responses of a selected group of respondents whose views are central to the research questions. This approach was considered appropriate for the present study because it sought to establish, across a reasonably large and geographically distributed sample, how young people in Abia State engage with and respond to LGBTQ content across four distinct social media platforms. Respondents' stated opinions were treated as reasonably direct expressions of their underlying attitudes, consistent with a standard assumption in survey-based attitude research, while recognising the limitation that stated attitudes may not always correspond precisely with private beliefs or future behaviour.

The population of the study comprised young people in Abia State between the ages of 15 and 35 years. According to the National Bureau of Statistics and the Federal Ministry of Youth Development (2025), the youth population of Abia State was approximately 1,496,072. The sample size for the study was 384, calculated using the online sample size calculator hosted by SurveySystem.com, consistent with standard practice for populations of this magnitude at a 95% confidence level. Of the 384 questionnaires administered, 362 were returned in usable form, representing a 94.3% response rate, which was considered adequate for analysis.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. First, the population was grouped into three clusters corresponding to the senatorial districts of Abia State: Abia South, Abia Central, and Abia North. Within each senatorial district, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were selected through balloting. Within each selected LGA, two busy public locations were identified as sampling points, yielding twelve sampling communities across the state. The sample was distributed equally among the twelve communities, and simple random sampling was used to select individual respondents at each location. This procedure was intended to give eligible young people an equal chance of inclusion, irrespective of the social media platform they used most frequently.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into sections corresponding to the study's research questions. The first section elicited respondents' demographic information. The second measured respondents' level of exposure to LGBTQ content separately for each of the four social media platforms, using Likert-type items addressing the frequency with which respondents encountered LGBTQ-related posts, videos, or messages; participated in related discussions; and became aware of LGBTQ accounts or content creators on each platform. The third section measured respondents' attitudes towards diverse sexual orientations. The items were adapted from the format used in the researcher's earlier Instagram-focused study but extended to refer to social media generally rather than to a single platform. The fourth section measured cultural representation, operationalised as the extent to which respondents' self-positioning in relation to prevailing sexuality norms had shifted following exposure to LGBTQ content. The fifth section addressed the factors respondents identified as motivating any reported shift, including influencer relatability, peer discussions, religious convictions, and family expectations.

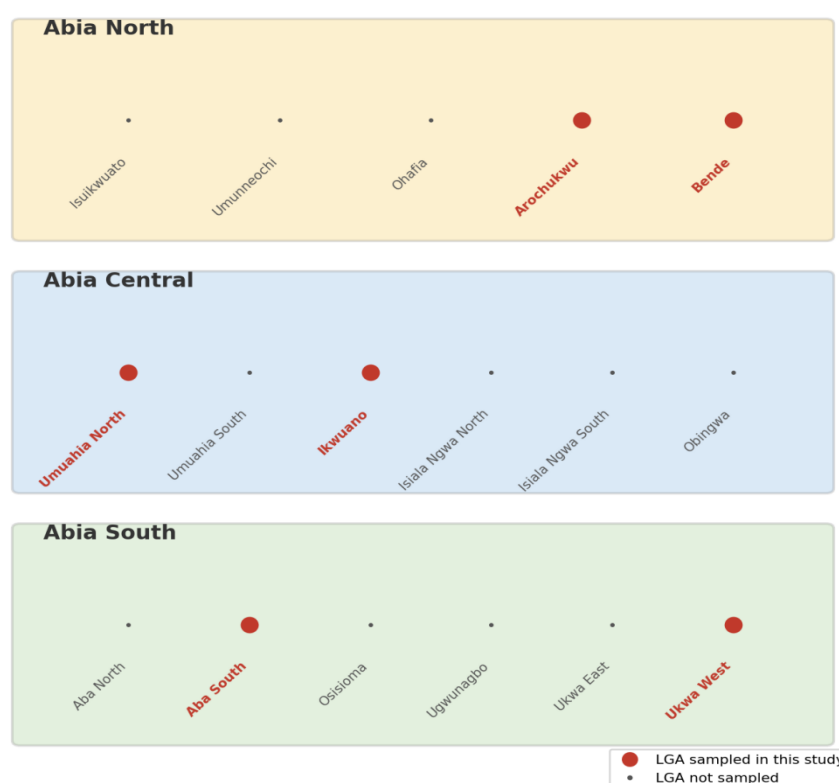
All items were rated on a four-point Likert scale, with a mean score of 3.0 or above regarded as the acceptance threshold, consistent with the convention applied in the earlier related study.

Table 1

Summary of the Distribution of the Sample Across Senatorial Districts, LGAs, and Sampling Locations

Senatorial District	Local Government Area	Sampling Location	Sample Size
Abia South	Aba South	Ariaria Market axis	32
Abia South	Aba South	Ngwa Road axis	32
Abia South	Ukwa West	Obehie town centre	32
Abia South	Ukwa West	Akwete junction	32
Abia Central	Umuahia North	Umuahia main market	32
Abia Central	Umuahia North	World Bank housing estate	32
Abia Central	Ikwuano	Oboro town centre	32
Abia Central	Ikwuano	Isiala Oboro axis	32
Abia North	Bende	Bende town centre	32
Abia North	Bende	Item junction	32
Abia North	Arochukwu	Arochukwu town centre	32
Abia North	Arochukwu	Amasu axis	32
Total			384

Figure 5: Schematic Map of Abia State Showing Sampled Local Government Areas Across the Three Senatorial Districts



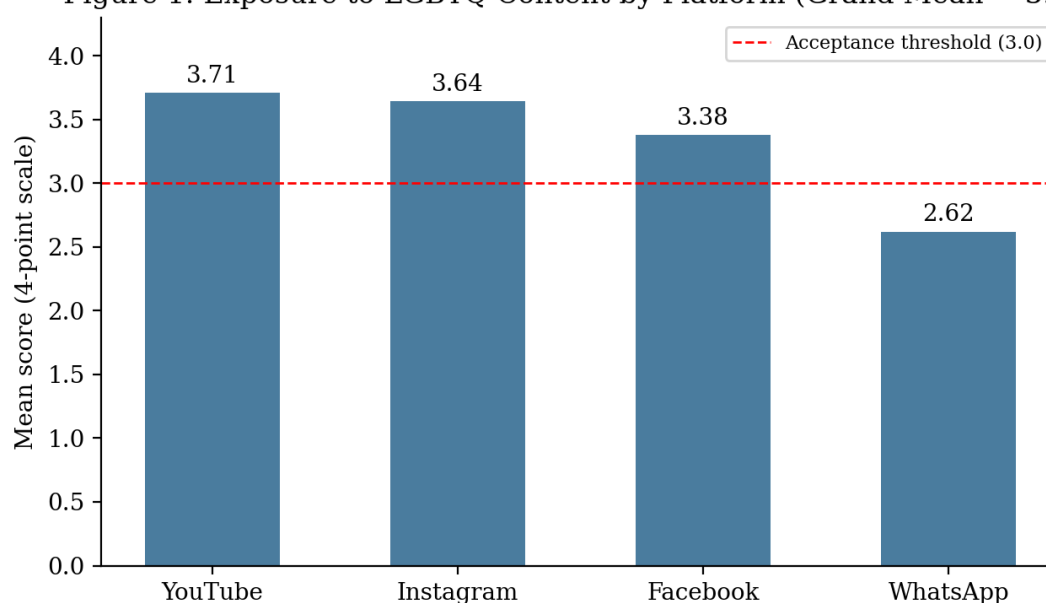
Note: Schematic representation for illustrative purposes; not drawn to geographic scale.
Two busy public locations were sampled within each of the six selected LGAs (twelve communities total).

Table 2:
Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 362)

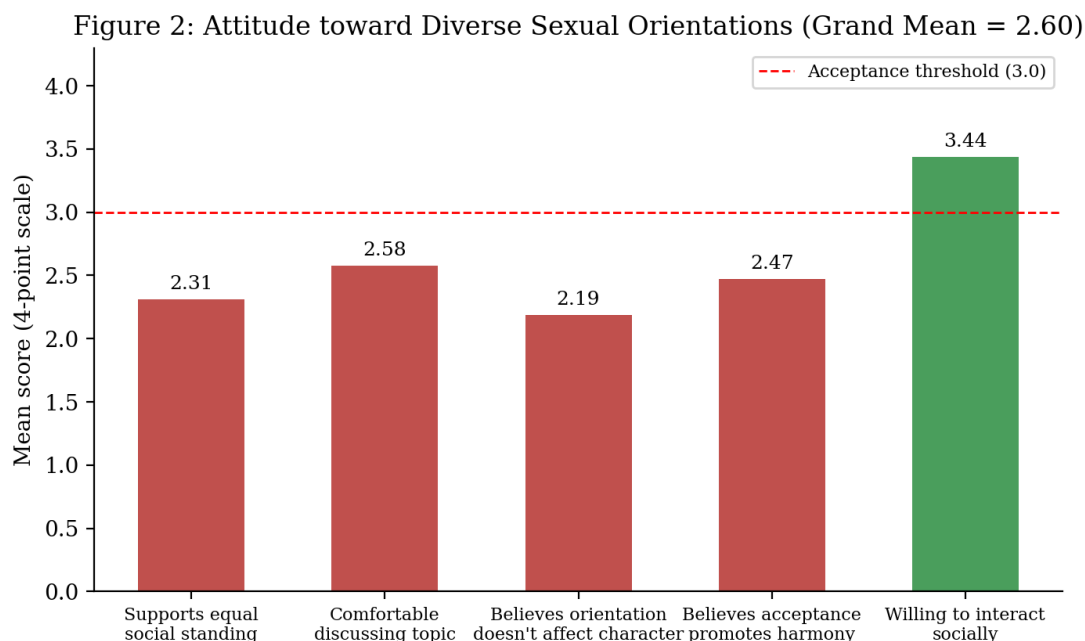
Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	197	54.4%
	Male	165	45.6%
Age	15–20 years	61	16.9%
	21–25 years	131	36.2%
	26–30 years	122	33.7%
	31–35 years	48	13.2%
Total		362	100%

Exposure to LGBTQ contents varied by platform. YouTube recorded the highest mean exposure score, reflecting frequent encounters with LGBTQ-themed videos, commentary, and advertising contents, followed closely by Instagram, where exposure was driven largely by visual posts and comment-section discussion. Facebook exposure was somewhat lower but still comfortably above the acceptance threshold, concentrated in group discussions and shared posts. WhatsApp recorded the lowest mean exposure score, consistent with its closed-group structure limiting reach relative to more public platforms, though a meaningful minority of respondents reported encountering forwarded LGBTQ-related messages within existing groups.

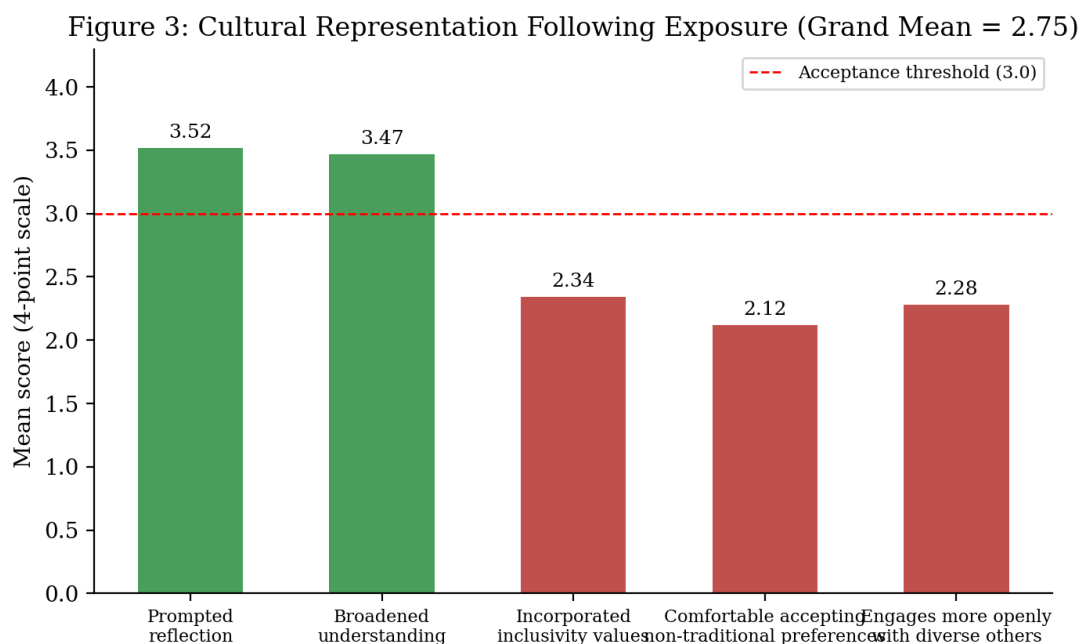
Figure 1: Exposure to LGBTQ Content by Platform (Grand Mean = 3.34)



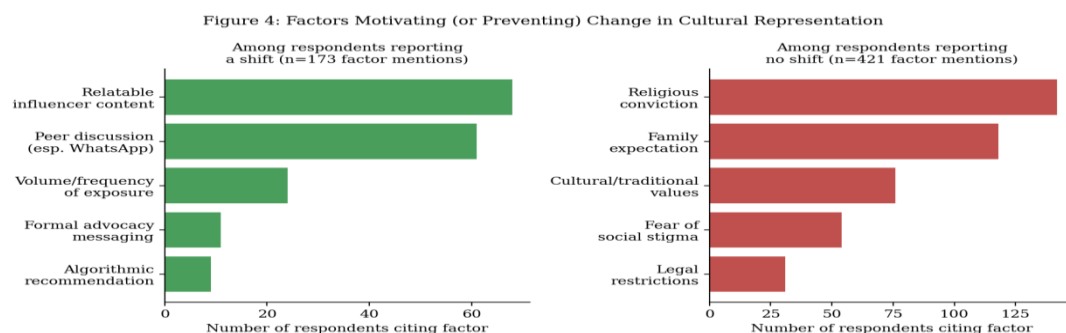
Attitude toward diverse sexual orientations and other cultural representations measured across combined social media exposure rather than platform by platform, remained below the acceptance threshold overall. Most respondents did not support extending equal social standing to people of differing sexual orientations and reported discomfort discussing the topic directly, mirroring the pattern the researcher's earlier Instagram-focused study found. One item, willingness to interact socially with someone known to hold a different orientation, returned a score above the threshold, suggesting outright rejection of diverse orientations coexists, for part of the sample, with interpersonal tolerance that stops short of endorsing the orientation for alien culture and representation itself.



Cultural representation findings showed a similar pattern, with distinguishing detail. A majority agreed that exposure to LGBTQ contents had prompted them to reflect on questions of identity, sexuality and other alien cultural representation more than they otherwise would have, and a similar majority agreed it had broadened their understanding of the range of orientations that exist. Substantially fewer reported having incorporated values associated with this contents, such as inclusivity, into their own social interactions, and fewer still reported any change in how they personally identify in relation to prevailing sexuality norms.



On factors motivating whatever shift did occur, relatable influencer contents and peer discussion, particularly discussion within WhatsApp groups following exposure elsewhere, were the two most frequently cited factors among respondents reporting any shift. Religious conviction and family expectation were the two most frequently cited factors among respondents reporting no shift at all, cited considerably more often than platform-specific factors such as algorithmic recommendation or contents volume.



Discussion of Findings

RQ1: To what extent are young people in Abia State exposed to LGBTQ contents on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp?

The first research question asked how extensively young people in Abia State are exposed to LGBTQ contents across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. The finding of high overall exposure, concentrated most heavily on YouTube and Instagram, is broadly consistent with what Ukonu et al. (2021) reported for Facebook and Instagram use, and it extends that picture by showing video contents on YouTube now carries at least as much exposure weight as image-based contents on Instagram. This aligns with Rodriguez's (2022) observation that YouTube's recommendation architecture actively surfaces LGBTQ-related contents to viewers who have not deliberately sought it out, which helps explain why exposure on a platform not typically singled out in Nigerian LGBTQ media research proved comparable to exposure on Instagram, the platform that has attracted more direct scholarly attention here (Souza et al., 2025; Barroso-Moreno et al., 2023). Radwan (2022), studying social media on a rural community, found that social media exposure produced a marked shift in cultural identity for a substantial share of respondents, a result that raises the question of why the present study's Nigerian sample, despite comparably high exposure, shows so little corresponding movement in cultural representation, a divergence the Discussion returns to below. The comparatively lower exposure recorded for WhatsApp fits the platform's closed architecture, though the minority who did report WhatsApp exposure were mostly encountering contents that had originated elsewhere and been forwarded into an existing group, a circulation pattern this study's instrument could not trace back to its point of origin.

RQ2: What is the attitude of young people in Abia State toward different orientation and cultural representation countered through LGBTQ contents on social media?

The second research question concerned attitude, and here the findings depart sharply from what a straightforward exposure-produces-acceptance model would predict. Despite high exposure, attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations remained predominantly unfavourable, consistent with Bankole, Uye, and Olapegba's (2023) finding that religiosity and cultural context, rather than social media use itself, were the stronger predictors of attitude toward LGBTQ+ individuals among Nigerian respondents, and with the discursive resistance Oyebanji (2021, 2024) documents on Nigerian Twitter, where pro-LGBTQ contents tends to be met with organised counter-argument rather than uptake. Bauwens and Smets (2023), studying identity performance among university students on social media, found that students readily performed cosmopolitan and national identities online but rarely performed indigenous ones, suggesting that social media use can broaden the range of identities young people display publicly while leaving the identity markers rooted in local, inherited tradition comparatively untouched, a selective pattern not unlike the selective movement this study finds between reflection and outright endorsement. The one attitude item that did clear the acceptance threshold, willingness to interact socially with someone of a different orientation, suggests a distinction worth taking seriously between categorical moral rejection and interpersonal tolerance in daily life, one the existing Nigerian literature has not typically separated out, having generally measured attitude as a single undifferentiated construct.

RQ3: What is the cultural representation of young people in Abia State following exposure to LGBTQ contents on social media?

The third research question, on cultural representation specifically, produced perhaps the most interpretively interesting result. Reflection and broadened understanding registered well above the acceptance threshold, while incorporation of LGBTQ-associated values and any shift in personal identification registered well below it. Read through Social Learning Theory, this is not simply a null result; it indicates that the attentional and retentional stages of observational learning, noticing and processing modelled contents, are clearly occurring, while the reproduction and motivation stages, actually enacting what has been observed, are largely being blocked. Bandura's framework attributes this kind of blockage substantially to perceived consequences, and the pattern in the motivating-factors data, where religious conviction and family expectation were the dominant

reasons given by respondents who reported no shift, supports that reading: the perceived social cost of reproducing what has been observed appears to outweigh whatever reward the contents itself models. This is broadly consistent with Oz, Yanık, and Batu's (2023) observation that LGBTQ social media activists operating under culturally and politically restrictive conditions describe audience reflection as considerably more common than audience conversion, a gap they attribute to the same kind of social cost calculation. The present findings sharpen that picture by locating the block specifically at the point between reflection and enactment, rather than treating exposure and attitude as a single undifferentiated relationship.

RQ4: What factors motivate change in cultural representation among young people in Abia State who have been exposed to LGBTQ contents on social media?

The fourth research question, on the factors motivating change where it occurs, adds a detail the earlier Instagram-focused study did not capture, since that study did not ask this question directly. That relatable influencer contents and peer discussion emerged as the strongest motivating factors, rather than sheer volume of exposure, aligns with the social comparison mechanism Safdar et al. (2026) describe and with Yan's (2025) finding that influencer-specific visibility, rather than generic exposure, drove measurable attitude change in the Chinese context studied. It also lends support to Bates, Hobman, and Bell's (2020) point that audiences respond more to contents authored by a relatable individual than to contents read as advocacy directed at them, which plausibly explains why formal advocacy messaging featured only marginally among the motivating factors cited. That peer discussion within WhatsApp groups was cited as a motivating factor despite WhatsApp recording the lowest direct exposure score is worth dwelling on: it suggests WhatsApp's role here may be less about generating exposure than about processing exposure that occurred on other platforms, a secondary function the thin existing literature on WhatsApp and LGBTQ contents on cultural representations was not directly addressed.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how LGBTQ contents encountered across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp shapes the cultural representation of young people in Abia State, and the findings point to a relationship considerably more qualified than a simple exposure-to-acceptance model would suggest. Young people in Abia State are exposed to LGBTQ contents at a high rate, most heavily through YouTube and Instagram, and that exposure does prompt reflection and does broaden awareness of the range of sexual orientations, cultural representation and identities that exist. It does not, for the most part, translate into a shift in personal cultural representation, and where such a shift does occur, it appears driven more by relatable influencer contents and peer discussion than by the volume of exposure itself or by explicit advocacy messaging. Religious conviction and family expectation remain the dominant forces holding cultural representation in place even in the face of substantial and repeated exposure. These findings suggest that social media's influence on cultural representation in a context like Abia State operates unevenly across the stages of observation, reflection, and behavioural adoption that Social Learning Theory distinguishes, with the transition from reflection to adoption representing the point at which cultural, religious, and legal context most decisively intervenes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policymakers and educators developing digital literacy programmes for young people in Abia State and the wider south-eastern region should design interventions that account for the gap between exposure and behavioural change identified in this study, rather than assuming that increased exposure to diverse contents will, by itself, shift attitudes toward diverse sexual orientations and cultural representation.
2. Given that YouTube recorded the highest exposure levels among the platforms studied, further attention should be paid to the role of video-based contents and algorithmic recommendation in shaping young people's encounters with LGBTQ-related material, an area that has received comparatively less direct research attention in the Nigerian context than Instagram or Twitter.
3. Organisations seeking to reduce stigma around diverse sexual orientations should consider that relatable, influencer-driven contents and peer discussion appear more strongly associated with shifts in cultural representation than volume of exposure or formal advocacy messaging, and should calibrate their communication strategies accordingly.
4. Schools, religious bodies, and families in Abia State should be supported in creating spaces where young people can discuss what they encounter online about sexuality and identity without fear of judgement, since the present findings suggest that family and religious expectation function as significant barriers to open engagement with this material even where exposure and private reflection have already occurred.

5. Given the comparatively thin body of research specifically addressing WhatsApp's role in circulating LGBTQ-related contents, and this study's finding that WhatsApp appears to function more as a space for discussing contents encountered elsewhere than as a primary source of exposure, further research should examine message circulation and peer discussion dynamics within closed platforms specifically, an area the present survey instrument could only partially capture.

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