

Social Media Reactions to Sex Toy Criminalization in Ghana: A Cross-Sectional Sentiment and Text Network Analysis

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The Digital Paradox

Digital platforms, once celebrated as tools for freedom of expression, have increasingly become instruments of repression and control. Social media now serves as a primary medium for curtailing women's agency, where those who challenge patriarchal norms face systematic ridicule, labeling, and moral policing.



Legislative & Judicial Context

1

August 2021: "The Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill" introduced to criminalize LGBTQ+ activities and sex toy use.

2

July 2024: Supreme Court reaffirmed that sex toys remain unlawful under Section 104(1)(b) of the Criminal Offences Act, 1960.



The Minister's Opposition

"This may create unintended consequences because sexual intercourse with all manner of aids, including sex toys that couples use to enhance their sexual experience..."

— Ursula Owusu-Ekuful, Former Minister of Communication, December 2023

Her stance sparked heated social media debates with supporters applauding her audacity while opponents accused her of being a practicing member of the queer community.



The Central Argument

This controversy reveals how **digital platforms function as tools of repression**—where dissenting or progressive positions on women's sexual autonomy are quickly personalized, stigmatized, and subjected to moral policing, reinforcing dominant heteronormative norms and silencing agentic expression.

2.0 Overarching Goal

Primary Research Objective

To explore narratives around **sexuality and bodily autonomy**, understanding how these discourses shape sexual agency in contemporary Ghana, **particularly for women**.

I Investigate Public Perceptions

Analyze social media comments to understand public attitudes toward the criminalization of sex toys as expressed across multiple platforms.

2 Identify Platform Differences

Determine whether sentiment expression varies across social media platforms—are comments on X more negative compared to Instagram or Facebook?

3.0 Methodology

Data Collection

Platforms: Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube

Tool: Python web scraping

Source: Public comments on minister's speech

Data Cleaning

- Removed duplicates and empty comments
- Eliminated stop words (oh, hello, or, is)
- Applied lemmatization (NLP preprocessing)
- Removed emojis to prevent misclassification

Three-Step Analytical Process

1 Comparative Analysis

Examine platform-specific patterns using conditional probability to identify differences in sentiment expression across Instagram, X, Facebook, and YouTube.

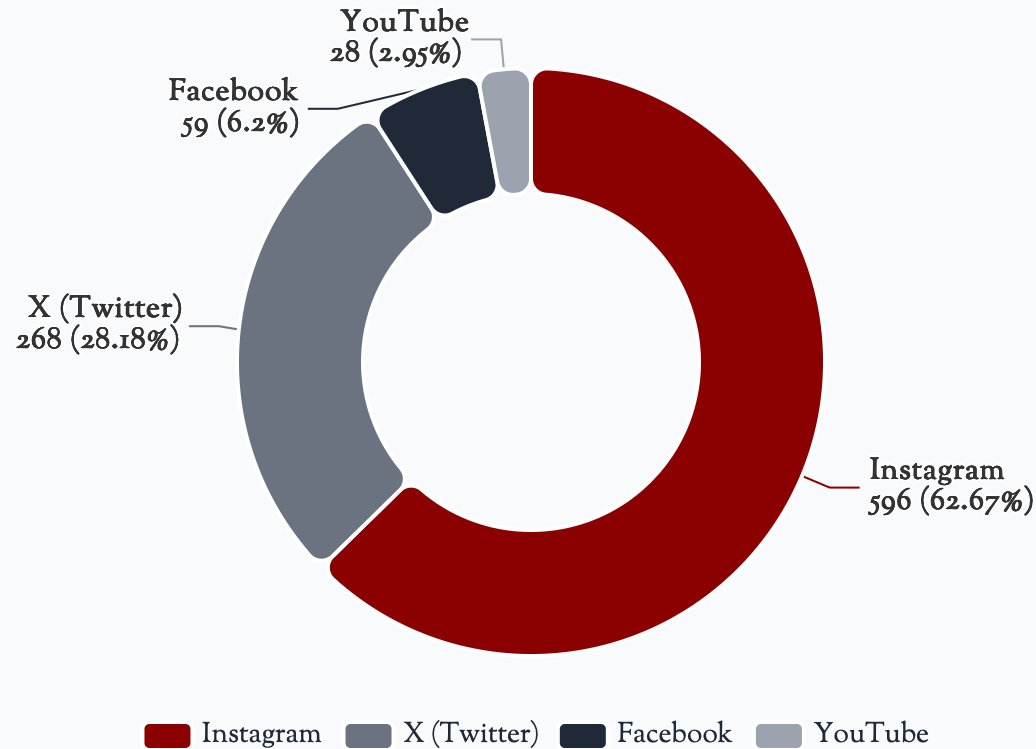
2 Sentiment Analysis

Pipeline method using NLP and machine learning to classify comments as positive, negative, or neutral, revealing dominant emotional responses.

3 Thematic Analysis

Identify recurring themes in comments to understand public views on sex toy criminalization and how these reflect patriarchal control mechanisms.

Figure 1: Comment Distribution Across Platforms



Total Comments

951

After data cleaning and preprocessing

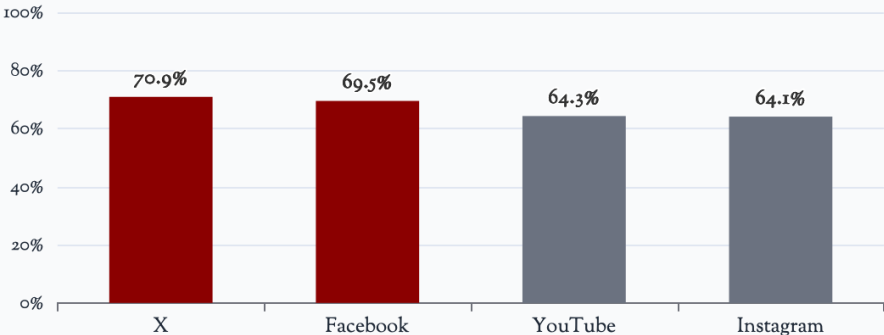
Platform Breakdown

Instagram	596 (62.7%)
X (Twitter)	268 (28.2%)
Facebook	59 (6.2%)
YouTube	28 (2.9%)

Platform Comparison

Cross-Platform Sentiment Differences

Negative Sentiment by Platform



✕ X (Twitter)

Negative: 70.9%
Positive: 5.2%
Neutral: 23.9%

f Facebook

Negative: 69.5%
Positive: 10.2%
Neutral: 20.3%

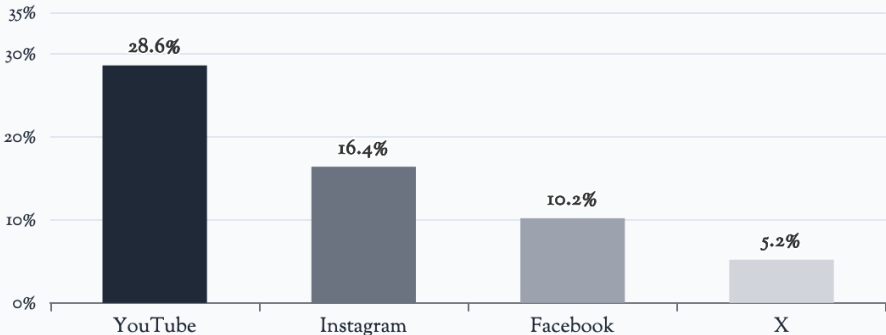
▶ YouTube

Negative: 64.3%
Positive: 28.6%
Neutral: 7.1%

📷 Instagram

Negative: 64.1%
Positive: 16.4%
Neutral: 19.5%

Positive Sentiment by Platform



⚠ Highest Negativity

X (Twitter) shows the highest proportion of negative sentiment (70.9%), followed by Facebook (69.5%), suggesting these platforms may amplify polarizing discourse.

✓ Most Positive Platform

YouTube has the highest positive sentiment (28.6%), more than 5x higher than X (5.2%), indicating different user demographics or discussion contexts.

6.0

Sentiment Analysis Results

Overall Sentiment Distribution and Keyword Analysis



Negative

66.35%

631 comments



Neutral

20.40%

194 comments



Positive

13.25%

126 comments

👎 Negative Sentiment Keywords

lesbian disgrace disgusting freaky stupid useless foolish gay

Example Comments:

“She was a lesbian all through secondary school. I am not surprised. That’s why she doesn’t respect men...”

“Men can do the work, but she is here talking about sex toys. She is a disgrace to the Ghanaian culture.”

👍 Positive Sentiment Keywords

joy love better enjoy rights support

Example Comments:

“Sex toys do not kill... they always bring joy to women who do not have boyfriends.”

“I support her on this because sex toys are for general use and not limited to only gays.”

➖ Neutral Sentiment Keywords

harm pressing issues personal choices

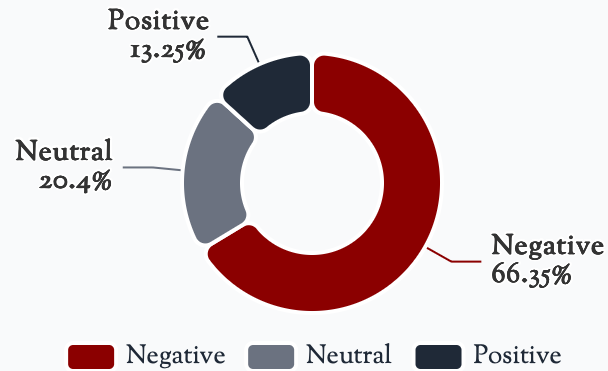
Example Comments:

“So far as it doesn’t harm anyone, why the need for such laws?”

“There are more pressing issues in this country than debating sex toys.”

6.o Sentiment Analysis Results

Figure 4: Overall Sentiment Distribution



Key Insight

The intensity of backlash demonstrates that the debate touched on deeply contested terrain where traditional norms are being actively challenged. The 10% progressive voices, while small, represent a significant shift in public discourse.

Dominant Sentiment Categories

Moral Outrage

45%

Expressions of disgust, religious condemnation, calls for punishment
“This woman is a disgrace to Ghana. How can she promote such immorality in parliament?”

Ridicule and Mockery

30%

Dismissive attitudes, personal attacks, sexualized insults
“What are you going to use the sex toys for?” — Radio presenter questioning Ursula

Fear and Anxiety

15%

Concerns about moral decay, threats to family structures
“If we don’t stop this, our children will think this is normal. Ghana is losing its values.”

Supportive/Progressive

10%

Feminist advocacy, human rights arguments, calls for sexual autonomy.
“Women have the right to pleasure too. This bill affects all of us, not just LGBTQ.”

7.0 Key Themes & Discussion

I

Sexist Undertones: Targeting Women's Sexual Autonomy

Beyond general resistance to non-normative sexualities, negative sentiments revealed **sexist undertones**, **targeting women** who expressed or supported sexual autonomy. Women were labeled simply for acknowledging the right to sexual agency.

Derogatory Labels Applied

Immoral

Deviant

"Loose"

Freaky

Disgrace

Mechanisms of Control

- Limit women's bodily autonomy
- Deny women's right to pleasure
- Maintain male dominance in sexual decision-making

2

Sex Toys as Symbolic Threats to Heteronormative Order

Sex toys were **not viewed as legitimate pleasure-enhancing tools** but as symbolic threats to the socially and religiously prescribed heteronormative order. Their connection to alternative sexual practices elicits strong resistance rooted in:



Entrenched Gender Norms

Reproduction as primary purpose; male-dominated intimacy



Conservative Religious Teachings

Christianity and Islam uphold conservative views condemning non-heteronormative sexualities



Moral Expectations

Sexual expressions outside reproduction framed as immoral or unnatural

7.I Key Themes & Discussion

3

Male-Centered Sexual Framework and Devaluation of Female Pleasure

Comments such as “**men can do the work**” reflect deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that prioritize male sexual performance while relegating women’s sexual needs as secondary or unnecessary.

Systemic Impacts

- ✗ **Restricted Autonomy:** Women’s capacity to explore preferences is limited
- ✗ **Undermined Rights:** Legitimacy of women’s sexual rights eroded
- ✗ **Power Imbalances:** Male-centered authority perpetuates inequality

Critical Questions

“Are women only expected to participate in sex for reproduction or to satisfy men?”

“Is sexual pleasure viewed as primarily for men?”

4

Suppression of Women’s Sexual Needs Within Patriarchal Structures

The negative reactions underscore how **women’s sexual needs are routinely suppressed** within patriarchal societies. Women advocating sexual rights are perceived as threats to masculine order.

Derogatory Labeling as Control

Labels like “freaky,” “disgrace,” and “lesbian” serve multiple functions: delegitimizing women’s sexual preferences, exposing women to verbal abuse and social ostracism, creating deterrence against future advocacy, and reinforcing that female sexual agency must be controlled.

Ideological Tools of Control

These derogatory terms become **ideological tools of control** aimed at delegitimizing women’s voices and reinforcing patriarchal dominance over sexual discourse and practice. The backlash reveals societal mechanisms used to discipline and silence assertive individuals.

8.o Conclusion: Digital Platforms as Tools of Sexual Policing



The Repressive Turn of Digital Spaces

Social media and digital platforms have become sources of policing on women's sexual agency—transforming from celebrated tools of freedom into active mechanisms of patriarchal control and moral surveillance.

! How Digital Platforms Enable Repression

1. **Amplification of Moral Outrage:** Platforms like X and Facebook amplify polarizing discourse, with negativity reaching 70.9% and 69.5% respectively.
2. **Systematic Ridicule and Labeling:** Women challenging norms face coordinated attacks, with 30% of discourse consisting of ridicule and mockery.
3. **Hostile Environment Creation:** Digital spaces become unsafe for women to express their agentic sexual needs, with 66.35% of overall sentiment being negative.

⊘ Hindering Women's Sexual Rights and Agency

- **Deterrence Effect:** The labeling and shaming of women who assert sexual agency serves as a powerful deterrent, discouraging other women from claiming their sexual rights.
- **Normalized Surveillance:** Digital platforms enable constant monitoring and policing of women's sexual expression, making privacy and autonomy increasingly difficult.
- **Reinforced Patriarchy:** The backlash reveals not cultural values but active mechanisms that maintain male sexual dominance and suppress female agency.

“The intensity of digital backlash against women's sexual autonomy demonstrates that these platforms have become contested terrains where patriarchal norms are not merely expressed but **actively enforced through coordinated moral policing, ridicule, and systematic silencing**. This digital repression fundamentally hinders women's ability to claim sexual rights and exercise agency in both online and offline spaces.”

Thank You

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