

Moral Gatekeepers or Silent Witnesses? Evaluating the Attitude of Mainline Churches in Curbing Sexualisation in Uyo LGA, Akwa Ibom State

By

Benjamin A. Etiemana Warrie (Ph.D. Candidate)

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

Akwa Ibom State University. Obio Akpa Campus

edymabenshalom@yahoo.com

08025468069

Umoh, Dominic S. Ph.D.

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

Akwa Ibom State University. Obio Akpa Campus

labbedominic2009@yahoo.uk

08025468902

Asukwo Edet Oko, Ph.D

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

Akwa Ibom State University. Obio Akpa Campus

Asukwooko@aksu.edu.ng

08037297842

Enang, Edenowo T. Ph.D

Department of English and Literary Studies

Akwa Ibom State University. Obio Akpa Campus

08020933031

Abstract

This work assesses the attitude of the selected mainline churches in curbing sexualisation in Uyo LGA area, Akwa Ibom State. Sexualized representations of men and women are ubiquitous across cultures via several channels especially the media. The valuation and validation of persons constructed on beauty-based or sexually-based features leads to objectification and commodification of persons, making sexualisation a grave psychosocial problem. This work validates Durkheim's Functionalism Theory which provides a framework for religion's roles in society. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation across mainline churches in Uyo LGA, findings show that the church though logically placed as moral gatekeeper, the current attitude toward curbing emerging sexual expressions presents the church as lethargic and silent witnesses, enfeebled by modern media influences and shifting moral standard. While moral teachings persist in doctrinal brochures, sermons and catechisms, it does not translate to positive and committed action; the passive and lukewarm impression is insufficient to regulate cultural shifts, social conformity fuelled by unbridled digital exposure to unhealthy content and behaviours. The study concludes that the church's functional role in moral gatekeeping is shallow and there is a significant decline in social stimulus. The study recommends

intentional rejuvenation of moral influence to balance holy intentions with action. Considering the magnitude of invasion, religious organizations, academic and other social institutions should join forces and adopt proactive engagement with emerging sexualised culture to restore religion's integrative and regulatory function within the social system.

Keywords: Sexuality, Sexualisation, church, Media, Uyo LGA,

Introduction The contemporary social setting is increasingly marked by an unprecedented wave of sociocultural transformation, where values, identities and self-expressions are shaped by the digital media, global entertainment and quest for fulfilment. One of the most profound outcomes of this definitive shift is the ongoing sexualisation of society. The prevalence and normalization of hypersexual images, sexualized behaviours and attitudes in everyday life from music to fashion to online platforms and advertisements, is fuelled by globalization, mass media and digital platforms. Globalization has attracted wide commentaries from the four cardinal points of the earth commentaries in both positive and negative dimension (Oko, 2015, p.358). In Nigeria, home movies, music videos, social media platforms are constantly bombarded with loads of sexual contents by celebrities and amateurs, thus creating a pornified culture where sex and sexiness defines the worth of an individual. The trend raises profound questions about morality, dignity and the role of social institutions especially the Church in safeguarding communal values.

Religion stands as both a moral compass and a custodian of spiritual guidance. Religion has created a lot of impact in the national development in many countries through education (Sibani and Oko, 2014, p.83). The Church for instance has functioned as a moral gatekeeper, shaping societal norms and resisting cultural practices deemed destructive to human wellbeing. Yet in the face of the trending phenomenon, the Church's response appears indifferent. In some contexts, it speaks boldly against moral decline, while in others it appears as a silent witness, retreating into a theological obscurity without tangible social engagement. The tension calls for critical reflection to ascertain the church's role as a moral gatekeeper or a silent observer. The article therefore interrogates the attitude of mainline churches (Methodist, Lutheran, Qua Iboe and Presbyterian) in curbing sexualization in Uyo LGA. It seeks to explore whether the church is actively shaping moral discourse or passively yielding to the pressures of the rapidly evolving society. The study thereby contributes to ongoing discussion about the relevance of religious institutions in shaping public morality in a rapidly pornified society.

Purposive convenience sampling, a non-random sampling technique that involves the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities they possess, was utilized in selecting the participants. The key criteria in the choice of participants with this sampling technique are the participants' knowledge, experience, willingness and availability. Participant observation provides additional tool in the study. It is expected that the select mainline churches in Uyo LGA with their large followership and influence through their preaching and teaching, social work, outreaches and church discipline can contribute to the ongoing discourse in sexualisation of Uyo LGA.

Conceptual Definitions

Church

The idea of the church as a gathering of specific people comes from the Greek word *eklessia*. *Eklessia*, from classical Greek was commonly used to indicate a called out assembly of citizens of a Greek city states usually summoned to deliberate on civic affairs. For, Christians, the word *ekklesia* came to mean a divinely called community of believers –called by God through Christ into a new fellowship. Bragg (nd) explains that *ekklesia* is ‘The most common word translated “church” in the New Testament, from Greek, *ek*-out, and *kaleo*, to call, hence a company or assembly of called out ones. It is a company of the *kletoi*, the called out ones. Bonhoeffer (1939, p.121) describes the *ekklesia* as ‘Christ existing as community’. By this he meant that church is the visible embodiment of Christ’s presence in the world. Akanbi & Beyers (2017, p.3), believe that when the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as called out by God in Jesus Christ for a special purpose and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ’. Terms like ‘Body of Christ’, ‘People of God’ and ‘Bride of Christ’, truly capture the church’s relationship with the Godhead, with Christ as the Head (Ephesians 1:10; 4:15). Thus, different usages of the term *ekklesia* rightly positions the church as ‘universal body composed of all true believers in Christ, united in Him by the Spirit, and, though there are many local “churches,” there is really only *one* church’ (Herrick, 2004).

Focus on the role of the church as an agent of social transformation and change is not misplaced. Olusakin (2020, p.4) believes that the Church exists to shape people’s attitudes, provide services..., Others are that she has the capacity to influence the powerful and has prophetic ministries. Throughout the ages, the church has been involved in the life of humankind, making

of nationhood, building of culture, structuring society with its functions and institutions and shaping the form and quality of political systems (Pillay (2017, np). Velarde (2024) is right to observe that ecclesiology is not some ivory-tower, academic discipline removed from the reality of daily life. Instead, learning more about the church helps us make a real difference in the present world and for all eternity.

Mainline Churches

In this study, the term ‘Church’ refers to the collective body of believers and their institutional structures and dogma that provide spiritual, moral, and social guidance. In the context of this work, these believers are represented in mainline denominations in Uyo LGA, Akwa Ibom state. Mainline Christian denominations are the several

long-established church traditions that share core doctrinal beliefs while often differing in specific practices, governance, and historical origins. Many of these groups arise from the major movements of the Reformation era or have roots tracing back through centuries of history. They traditionally emphasize communal worship, doctrinal creeds, and a commitment to outreach within broader society (Bible Hub, 2024).

Interestingly, while local church structures and practices can differ, the mainline denominations largely affirm the foundational teachings of Scripture like the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, His resurrection, salvation by grace alone, and Christian worship/fellowship. In Uyo LGA, these denominations apart from their similar origins share a common identity which can be quickly identified from *non-mainline* denominations. ‘This shared identity often surfaces in ecumenical dialogues and cooperation for evangelism, social issues, and interdenominational ministries, and across the denominational lines, the central mission remains pointing to Christ, proclaiming His Gospel, and growing in the knowledge of His Word’ (Bible Hub, 2024).

The observation in Health Sciences that mainline churches are ‘characterized by less frequent youth gatherings and a subdued religious atmosphere...avoid explicit discussions on sex-related topics by fostering a more reserved approach to religious experiences’ (Wisdom Library, 2024), serves as a basis of contrasts which this work seeks to examine. Known for historical breadth and theological richness of the Church’s witness to the world, it is believed their affirmation of the scripture as the only rule for faith and practice reflect a shared heritage of Christian belief and motivation to approach social issues with the right attitude and theological base. Mainline denominations considered in this work are Methodist, Lutheran, Qua Iboe and Presbyterian

congregations within Uyo LGA. These churches in addition to their long established presence also boast of large followership and influence in all social institutions in the state.

The Church as a Moral Gatekeeper

The idea of the church as a moral gatekeeper describes its socio-religious role in the transmission, regulation and intentional preservation of moral values in society. Emile Durkheim's Functionalism theory captures the social role of religion not only in social cohesion and solidarity but also in regulating behaviours through collective values and norms. Omoruyi (2025, p.2) affirms that 'A church generally accepts the norms and values of society and frequently regards itself as the guardian of the established social order'. It gives society rules of conduct to live by equally serves as a model for how life should exist based their life on Jesus example. According to Oko (2022), the church is a tool for development, and is spiritual in approach which appeals for people sense of what is right or wrong. Thus, as a moral gatekeeper in her long history, the church has positioned itself not just as a custodian of moral traditions but also as a formative moral community and moral regulator. This empowers the church through its prophetic capacity to evaluate cultural norms and societal trends based on its ethical lenses, define moral boundaries and mount a moral guard for a society by filtering what passes through the gate.

Sexualisation

Human beings are sexual beings. They exist as products and agents of sexuality. This makes sexuality 'a core part of an individual identity and affects both sexual behaviour and totality of human functioning and is influenced by social attitudes' (Ventriglio & Bhugra 2019, p.29). Whereas *nature* decides individual sex, sexual expressions are culturally decided through a script. Thus, sexuality is the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures, a manner we decide to or are conditioned to enjoy or deny our sexual desires (Weeks, 2003, p.8). Sexology as a discipline shows that sexuality is multidimensional. It includes sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations. Interestingly, it touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence (Tamale, 2011, p.45). Sexualisation is a negative expression of sexuality which has been discussed as a

social problem. According to APA (2007, p.I), sexualisation occurs when a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

- I. a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- II. a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making;
- III. and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person

The first standard espoused by the APA report restricts human value to mere sexual appeal and desirability; the second measures physical appearance according to a cultural standard – like sexy hour-glass body; the third focuses on sexual satisfaction derivable from a sex object while the fourth standard examines unsuitable imposition of sexual particulars on a person. Any one of the listed criteria is sufficient in itself to constitute sexualisation. This sexual valuation can come from the culture, from person to person and from the individual. In the last case, the individual decides to present/evaluate him/herself based on physical attractiveness or sex appeal. When a society becomes hypersexual and pornified, sexual attractiveness becomes an important part of people's identities perhaps due to the rewards and positive outcomes associated with being sexually attractive and objectified.

In the end, society is constantly bombarded with sexual imageries and sexual discourse in sights, sounds, thoughts and feelings. The media has been identified as the prime player in the sexualisation of persons/societies, featuring platforms that showcase sexual expressions in movies, fashion, advertising, printed works, music videos, and social media platforms. The more people are exposed to media with highly sexualized portrayals, the more they objectify their own bodies, enjoy emphasizing their sexiness, and base their worth on sexual appeal (Choi and DeLong (2019, p.1354). The most popular conception is that girls and women are the most sexualised and objectified members of society. Ward (2016, p.562) argues that sexualisation is a 'form of sexism which narrowly frames women's worth and value in ways which they are seen only as sexual body parts for others' sexual pleasure'. Again, 'There is no mutuality in sexualisation because one person is "using" the other for his or her own gratification, without regard for the other's needs, interests, or desires'. Studies reflecting examining western societies describe these societies as pornified with ubiquitous sexual imageries especially in media and fashion industry. Referring to cultural acceptability, Mace (2012, p.49) observes that:

As the public's attitude towards sexuality becomes more passive and tolerant, fashion imagery has simultaneously evolved into a more provocative and eroticized aesthetic, opening the door to the mainstreaming of soft-core pornography and evoking imagery that capitalizes on notions of hyper-sexualisation to further the commodification of sex.

Mace's position recognises the connexion between the moral state of society and the sexual behaviour of her members. The more society loosens restrain on sexual expressions or becomes indifferent; individuals decide to flow with the popular culture. Scholars have identified various negative consequences of sexualization of society such as mental health problems like eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction, body anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, sexual violence, and acceptance rape myth.

Uyo LGA is not just an economic hub of Akwa Ibom state. It is also a religious, social and political centre with features of a metropolitan society like population, urban spread, transportation network, cultural diversity and administrative importance. The prevalence of sexualisation can be observed in youth fashion style, patronage of social clubs that publicly flaunt and promote sexiness and sexualised behaviours, sex in advertising, trending local and Nigerian music videos, home movies and rise in hook-up culture.

The mobile phone and the internet provide an opportunity for sexting, unhindered access to dating sites and limitless pornographic materials of celebrities. Local content creators use Facebook and TikTok platform to produce amateur contents with sexual explicit innuendoes either for fun or funds. With the monetisation of the Facebook for instance, one is constantly bombarded with loads of self-sexualised materials sometimes accompanied with an erotic music or sexually suggestive poses and dress. It shows to what extent non-western cultures are exposed to the sexualised culture of the West and how much they have internalized the popular culture of sexualisation. These observable features in Uyo LGA justify its description as sexualised society and it calls to question Christian presence organized in religious denominations littering the streets of Uyo Local Government Area.

Durkheim's Structural Functionalism – The Church in Society

The Church wields a widespread, growing and influential presence in the Nigerian society at large. To justify the religion-society relationship, Emile Durkheim's Structural Functionalism posits that society is a complex system of interconnected institutions, norms and values. Each component performs a specific function, maintaining order and stability through consensus, cohesion and social control. Durkheim's theory stresses the importance of social solidarity and

collective conscience. Its emphasis on functions of social institutions such as socialization, social control and integration provides insights into the mechanisms that maintain social order and stability as well as potential for change. The function of this theory is its ability to socialize the individual. As religion is a reflection of society, this moral power actually serves to socialize people into certain accepted behaviours, and to avoid certain forbidden/deviant actions.

According to Durkheim, there is no religion in which prohibitions do not exist and play an important part. With its strong integrative force religion instils of common values and identity. This helps strengthen the integrity of a society (Durkheim 1997, pp.130–131). In this way, religion creates the framework for what is considered moral principles and behaviour within society, which in turn regulates social relationships, as the individual cannot exist without society. It also serves as a counter to individualism, which is inclined to weaken social cohesion. Sexuality has never been left to the whims and caprices of individuals. Though personal, but society determines what is acceptable and unacceptable, taking cognizance of social and future implications. This is where the church comes in as a moral gatekeeper.

Church Role in Curbing Sexualisation of Society

- Doctrinal Affirmation of Mankind as Image of God**

In spite of doctrinal differences in Christian denominations in Uyo LGA, there is a unanimous acceptance of the place of mankind in the divine plan and priority. Man is the bearer of the image of God and partakes of the divine nature. Therefore, all forms of activities that abuse the dignity and sanctity of persons should be discouraged. Within the framework of man in the image of God and equality in Christ, women's bodies are temple of God and emphasis on physical appearance downplays the concern of Jesus on the soul, rather than the corruptible bodies. The theology of the human body has a long history and tradition within the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II opines that the human body reveals the mystery of God. On that foundation, the Catholic Churches world over, in its social teachings, papal encyclicals and ecclesiastical documents and priestly exhortations emphasize the wholesome dignity of the human body. Since the body is always the centre of sexualization and objectification, it is believed that the acknowledgement of the image of God in man should discourage the various expressions of sexualisation in Uyo Local Government Area.

This doctrinal avowal is an antithesis to the undue obsession with physical appearance and quest for a certain kind of body size and shape. Humans are not Temples of the Living God based on some physical characteristics and there is no Christian teaching that the prettier the holier. Smolak & Murnen (as cited in Ward et al.,2023) states that 'because standards for female beauty within Western cultures require a thin and sexy body, adolescent girls and young women frequently experience cultural pressure to self-sexualize'. The pressure to conform to certain body standard and look sexy is prevalent especially amongst women and girls. This body mindfulness comes with anxiety as girls come to depend on external gaze and compliments. Adequate emphasis on humanity in the Image of God discourages on one hand all forms of abuses (like objectification and commodification of the body), and on the other hand, all uses that is materialistic and undermines the development of spiritual faculties.

- **Systematic Teaching on Marriage, Sexuality and Christian Sexual Ethics.**

A significant number of Christian denominations within Uyo LGA organize regular biblical teaching on sexuality, dignity, modesty and holiness. This is done through daily devotionals distributed to members and non-members. These devotionals feature topics that challenge cultural norms that treat marriage, sexuality and sex with levity. A thematic analysis of a daily devotional manual (Heaven's Dew) produced by Qua Iboe Church and Methodist church's Daily Reflections reveal the church is aware of the pervasiveness of sexualisation of local cultures and biblical lessons lasting for over two months were produced to discourage immodest dressing, partaking and exposure to corrupting media trends and illicit relationships. For the church, there is strict adherence to modest dressing for all her members, from the clergy to the laity alike. Beyond religious materials which can be accessed by literate church members. Rev. Okworo and Rev. Raymond (personal communication on 23rd July, 2025 and 26th July, 2026 respectively) confirm that youth fellowships in most mainline churches in Uyo LGA regularly conduct seminars and Sunday school classes for different age grades to examine matters of marriage, sexual standards, sexual identities and orientation, unhealthy relationship, dressing, pornography and hook-up culture

- **Discipleship, Advocacy and Social Engagement.**

Christian denominations also engage in intentional process of mentoring their young members through discipleship and mentoring. According to Vincent Okon (Personal Communication on

24th May, 20205), ‘this is a step beyond pulpit speech-making and wow lectures. We have members who are good at delivering great lectures and wonderful sermons but wanting in integrity. What we do is to assign some young people to a mature member to *culture* them over time’. Churches who employ this initiative intend to monitor the progress of their young members, help them in their struggle against negative peer influence and discover new areas the church can look into. Okworo Martins (Personal Communication on 23rd July, 2025) believes that ‘This initiative helps both our young ones and their absentee or indifferent parents. Even those who are called to mentor and disciple our teens must be watchful of themselves as well’. Another church-based approach to curbing self-sexualisation is in advocacy and social engagement programmes. The church prides itself as the light of the world and salt of the earth. As a bride to nation-builder, the church must invest in intra in massive human right educational programmes needed to raise the level of general consciousness in any given area so as to arouse activity the people’s initiative and participation in nation building (Atanang, Ekanem and Oko, 2022, p.209) This bequeaths upon her the right to pursue social good. Victory Chapel of the University of Uyo, organizes monthly youth outreach in Uniyo community to discuss the prevalence and dangers of self-sexualisation using proficient resource persons. ‘Through public performances, spoken words, campus concerts, partnership with non-governmental organizations, the Chapel targets students’ population with the aim of raising Christ-like models’. We encourage our youths to live a representative lifestyle amongst their mates in their departments and society at large, such that their behaviour will not discredit their message’ Elder Pius Udoh (Personal Communication on 21st June, 2025). An important aspect of social engagement is the church-society dialogue to sanitise Ibibio culture of chauvinist mentality and obnoxious practices that debase women and exalts unhealthy socialization between genders.

- **Use of Social Media:**

The media is taking the world by storm and it has become the greatest factor in the spread of sexual materials. Apart from traditional practices and patriarchal beliefs which sexually objectify women, the greatest factor driving sexualisation of persons globally is the media. Santoniccolo *et al.* (2023,p.1) confirm that ‘...the ubiquity of media, the chronicity of individuals’ exposure to it and its role in shaping beliefs, attitudes and expectations have made it the subject of scientific attention’. Continuous exposure to sexualizing media definitely encourages the internalization of the sexualisation culture. For instance, Ward (2016, p.560) affirms that the mainstream media

have been noted to contain a high level of sexual content that features a particular characterization of women and of female sexuality, with extreme focus on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to others.

Much attention has focused on the role of the media and the emphasis is justified in view of the abundance of sexualized images of women across media. To say the least, the media is where everything is happening now. With a mobile phone, internet connection and ease of access to any site of interest, nothing is hidden. Instead of suppressing the truth, religious denominations have taken up media campaigns using outdoor billboards, video skits and religious contents to educate the public of the implications of pornography, sexting, indecent dressing and unhealthy online relationships. Obsession with the social media especially amongst young people today provides an evangelistic opportunity for the church to leverage on the fascination and share informative content, personal stories and healthy resources. The church seems to confirm that sexualisation is unhealthy, indecent self-exposure on the social media space is immoral and discredits the integrity of the church in society.

- **Intentional Parenting:**

Teachings on building godly homes hold a significant place amongst Christians. The family is the core of the church and society. If families are mini-factories that produce personalities, parents are primary producers and are entrusted with the sole responsibility of cultivating discipline and enforcing religious teachings on their children. Elder Ette (Personal Communication on 19th July, 2025) admits that, ‘sexual elements in all media platforms are posted and downloaded by people family affiliations. Yet, fear and shame that once kept our children in control have disappeared. Yes, there is liberalisation and democratisation of moral values in modern culture, but parents can still discipline their children rather than wait for the church or school to perform some magic’. The abdication of parental role is a major challenge in the contemporary age, where parents often assigned duties to other agencies while they pursue other endeavours.

According to Captain Joshua (Personal Communication on 5th July, 2025) reveals that ‘Parental negligence and ignorance is a key factor in the proliferation of sexual attitude and behaviour of young people. While some parents condone some unhealthy behaviours, some do not even know what their kids are into, both online and offline. But the worst situation is where either of the

parents objectifies/commodifies the ward for some pecuniary reasons. That is an outright case using a person as an object, a means to achieve some ends. In her attempt to curb further pornification of society, the church charges parents to pursue healthy socialization of their children through exemplary living, equal respect for both sexes, informed discipline and a family culture built on strong moral framework to serve as a compass and shield against negative peer influences.

Pastoral Counselling and Youth Empowerment Programmes

Most congregations of Qua Iboe Church and Lutheran Church have counselling units to attend to the congregants' needs. The aim is to offer pastoral assistance to both erring members, depressed and abused individuals. Rev. Bob of Qua Iboe Church (Personal Communication on 14th June, 2025) explains that, 'In my congregation, the unit is for members who have experienced abuses in their relationships, struggle with body acceptance or physical appearance, or people struggling with sexuality-related matters. The unit is composed of a medical personnel, a psychologist, selected elders and a barrister. The interaction shows that the most sensitive case handled in the unit was a case of leaked nude video/pics involving a member.

Whereas young people engage in posing sexy-selfies for fun, some actually sell their private videos to raise *urgent 2k*. 2k literally refers to Two thousand naira- and generally came to be used for any urgent cash to meet immediate needs). The church understands the helplessness of some students and the temptation to join sexualising trends like hook-up culture. The church believes in the holistic development of all human faculties, and encourages members attend skills acquisition workshops in entrepreneurship and other decent ways of earnings. This approach is based on a number of teachings that extol decent work and discourages slothfulness. Proper counselling is needed to liberate the people involves from alcoholic quagmire of drunkenness (Sibani and Oko, 2022, p.114).

The foregoing discourse shows that mainline churches are involved in curbing sexualisation in Uyo LGA. The role as a moral gatekeeper is not a new found role or merely a reactive effort to a moral disaster. Interestingly, at some point in the history of the church and sexuality, the church once assumed full control of sexual expressions, delineating what is acceptable and unacceptable by the church. The Catholic Church as a prominent influence in Western Europe during the

Medieval Ages seemed to have exalted chaste men and women above others, because they were devoted to God and sex was a shameful and sordid business (Worthen, 2016, p.171). Marriage was for the function of procreation. Brundage cited in Worthen, (2016, p.171) mentions specific religious restrictions viz.:

Sex was forbidden during Lent, Vigils, major feast days and Sundays throughout the year. Believers must abstain from sex as during menstrual periods, pregnancy and after child bearing years. Newly married couples were to avoid sex on their wedding night and were forbidden to enter the church for thirty days following their wedding. Marital sex for enjoyment was considered sinful. Sexual pleasure was sinful and couples were advised to make the sign of the cross and pray that they would not experience pleasure during sex. The approved sexual position was the missionary and only for procreation. Forbidden sexual practices comprised oral and anal sex acts, same sex behaviour, adultery, incest, masturbation, prostitution, sexual imagery and spontaneous sexual emissions.

This era was a period of excessive sexual austerity and repression. But as Worthen clarifies, despite the stronghold of the Christian Church and its extensive restrictions, in practice, sexual pleasure still made its way into the medieval society. For early historians, however, this was also an age of hypocrisy. Social conventions made discussion of sex, sexuality and bodily functions taboo, but at the same time pornography and prostitution flourished. Religious repression of sex succeeded in driving sex underground, then came the Renaissance, which awakened sexuality in all its forms.

The invention of printing machine made publications available to all and material on sex, sexual positions other than the sanctified ‘missionary’ style, contraception and pregnancy flourished. But this awakening was cut short during the Victorian era. For Worthen (2016, p.172), “if the Renaissance represented a rebirth and awakening of sexual pleasure following the Dark Ages, the Victorian Era symbolized a retreat back into sexual repression’. Sex was utilitarian (reproduction)...women should show no sexual passion or appetite...should be modest, sexually passive, pious, chaste and even asexual...they were given a specific dress and hair style, and forbidden from food that have direct influence on the abnormal exercise of the sexual system’ (Worthen 2016, pp.172, 173).

History shows that the church was at the forefront of moral regulation. Far from being a silent witness, society got direction from the church and the church exerted some control over nearly all aspects of life. It appears the church has been overwhelmed by the current hypersexual culture. The present sexualised and sexualising society makes it that:

We do not have to go looking for ways to stain our hearts; they come looking for us! The pathways to dark and destructive places abound: Internet, cable TV, hotel room adult video offerings, movies, and mobile dating apps are part of a culture that beckons us to give in to our feelings and desires, to escape lives of loneliness, routine and stress. Even if you are not personally struggling with sexual integrity, there are dozens of people sitting in the same church service as you who are struggling (Freeman, 2016, np).

Freeman's position is quite expressive of the current socio-religious landscape of Uyo Local Government Area. The pervasiveness of sexually objectifying environments is a glowing evidence of how far society's silence is perceived as acceptance. In all fairness, the church has been largely silent or less vocal today. Rev. Fabian (Personal Communication 28th June, 2025) believes that the modern church seems to have lost some interest in social issues. With the rise in independent congregations, more energy is channelled to empire expansion, economic odyssey and some illicit co-operation with political leaders. An instance of the association is the creation of the Fathers of/in Faith forum in Akwa Ibom State. Unfortunately, the religio-political fraternity is not harnessed towards the promotion of morality or social good, but self-aggrandizement. Rev. Fabian believes that it is difficult for church leaders to speak up and confront social illnesses when the church is complicit in some ways.

Adeola (2010, p.158) observes that, it seems people dress up to expose their bodies...clothes that expose the breast, short skirts, tight blouses that show the belly button...are worn even to the church. Mainline churches studied do not permit revealing dressing – mini-skirt, open back blouse, short gown, any wear that exposes the armpit, trousers, uncovered hair, male use of earring, and other tight-fitted wears. All the mainline congregations for instance, have strict directives for female dress code during worship services. But while the Church exercises control over what their congregants wear on Sundays, less is actually done to sustain this direction after service on Sunday, for the saintly dressed chorister on Sunday morning can also dress like a porn-star at a social club after church.

But to Freeman (2016, np), the church is silent because; it is in our nature to pretend—to pretend that all is well. We really do not believe that the gospel can transform deep sexual struggles and we feel that the Bible outdated for today's culture. Personal struggles with unresolved sexual baggage in our own history continue to plague us and there is fear that to do so will open up Pandora's Box. Pastors and leaders are so busy with other agenda items and neglect the need for leadership to intentionally offer help to others and our people are increasingly unaware of the

depths to which the Bible speaks about sexuality and the way God designed it. In the same vein, ‘Adeola posits ‘The church has been (sic) silent about sex and sex related issues, it was and still a taboo in some churches to mention the topic of sex in a church environment’. Yet the daily barrage of sexual innuendoes in society today makes it easier for curious kids to ignore the silence of the church and learn sexuality from the enchanting popular culture.

In evaluating the attitude of these churches, there is a positive attitude towards morality and use of social media in the official statements and doctrinal positions such as pastoral letters, communiques, policy statements and synod/conference resolutions. However, these documents are just general moral statements that do not address sexualisation directly and a number of congregants are not aware of the documented social policies of the church. Sermons and teachings often capture the moral stand of these churches. But while the tone often shows deep concern and urgency, at least for the occasion, there is lack of follow up and feedback. For Deaconess Unwana (personal communication on 28th June, 2025) ‘most church pastors tread this path with caution or risk offending the youth population who appears to be the most active participant in the trend or appearing judgmental and ‘old fashioned’.

For those who even mention it, the somewhat active attitude is occasional and there are no direct interventions outside the church, no media presence, awareness campaigns, public condemnation or consistent engagement with trending sexualised issues. The attitude is more reactive than proactive and there is evidence of shallow knowledge about cultural trends the implications of sexualisation in society. However, like Deacon Nkantion (Personal Communication on 19th July, 2025) observed, ‘silence does not mean we approve it, it is just evidence of the end time. While we cannot change the society, we can just monitor what our children are exposed to’. Yet, as defeatist as the response sounds, parental role cannot be ignored. Silence is also an attitude and it shows a non-confrontational and permissive attitude. The prophetic voice need not be silent and ‘prophetic proclamation is twofold: warning regarding impending danger, and promise of restoration and renewal, for the repentant’ (Olusakin, 2020, p.4).

The Church appears relaxed, distracted and overwhelmed as a moral gatekeeper. It seems forces of globalization, the internet, ICTs and the addictive capacity of social media have usurped the coaching role of the Church, disarmed and muzzled the prophetic voice, such that the more she sees, the less she talks. Yet the church has inbuilt advantages over other social institutions to direct moral attitude and behaviour. Olusakin et. al. (2025, p.23I) confirm that the church

reaches a large number of people both at the rural and urban area, provides a long-lasting sustainable service to the people and has the potential to influence the powerful. Due to respect people give to their churches and church leaders, church has the capacity to shape people's attitude and behaviour. These comparative advantages make this moral; gatekeeping responsibility important.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the present Uyo society is engrossed with inappropriate expression of sexuality from fashion to pageantry, advertisements, strip clubs, home videos and musical videos. Tiktok and Facebook posts are inundated with nude pictures and amateur sexualised videos by local content creators and porn companies. The Church is not unscathed in this immoral and mal-social incursion and reluctance to confront this state of affairs would create grave socio-religious implications for the Church and society. Christianity is the dominant religion in Uyo Local Government Area, with varieties of Christian congregations littering every street. Mainline churches (Lutheran, Qua Iboe, Methodist, Presbyterian), all hold on to strict moral conduct espoused in their daily devotional materials, manuals of doctrines and practice. Yet it does not translate to a positive reaction and pro-action to curb an emerging sexualised culture taking society by storm. The Church and her leaders have not done enough to curb the prevalence of sexualisation in Uyo LGA. Personal interactions with church leaders in Uyo LGA clearly confirm that 90% of Christian congregations do not see sexualisation as a social phenomenon requiring a 'state-of-emergency' response. The level of concern is weak and indifferent, commitment is lukewarm. A good percentage of church leaders are ignorant of sexuality issues in society and the extent to which such issues have impacted attitudes and behaviour in the church.

Each time the church fails to be proactive in nurturing values, detecting alien hostile forces and warning congregants of the dangers 'out there', congregants fill the vacuum from the popular culture. Sexualisation is actually carried out by individuals who belong to one Christian denomination or the other, with various levels of commitment. The escalating complicities of *church people* in the ongoing sexualization seem to challenge the integrity and capacity of the Church as an indispensable social institution. The Church is sleeping on duty; the enemy (foreign and local) came and sowed tares among the wheats; but should the church delay action till the

end of time? A passive and occasional response to the ongoing sexualisation of society cannot curb the degree of sexualisation observable in Uyo LGA.

In most western countries, sexualisation is the concern of the government, policy makers, advocacy groups, academic communities and other stakeholders. But like Hewson said (though about a different matter), 'If the church were to get behind this, imagine what we could do'. There is no righter circumstance to say this than in Akwa Ibom state with millions of worshippers, wealthy congregations and influential leaders who equally wield some sort of influence in government. Imagine that Christian congregations in Uyo LGA can join forces, share ideas, harness their vast resources to resist further escalation of this socio-cultural and ideological crisis, just like it happened during the pandemic, somehow, public morality will be restored and the land and its inhabitants will be redeemed from their unhealthy ideological servitudes.

Recommendations

Based on findings above the study recommended as follows:

- I. Mainline congregations in Uyo LGA should be intentional in their approach and commitment to reshaping cultural imagination and social ideologies that promote sexualisation and objectification of persons through appropriate programmes. As part of God's design, sexuality should not be seen as a criterion for valuation, validation or profit.
- II. The degree of sexualizing elements in Uyo LGA requires collective efforts. This calls for deliberate denominational partnership/forum with the mandate of identifying and confronting all manifestations of sexualisation in society.
- III. Outside ecumenical collaborations, there is need for partnership with parents, schools, agencies of Government (like Ethical and Attitudinal Reorientation Commission EARCOM), and NGOs that protect children from early exposure to illicit contents, promote human dignity, decent job opportunities, sexuality education, ethical advertising and media regulation.
- IV. Times have changed, Mainline congregations in Uyo LGA should develop a balanced theology for current sexuality and social media, create alternative media contents like

films, songs, digital content that promote modesty and virtue as an attempt to infiltrate media platforms so saturated with obscene, vulgar and sexualised sights and sounds.

V. Christian designers, musicians and artists, content creators in Uyo LGA should be encouraged use their creativity to honour God not sexual appeal. Godly role models should be celebrated instead of celebrities known for sensualities.

VI. All congregations need to look inwards to identify elements within that may weaken their resolve and moral capacity to curb this malaise. At the same time, members who promote or participate in sexualised contents should be warned or disciplined.

References

Adeola, K. A. (2010). 'A Christian's Response to Human Sexuality in a Changing Society. Religion and Democracy in the 21st century'. *Nigerian Association for the study of Religions*, 158–167.

Atanang, B. E; Ekanem, J. B; Oko, A.E.(2022). Peace Co-Existence in Nigeria. *Niger Delta Journal of Gender, Peace of Conflict Studies*. Vol. 2 (3):197-211.

Akanbi, S.O. & Beyers, J., 2017, 'The church as a catalyst for transformation in the society', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(4), a4635. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4635>

American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

Bonhoeffer, D. (1993) *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Fortress Press.

Choi, D., DeLong, M. (2019) 'Defining Female Self Sexualization for the Twenty-First Century'. In *Sexuality & Culture*, 23:1350–1371 . <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09617-3>.

Durkheim, E (1997) The Elementary Forms of religious life (K.E. Fields, Trans.) New York: Free Press.

Freeman, J. (2016) Sex and the Silence of the Church: How It Is Crippling God's People. <https://harvestusa.org/sex-silence-church-crippling-gods-people>.

Mace, Christine. (2012) 'Fashion or Porn? The hyper-sexualization of Western culture and the commodification of sex' *Master's Dissertation - MA Program in Fashion Studies School of Art and Design History and Theory. (PDF)Academia.edu*.

Mainline churches in https://biblehub.com/q/what_are_mainline_christian_groups.htm. Retrieved on November 22,

Mainline Churches: Significance And Symbolism. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/mainline-churches>. Retrieved on November 22,

Munteanu, C. M (2019). The Church – A Model for Society. *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* . VOL. 3, DOI:10.5281/zenodo.3066456

Oko, A. E. (2022) The Place of the Church Towards Peace Process for Sustainable Development. *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts. AKSUJA* Maiden Edition 9-29 .

Oko, A.E. (2015). Negative Impacts of Globalization in the Nigerian Society: Way Forward and Implication for Religious Education. *Journal of Agriculture and Science Education (JASE)* Vol.1 (1): 358-362

Olusakin, V.A (2020) The Church in Nigeria and the Fight Against HIV/AIDS: The Bases and Areas of Response. *Benin Journal of Religions and Society*, Vol. 4, No.2, pp.1-17

Olusakin, V.A. Paul S. Mpiji G. M. (2025) The Role of the Church in Mobilizing Women for Sustainable Peace in the Niger Delta. *NIU Journal of Social Sciences*. Nexus International University ISSN: 3007-1682; 11(2): 225–236

Omoruyi M. Church and Society from Socio-Religious Perspective. *International Journal of Culture and Religious Studies* ISSN 2789-3898 (Online)Vol. 6, Issue No. 2, pp 1-18, 2025www.carijournals. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3300-2228>

Pillay, Jerry (2017) The church as a transformation and change agent. *HTS Theological Studies*. Herv. teol. stud. Vol.73 n.3 Pretoria. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4352>

Santoniccolo F, Trombetta T, Paradiso M. N & Rollè L (2023). ‘Gender and Media Representations: A Review of Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization’. *Int. J. Environ Res Public Health*. 2023 May 9;20 (10)5770. doi:10.3390/ijerph20105770.

Sibani, C. M. & Oko, A.E. (2022). Youths and Alcoholism in Contemporary African Society: A Socio- Religious Therapy. *NIU Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 7 (1): 107-115

Sibani, C. M. & Oko, A. E. (2014). Impact of Religion on National Development. *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 10 (1):83-97.

Tamale, Sylvia. (2011). ‘Researching and theorising sexualities in Africa’. *African sexualities: A reader*. (S. Tamale (Ed.), Pambazuka Press.

Velarde, R.(2024) What Is the Church? Retrieved from <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/what-is-the-church/>. November 22, 2025.

Ventriglio, D. B. (2019) *Sexuality in the 21st Century: Sexual Fluidity*. *East Asian Arch Psychiatry* 29:30-4 | DOI: 10.12809/eaap1736.

Ward, L. Monique (2016) 'Media and Sexualization: State of Empirical Research, 1995–2015', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53:4-5, 560-577, DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2016.1142496.

Worthen, G. F (2016) Sexual Deviance and Society: A sociological Examination (1st ed.) London: Routledge.