

Media Influence on Adolescents' Sex Education: A Comparative Analysis of Sex Education in China and Western Countries

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Abstract: The development of society leads to increased awareness of health issues, especially sex. Since sex-related issues are primarily emphasized during adolescence, adolescents become the major targeted audience of sex education, and sex education has obtained much attention in recent decades. There are several research discussing prominent discrepancies between sex education in different nations, however, few research steps into this domain from the perspective of media. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of media influence on adolescents' sex education in China and western countries, which not only briefly introduces certain types of traditional media and new media but also discusses the status quo of media application respectively. The results of the comparison demonstrate that the media influence on adolescents' sex education in China and the West mainly differs in the content and the approaches being used, while the perceptions of sex education and the negative impacts brought about by the application of media share some similarities. Furthermore, these results may attribute to two aspects, cultural background and the development of sex education.

Keywords: media, comparative analysis, adolescent, sex education, China and the west

1. Introduction

Sex education is an instructional activity that should be carried out according to sexual culture, including sex knowledge such as physiology and fertility, as well as covering some ethical and moral content related to both sexes [1]. In recent decades, sex education is becoming a central concern in all societies, and adolescence is the critical period to obtain relevant knowledge. Therefore, sex education for adolescents, more specifically, for whom are aged between ten and nineteen years old according to the World Health Organization, is of great importance. Moreover, the media has always played an important role in sex education, which provides a set of channels of expression. Not only do traditional media such as printed materials, radio, and television has been using as essential resources for sex education, but also new media that are developed with the Internet and technologies significantly influence the content and approaches to sex education. As adolescence is a period of life with sexual knowledge absorption and adolescents take up a nonnegligible proportion of media users, it is worthwhile to evaluate media influence on adolescents' sex education.

Additionally, there are obvious differences between China and western media and their sex education for adolescents, so this article conducts a comparative analysis to explore the impacts that media have on sex education. Four sections construct the main content of this article. The second section introduces the media that influence adolescents' sex education with the categories of traditional media and new media, and then the focus moves to the current application of Chinese media in adolescents' sex education domain. Similarly, the third section discusses the application of Western media in respect of traditional media and new media. In the last section, it analyzes the differences and similarities between adolescents' sex education in China and the West. The probable reasons including cultural background and developments, and suggestions are also added to the results of the comparison.

2. Categories of Media that Influence Adolescents' Sex Education

2.1. Traditional Media: Textbooks, Television

Due to its ease of use and low cost, traditional media might be considered effective in both developed and developing countries of the world [2]. It has the great potential to enhance adolescent pedagogy in the educational setting, especially in adolescents' sex education.

The use of textbooks could illustrate the essentiality of traditional media applied in youth sex education. First, according to Friesen, the textbook could be regarded as a container that has its own specific "potency of life" [3]. This pedagogical potency not only provides a simplified version of obscure knowledge but also vivifies the demonstration of paradigms through inductive questions, instructive guidance, and stimulative images. In this article, the textbook mainly refers to approaches and materials that help achieve the goals of sex education, whose core format is printed books with aided audio and visual teaching materials. One example is a chapter of the Chinese sex education textbook for primary school students, in which the contents cover a detailed description of the formation of a zygote with cartoons for children to comprehend this process more easily [4]. Generally, the textbook provides adolescents with clear and fundamental resources and is an indispensable medium for them to acquire knowledge about sex.

Television also has been contributing to adolescent' sex education for decades. Brown et al. stated that the time adolescents spent viewing television remain high, although the overall trend of watching hours was on the decline during their growth [5]. In essence, adolescents are exposed to television which offers them abundant information and sexual information is no exception. Moreover, television might have effects on adolescents' behaviors and beliefs. Possibly, the content on television not only influences adolescents' expectations of sexual activity but also potentially frames their values concerning their appearance and bodies. One content analysis argues that sexual attractiveness is seemingly standardized on television and many advertisements use sex appeal or beauty as selling points [5], which probably induces the youth to pursue a stereotypical physical attractiveness. In addition, it was reported that young audiences who spent much time watching soap operas were more likely to have illegitimate children [6]. Therefore, sex on television might affect adolescents' perceptions of sexuality and sexual values in their real life. In sum, due to the accessibility of this traditional media, television needs to be a positive force for adolescents to absorb healthy sexual information.

2.2. New Media: Social Media, We-Media

When introducing new media, there comes up issues with the definition. According to Siapera, the split between "old" and "new" media is somewhat arbitrary, since some "new" media such as the Internet also have a history of several decades [7]. Meanwhile, the "traditional" media is sometimes considered dated, even though the contents and forms of some traditional media denote a penchant

for developing constantly. In general, new media in this article refers to media that converge characteristics of new technologies and communicative approaches. Furthermore, one study conducted by Pascoe indicates that youth use new media in intimate relationships because new media are seen as an essential site for them to explore and express embarrassing information or sensitive topics related to sex [8]. Therefore, new media are another important venue for adolescents to directly access sexual health education.

Social media is the term for sites that integrate content generated by users, information aimed at socialization, and technology to build connective relationships [7]. Because of these characteristics, social media immediately gained popularity and became an important communication channel, in particular for youth nowadays. One research suggests that the use of social media significantly impacts the sexual well-being of the youth [9], as well as identity development and self-expression. Normally, by providing necessary and scientific sexual education for youth, online interventions on social media may effectively give rise to susceptibility to dangerous diseases such as AIDs and HIV. Moreover, such online sexual content may also prevent the spread of sexual confusion and anxiety [10]. In other words, youth might obtain sexual information that is rarely mentioned in the school and society setting, for example, sexual orientation that may cover sexual aspects in the LGBTQ community. Similar bewilderment from other social media users particularly their peers possibly helps release adolescents' restlessness about sex. Consequently, the existence of social media extends the scope of sexual information and access to sexual knowledge for adolescents.

Apart from socializing, people express their values through new media, typically through we-media. Tan stated that we-media is the umbrella name for individual media that are based on new media [11]. Equipped with easy-to-use Web devices and strong punishing tools, online audiences can participate in their own kind of news and truths [9], and then they become an active part in the dissemination and production of news and form the subject of we-media, as empowered by technologies connecting information globally. We-media functions as a beneficial platform for online sex education [11]. Specifically, the majority of youth who ever required to simply register an account, and then they can engage in discussions related to sex on we-media platforms. From the perspective of the individual we-media, adolescents' personal accounts are carriers for them to access sexual knowledge, while accounts of influencers might provide positive guidance on youth sex well-being. Additionally, some official we-media such as sexual health organizations may influence adolescents' sex education by posting blogs on sexual science and arranging educational sessions for youth.

3. Current Application of Chinese Media in Adolescents' Sex Education

3.1. Traditional Media: Textbooks, Television

The culture of "sexual silence" has been rooted in China for a long time [4], especially in school sexuality education which is a crucial period for youth to form a perception of sex. Fortunately, due to the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), which is an instruction method to guide curriculum standards and textbook development [12], much importance has been attached to adolescents' sex education. Take one Chinese sex education textbook called *Cherish Life*, for instance, it demonstrates sexual knowledge basically from four aspects, including sex physiology, sex psychology, sex morals, and sex legal system [4]. In addition to covering basic sexual information, this textbook not only conveys physiological knowledge from the perspective of biology to youth but also sets sex education as the foundation and lays stress on the hardship that parents have when giving birth to them. As a result, young learners might feel grateful to their parents, respect the life of others, and be aware of the goodness in their lives. However, some contents in textbooks for academic subjects such as English textbooks are problematic. It is noticed that in the vocabulary learning section, the examples use gentle and quiet to describe girls, whereas adjectives like active and careless

are used for boys [12], which probably reflects gender stereotypes and might restrict Chinese young learners' perception of sex and individual development. Therefore, textbooks on sex education could promote adolescents' sexual learning to some extent, but the CSE requires strengthening the integrality between sex education and other academic content.

Television is highly influential in youth's sex-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors [13]. However, the current television works in China cannot fulfill adolescents' needs concerning sex education. One obvious reason is that the Chinese television rating system has a large space for improvement. According to Ge, the cause-and-effect relationship between sex on television and juvenile delinquency objectively exists, and inappropriate sexual content on television may induce risky sex behaviors once seen by immature adolescents [14]. Particularly in China, the absence of dividing suitable television works for audiences of different ages might misguide young audiences. Nevertheless, the status quo of Chinese television is that the margin between pornography and normal shots is vague, and the censorship rules of media lack an explicit standard. Consequently, some plots that seem normal to adults might potentially have negative effects on youth, as adolescents have not developed a capable perception of the virtual world and real life. On the other hand, some meaningful and instructive works might be forbidden because of involving episodic sensitive scenes. To provide Chinese adolescents with effective sex education, it is worth noticing to promote the construction of a thorough television rating system integrated with more sound censorship regulations.

3.2. New Media: Social Media, We-Media

Considering the lack of a social support system for sex education and traditional sexual values in China, the flourishing knowledge community on social media becomes a vital venue for sexual discussion [15], and such communities might provide extra sexual knowledge for adolescents. One typical platform might be Zhihu, a commonly used social media that is particularly welcomed by Chinese young users. The core function of this social media platform is to provide an online forum for various topics, and discussants are relatively free to participate in any topic that arouses their interests. Therefore, Chinese adolescents who have difficulty obtaining sexual knowledge from schools and their families may seek knowledge support inside communities on Zhihu, and the topic-question-answer structure is likely to give clear guidance to youth. In addition, since Zhihu also has a large portion of well-educated users, the contents of discussions are probably high-quality [15], providing useful sex-related information for adolescents. Furthermore, studies have confirmed that the online knowledge community can satisfy users' emotional needs [16]. To be more specific, Weibo, a well-known social media in China that is particularly welcomed by the youth group has a section called SuperTopic that functions similarly to Zhihu. In this module, participants can become followers and co-constructors of the topic. Concerning sex-related SuperTopics, adolescents may realize that many discussants share similar confusion with them, and consequently find a sense of belonging and reduce their sexual anxiety.

In the era of we-media, media communicators have a huge impact on the spread of sex-related content and the promotion of sex education. Users of we-media are not only receivers but also producers, and they bridge the communication and propaganda between individuals and finally construct a complex media network [11]. In respect of Chinese adolescents' sex education, we-media producers such as influencers or professionals in sexology produce scientific sex content on media like Weibo, and Chinese we-media users from the youth group receive sex-related information from them and then repost the content to promote the communication scope. Therefore, a two-way process is formed on we-media. Additionally, from the perspective of propagandists, for example, a WeChat official account called MAYLOVE aims at changing the status quo of sex education in China. Not only does this we-media create scientific sexual knowledge but also it has arranged offline sexual theme exhibitions and lectures. Generally, we-media provides an open discussion forum for Chinese

adolescents to receive and communicate sexual knowledge without time or space limitations, and such a forum might extend to offline activities to evoke a wider range of influences on Chinese adolescents' sex education.

4. Current Application of Western Media in Adolescents' Sex Education

4.1. Traditional Media: Book Resources, Television

Although the shortcomings of sex education are increasingly concerned by people world-widely [16], many western nations have developed and formed relatively suitable sex education systems for their own countries for decades. For example, in the domain of American sex education for adolescents, the policy for sex curriculum and textbook design has been revised several times, and the contents related to biology and psychology of different levels are added to promote young students' cognition towards sex knowledge in different phases of their growth[1]. In addition, because of maintaining the consistent principle of "sexual purity education" advocated in the 1980s [1], American textbooks for sex education purposes also are permeated with rules of sex interactions and responsibilities that students should take in sexual relationships. As a result, the occurrence of adolescent sexual mistakes or crimes will probably decrease, and such textbooks might help American adolescents foster sex morals and appropriate sex behaviors. Moreover, since the library is regarded as the second classroom for adolescents' sex education [17], book resources from libraries are valuable materials for sex knowledge acquisition. It was stated that libraries in America have been providing sex education books for public schools to serve as textbooks since the 1980s [17]. By acquiring abundant and authoritative sex-related recourses from the library or textbooks, of which contents are newly updated and accurate, adolescents might obtain a more comprehensive sex education principle and master relevant sex knowledge with a better understanding. Finally, it can be concluded that young learners will make the right decisions in sexual settings, which possibly will promote adolescents' health ability.

Due to the increasing prevalence of media, particularly television, adolescents are exposed to various information, and pornographic is also included, which gives rise to concern about the potential harmful influences that television might have on young audiences. According to Bushman and Cantor, many parents are worried that exposure to television may induce their children to absorb unhealthy information such as promiscuity and imitate sex behaviors, especially those combined with violence [18]. Additionally, more controversial topics began to emerge in the mainstream media, consequently, the rating system originated in the late 1960s in the United States [18]. Ratings and other advisory systems are designed to give suggestions to viewers and protect adolescents from harmful information. The television rating system not only provides guidance for American parents to select suitable videos for their young viewers but also enables American adolescents to unconsciously absorb some sex-related knowledge in the family setting. Furthermore, television with a well-designed rating system also plays an important role in promoting adolescents' perceptions of sex. Specifically, American youth probably will absorb much explicit sex knowledge from television as they grow up, and during this process, their ability to judge is also developing. Therefore, instead of being misled by potentially harmful sex information on television, they are more likely to learn useful content and be educated about correct sexual actions.

4.2. New Media: Social Media, We-Media

The rapid development of new media has occurred in western countries, particularly the spread of social media during the past decades, making it plays an increasingly important role in sex education in western youth sex education. It has been reported that adolescents probably find out sexualized media to satisfy their curiosity by using various ways to interact with media [19], and social media

serves as the most used venue for western adolescents to obtain information concerning sexual practices, especially in western countries that are relatively open to sex-related topics and does not have strict rules to forbid sexual contents on social media. One manifestation might be the sexual content in music that is posted by artists. The study conducted by Wright and Rubin assessed the relationship between the sexual content in music on social media and the sexual risk and cognitions among Australian and American adolescents [20]. The results supported their initial hypothesis that sexual content in social media posts of musical artists may be associated with the increase in negative sexual cognitions of the youth [20]. Therefore, “user-generated content” social media where users can create and spread sex-related information in western countries such as Twitter and Facebook, and other knowledge communities including Reddit and Yahoo [15] are all likely to influence adolescents’ sexual cognitions. However, it is noticeable that these social media also function to share health-related information, and adolescents may exchange social support in some online communities.

We-media is becoming the more influential form of new media in western countries, which advocates autonomy and individual expression. Moreover, western countries adopt comparatively modest ways to limit media content, for instance, libel laws and some restricted access to public information [21]. Instead of constructing strict censorship to guarantee the online behaviors of we-media users, the freedom might encourage them to produce some novel and meaningful content. In particular, we-media creators will possibly feel freer and less embarrassed to design and post content that is related to sensitive themes such as sex. Consequently, adolescents as a large proportion of we-media targeted audiences may be stimulated to learn sexual knowledge, obtain more explicit sexual information, and form a better comprehension of sexual behaviors. Such a process of creating and receiving sex content through we-media may potentially educate adolescents about healthy, safe, and correct sexual cognitions. Nevertheless, due to the low-cost, large quantity, and little censorship of we-media, this kind of new media is easy to be controlled by the capital, so as to attract much traffic and exchange for commercial value [22]. Particularly in western countries, various trends of thoughts select we-media as the medium to spread information, and some of them might exaggerate the controversial aspect to achieve a dramatic effect. Therefore, the content involving sex knowledge is not always trustworthy, and some adolescents might absorb some false and harmful sexual content because of a lack of judgment ability and critical thinking. In general, the relatively free media circumstances in western countries stimulate the motivation of we-media producers and provide youth with much sexual knowledge, whereas such a media environment may also cause the occurrence of inappropriate sexual content and bring a negative impact on adolescents’ sex perception.

5. Comparison of China and Western Countries

5.1. Comparative Analysis Results

This section mainly focuses on the comparative analysis of the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western adolescents’ sex education. In terms of differences, the content of sex education and approaches to educating youth are highlighted, while perspectives of perception and application of mass media are emphasized when analyzing the similarities.

5.1.1. Differences

For content, from the perspective of adolescents’ sex education content, Chinese media attach much importance to theoretical aspects of sex education, while sexual value orientation is more emphasized by media in western countries. One prominent manifestation of this difference exists in the textbook. Specifically, Chinese textbooks for sex education guide youth to view sexual relations from a biological angle and promote adolescents to form correct views of sexual ethics and morals. As for western sex education textbooks, they add psychological knowledge to accelerate the construction of

correct sexual perceptions, and relevant laws and regulations are included to help adolescents form correct sexual values [1]. Therefore, western media seem to go beyond the delivery of sexual information and emphasize value development. In addition, Chinese media seem to provide limited sexual information for adolescents to obtain, whereas western media might offer more abundant sexual knowledge and show less sensitivity to sex-related topics. Particularly in mass media such as television, Chinese adolescents may be confused about some sexual lens shown on television, because the censorship committee has cut off some fragments, which might give some false instructions to them afterward regarding sexual practices. On the contrary, western countries typically the United States have developed a relatively sound rating system so that adolescents can gradually obtain sex knowledge as exposed to appropriate sexual scenes.

For approach, concerning the approaches that Chinese and western media use in adolescents' sex education, Chinese media lay onefold emphasis on school-based sex education, in contrast, western countries have a more integrative system for youth to acquire sex knowledge. According to Lu, sex education in China is fairly restricted to formal classes inside the campus, with textbooks and videos officially designed for adolescents, and sometimes these materials do not receive enough attention and cannot play their parts in practice [1]. There seems to be a gap between school-based media and extra-curriculum media in family and society settings, for example, formal forums on social media for students to ask questions are lacking, and consequently, it may be difficult for Chinese youth to obtain useful and accurate sexual information. However, western countries not only attach great importance to textbooks but also expand the approaches to sex education by combining traditional media with new media to make full use of educational resources on the Internet. It is worth noticing that some western countries have designed online courses for youth sex education with joint support from institutions, professionals, and social workers [17], which demonstrates a more comprehensive characteristic of western media.

5.1.2. Similarities

For perception, in general, nowadays media for adolescents' sex education in China and western countries both show the trend of a liberal and open perception. As mentioned in the research of Pei, the current textbooks for Chinese youth are more up-to-date, pluralist, and inclusive in comparison to the paper medium in the past [4]. To be more specific, some textbooks have added content related to gender minorities and admitted that the admiration of other peers is normal in adolescence[4], which possibly prompts students to comprehend sex knowledge from a more open perspective. Similarly, in western countries, sexuality is perceived as a positive characteristic of human beings. Particularly in the Standards for sexuality education in Europe [23], which successfully attempts to build the consensus that sexuality is normal including the perception that sexuality can be regarded as a fundamentally positive human potential. As a result, western textbooks and other media function to promote adolescents' sex education might stress the normalization of sexuality and consequently liberate youth's perception towards sex.

For the application of mass media, it is reported that both mass media in China and western countries more or less have a negative effect on the growth of young people [24]. Especially in western countries such as the US where the control of media is loose, and pornographic videos flooded. Therefore, some adolescents who are curious and immature may access such yellow materials in an inappropriate developmental phase. Chinese media might be another extreme, since the law prohibiting the dissemination of pornography is so strict that many conducive resources on media probably are banned as well. Additionally, the unsound rating system of Chinese media inevitably attributes to the production of artistic and literary works that might have a harmful impact on young people, so adverse influences will be given to adolescents' establishments of sex knowledge.

5.2. Reasons for the Media Differences in Adolescents' Sex Education in China and Western Countries

5.2.1. Cultural Background

During the process of media development concerning sex education, cultural background is the major cause for differences in the manifestations of Chinese and western media. Zhou declared that the traditional Confucian culture has been rooted in the hearts of Chinese people and the feudal society has existed in China for a long period of time [24]. The traditional culture that stresses the importance of moral education, the reluctance of disclosing sexual behaviors and values [25], and the feudal ideology all restrain the promotion of sex education in media, which leads to a closed media atmosphere and results in the targets and concepts of youth sex education in China going to be extremely conservative. However, western countries have fewer feudal impacts, especially the US, where freedom, democracy, and equality founded the original ideology of Americans [24]. Also, they support sex education on account of the supposition that sex education helps tackle social problems [24]. With much importance attached to sex education, western media possibly obtain supportive circumstances to develop and are gradually characterized with openness and vitality.

5.2.2. The Development of Adolescents' Sex Education

The application of various kinds of media influences youth sex education, in reverse, the differences in the development process of adolescents' sex education in China and western countries also affect the process of media development and their subsequent characteristics. According to Zhou, it was in the early 20th century that the awareness of sex education was raised by domestic intellectuals [24]. During this period, many scholars wrote essays and published them in media such as journals to advocate the urgency of sex education. However, due to some political factors, Chinese sex education was not revived until the 1980s, and the media have been imprisoned with sexual taboos for decades. Although the implementation of sex education in western countries is later than in China, the speed is faster. The starting point of sex education in western countries is approximately around the 1950s [26]. Compared with China, western sex education developed with the economy and has fewer outer interferences, and consequently, the smoother development facilitates the improvements in media concepts, content, and approaches to adolescents' sex education.

5.3. Suggestions

School-based sex education is a major way that adolescents acquire sex knowledge systematically. Therefore, apart from traditional educational content about sexual theories mainly through textbooks, schools may utilize new media, Internet technologies, and multimedia facilities to present more vivid content for youth. Moreover, family is another important channel for adolescents' sex education. Parents should be aware of educating young members of the family, not only having an open mind to discuss sexual issues with youth and offer them some basic sexual knowledge throughout their adolescence but also guiding them to appropriately access sexual information on media such as television and mobile devices. Considering adolescents themselves, it was reported that youth spend over seven hours a day on media, in which sexual content is commonplace [27]. To avoid some negative effects of media messages that glamorize unhealthy sexual relationships and behaviors, adolescents are recommended to improve their ability of critical thinking about media information. Furthermore, youth may take a more active part in getting sex education on campus and at home, and take advantage of accessible and suitable media to promote their understanding of sex.

6. Conclusion

This research investigates media influence on adolescents' sex education in various aspects and compares the manifestations in China and western countries. Book resources including textbooks and the ones in libraries, and television are two typical traditional media for adolescents to obtain sex-related knowledge, however, the contents and relevant systems of them in the West might be sounder and more comprehensive than those in China. Moreover, although new media particularly social media and we-media have freer circumstances in western countries, some adolescents may be misled by inappropriate sexual content. New media in China help promote sex education for adolescents but due to the strict censorship, their effects are limited. In general, these manifestations result from cultural and historical factors and might be tackled with joint efforts from schools, parents, and adolescents themselves. However, this paper only focuses on limited types of media and ignores the differences in sex education inside western countries when carrying out the comparison. In the future, the types of media and the selection of countries are recommended to be more comprehensive and specific, and hopefully, qualitative research can be added to explore the feelings and attitudes of adolescent respondents toward media sex education, for example, by conducting interviews with adolescents.

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