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PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND
LIFESTYLES DETERMINANTS AMONG PREGNANT
ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract:

Teenage pregnancy is still a social problem with physical and psychological implications in many countries worldwide. This study aimed to examine the perceptions of teenage mothers toward pregnancy and their lifestyle determinants. A cross-sectional study was carried out among a convenience sample of 30 teenage mothers who attended one purposefully selected Maternal Child Health Clinic in Kuching. The study involved 30 teenage mothers between 13 and 19 years of age who had registered with an antenatal clinic and attended the follow-up. The perceptions of teenage mothers towards pregnancy were more often negative, with 19 (63.3%) having no knowledge of prevention and 11 (36.7%) having some knowledge of pregnancy prevention. Lifestyle determinants of teenage mothers included parents who were concerned about social limitations; loitering or socializing with friends and consuming alcohol can increase the desire for sex, clubbing, and smoking. Findings from this study have shown that 87% of teenage mothers enjoyed loitering or socializing with friends, with clubbing as their main activity. It was found that 66.7% were smokers and 73% consumed alcohol. In addition, 80% of the teenage mothers claimed they were having less communication with their parents despite staying with them. In conclusion, the perceptions and lifestyles adopted by teenagers were significantly related to being pregnant at a young age.

Keywords:

Teenage Pregnancy; Pregnant Adolescents; Teenage Mothers

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization's report from 2019, around 21 million adolescents who are between the ages of 15 and 19 in developing countries become pregnant, and of these, roughly 12 million give birth.

Teenage pregnancy remains a global public health concern, with significant negative consequences for the adolescent mother and her child. In addition to the physical and emotional challenges of pregnancy and childbirth, pregnant adolescents may also face social stigma, limited access to education and employment opportunities, an increased risk of poverty, and poor health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2019).

A study by Malaysia's Health Ministry in 2019 found that 18,000 teenage girls in Malaysia become pregnant on average every year, with 25% of those pregnancies occurring outside of marriage and leading to unmarried mothers. The issue of teenage pregnancy is complex, and attitudes toward pregnancy and factors related to lifestyle are important contributors to this social problem. The National Population and Family Development Board of Malaysia reported in 2015 that there had been a total of 19,538 births resulting from teenage pregnancy. Out of these, 228 births were to girls who were younger than 15 years old. Sabah and Sarawak had the highest rates of teenage pregnancies, with a total of 3,395 cases.

While research on teenage pregnancy has focused on its epidemiology and health outcomes, less attention has been given to understanding the perceptions and lifestyle determinants of pregnant adolescents. The adolescents' perceptions of pregnancy, including their attitudes towards sex, contraception, and childbearing, are shaped by a range of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors (Amoadu et al., 2023). These factors may include cultural beliefs about gender roles and sexuality, family dynamics, peer pressure, and access to reproductive health information and services.

Understanding the perceptions and lifestyle determinants of pregnant adolescents is essential for designing effective interventions to prevent teenage pregnancy and support pregnant adolescents. The results of this research could be utilized to create interventions that target the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors that impact teenage pregnancy. These interventions could be designed to reduce the rates of teenage pregnancy in Sarawak and specifically in Kuching. Therefore, this study aims to examine the perception of adolescent mothers toward teenage pregnancy and the determinants of their lifestyles in Kuching, Sarawak, to provide evidence-based recommendations to improve adolescent health and well-being.

Literature Review

There are two points will be discussed in the Literature Review

Perceptions Towards Teenage Pregnancy

Several studies have investigated the perceptions of teenage pregnancy among adolescents. A study by Harun Narasid et al. (2022) among first-year undergraduate students of one of the universities in Malaysia found moderate perceptions regarding adolescent pregnancy, which indicates moderately liberal attitudes towards adolescent pregnancy. However, a moderate level of perception somehow shows that they are still upholding their beliefs and religion. Jones et al. (2019) found that teenage mothers in the UK faced criticism and stigma from their peers,

who viewed teenage pregnancy and parenting as failures to achieve conventional life goals. These negative perceptions were particularly prevalent among teenage mothers' friends who were not parents themselves, and who viewed teenage mothers as having "ruined their lives." According to Panda et al. (2023), numerous studies conducted in India have also revealed that the primary causes of early pregnancy are a lack of knowledge and practices regarding the dangers of teenage pregnancy.

Lifestyles Determinants Among Pregnant Adolescents

Factors related to one's way of life have been recognized as significant contributors to adolescent pregnancy. A study by Clark et al. (2018) in the United States discovered that engaging in substance use, having unprotected sex, and initiating sexual activity at a young age were all lifestyle elements that were associated with a higher likelihood of teenage pregnancy. According to a study done by Ahinkorah et al. (2020), family dynamics have been recognized as an important lifestyle factor. The study found that inadequate family support and ineffective communication concerning sexual and reproductive health were significant factors that contributed to teenage pregnancy. The research revealed that adolescents who reported insufficient communication with their parents regarding sex and reproductive health were at higher risk of unintended pregnancy.

It was found in a study by Sychareun et al. (2018) that determinants of teenage pregnancy in rural Lao included liberal attitudes toward teenagers toward pre-marital sexual intercourse, early marriage and pregnancy.

A recent study by Idris et al. (2022) in Malaysia found that various familial, peer-related, psychological, economic, and sexual knowledge factors are all significant contributors to risky sexual behaviour and teenage pregnancy. Another study by Sulaiman et al. (2023) in Malaysia also revealed that inadequate knowledge among adolescents about reproductive and sexual health, other social, cultural and peer influences, parenting values, and poor financial and educational status were factors that contributed to adolescent pregnancy.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that perceptions of teenage pregnancy and lifestyle determinants are significant factors influencing adolescent pregnancy. The findings of this literature review highlight the need for interventions that address socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors that influence adolescent pregnancy and help reduce its negative consequences. The next section will describe the methodology for this study.

Research Methodology

In this study, a cross-sectional design was used to gather data on the perceptions and lifestyle determinants of pregnant teenagers attending a Maternal and Child Health Clinic in Kuching, Sarawak. A cross-sectional study is an observational study that analyses data from a population or a representative subset of that population at a specific time.

A convenience sample is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The sampling method chosen was a convenience sample of pregnant adolescents who attended the Maternal and Child Health Clinic in Kuching, Sarawak. This sampling method was chosen because it was the most

practical and feasible way to obtain a sample of teenage adolescents for the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire comprised of three sections used in this study to examine the perceptions of teenage pregnancy and lifestyle determinants among pregnant adolescents. The data was collected using a 25-item closed-ended questionnaire in Bahasa Malaysia, divided into three sections. Section A of the questionnaire focused on sociodemographic factors and included ten questions about age, marital status, education status, number of pregnancies, living arrangements, occupation, parents' occupation, main financial source, and daily pocket money. Section B of the questionnaire assessed the teenagers' perceptions of teenage pregnancy and consisted of six main questions. Finally, Section C of the questionnaire included nine questions on lifestyle determinants.

After data collection, the completed questionnaires were analysed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data, which allowed the researchers to determine the adolescent mothers' perceptions of teenage pregnancy and lifestyle determinants.

Findings and Discussion

Sociodemographic Information

Table 1 displays the sociodemographic information gathered from this study. The data include age, marital status, academic level, number of pregnancies, current residency, occupation, father's occupation, mother's occupation, financial main source, and amount of pocket money per day.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Information

	Variables	Frequency	%
Age (years old)	13-14	2	6.7
	15-16	5	16.7
	17-18	23	76.7
Marital status	Married	17	56.7
	Unmarried	13	43.3
Academic level	Primary school	6	20
	Secondary school	24	80
Gravida	Primigravida	19	63.3
	Gravida 2	10	33.3
	Gravida 3	1	3.3
Current Resident	With parents	20	66.7
	with mother or father ONLY	4	13.3
	Others	6	20
Occupation	Business	1	3.3
	Jobless	27	90
	Other	2	6.7
Father's occupation	Professional	4	13.3
	Business	7	23.3
	Odd job	9	30
	Others	10	33.3

Mother's occupation	Professional	8	26.7
	Business	5	16.7
	Odd job	11	36.7
	Others	6	20
Financial source	Parents/ Guardian	14	46.1
	Spouse	15	50
	Others	1	3.3
Amount of pocket money per day	<RM5	6	20
	RM5-RM10	15	50
	>RM10	9	30

Based on sociodemographic information, most of the teenage mothers are between the ages of 17 and 18. The data analysis indicated that 56.7% of the participants were primigravida, meaning this was their first pregnancy. Additionally, 43.3% of the participants were unmarried. Most participants had completed their education up to the secondary school level without necessarily having taken the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of a study done in rural areas of Indonesia, whereby education level is associated with teenage pregnancy. The lower the education level, the higher the chances of experiencing teenage pregnancy (Wulandari, Laksono, & Matahari, 2023). Many of them were unemployed and lived with their parents. During the antenatal interview, the teenage mothers expressed that it was difficult for them to find a job, and they felt the need to distance themselves from the community due to the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy. The teenage mothers chose to stay with their parents because of the poor economic situation and lack of job opportunities. They received daily pocket money from their parents, ranging from RM5 to RM10 daily. The data also revealed that all of the respondents' parents were employed, regardless of their category. This finding suggests that the responsibilities of the parents increased with the addition of more family members.

Perceptions Toward Teenage Pregnancy

Perception about pregnancy correlates with preventing oneself from predisposing factors of pregnancy, knowledge level about contraceptive methods, and awareness of teenage pregnancy complications. The results indicate that most participants had negative perceptions of contraceptive methods but expressed a willingness to use them if given the opportunity. At the same time, they were aware that having unprotected sex could lead to unplanned pregnancy, which in turn could cause other problems such as poor health status, early marriage, financial instability, and even divorce. Additionally, the participants recognized that teenage pregnancy could lead to baby dumping cases.

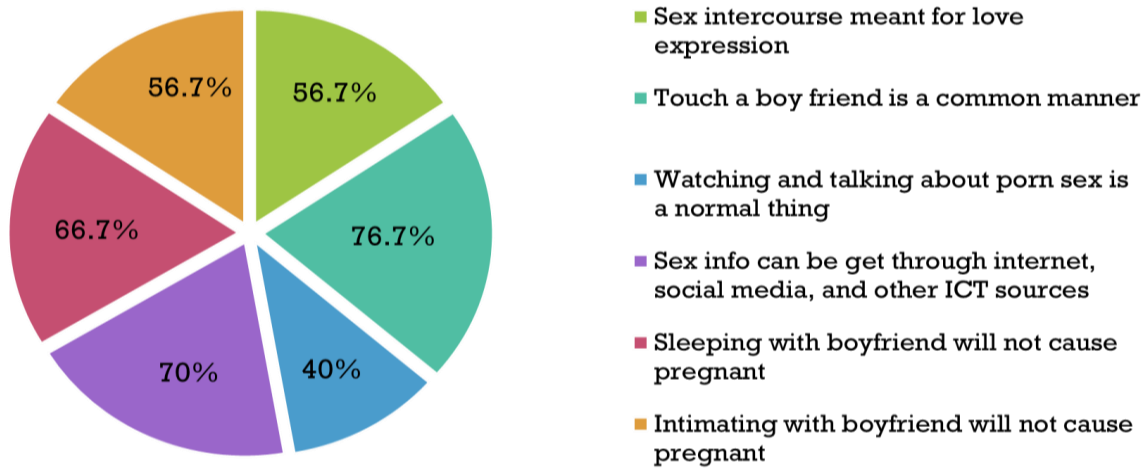


Figure 1: Perceptions Toward Teenage Pregnancy

This study also revealed that the majority of participants believed that sexual intercourse was primarily meant for expressing love, indicating that teenagers may not be fully mature in their thinking processes. Additionally, 76.7% of participants believed that touching someone of the opposite gender was common among friends, without understanding that boys undergo physical growth earlier than girls and may have different feelings towards sexual intimacy. Sharing stories about sexual activities among peers was found to encourage teenagers to experiment with sexual activity, beginning with petting, cuddling, and kissing before eventually having sex with their partner. The study also found that 70% of participants obtained sex-related information through the Internet, social media, and other ICT sources, which suggests that pornographic material may be easily accessible. Although most teenagers understood that watching pornography could lead to sexual desire, discussing sex was still viewed as taboo. The study highlights the negative impact of pornography and the need for authorities to take action to prevent its misuse among teenagers.

Lifestyles Determinants Among Pregnant Adolescents

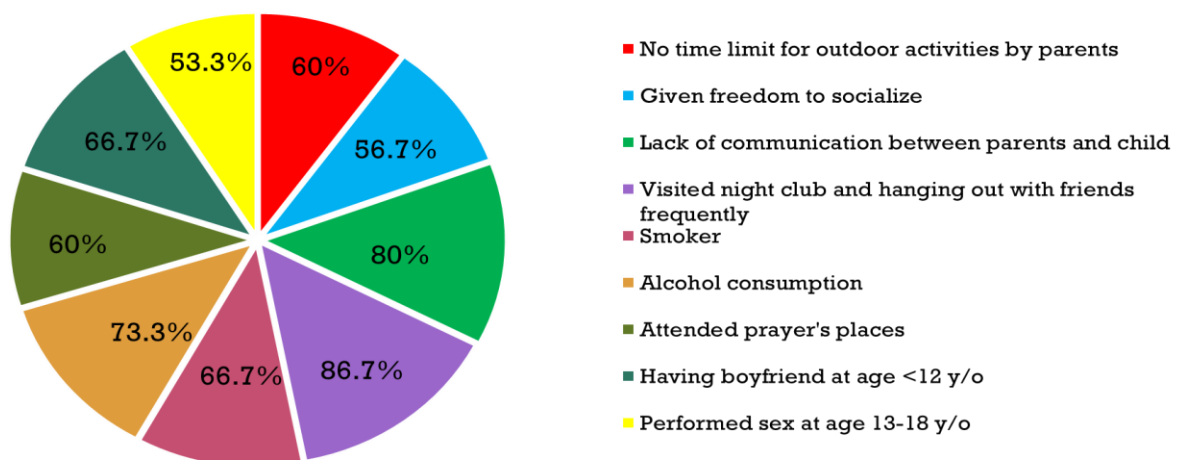


Figure 2: Lifestyles Determinants of Pregnant Teenagers

The way teenagers view pregnancy affects their lifestyle choices. This study found that the most common lifestyle activity among teenagers was visiting nightclubs and hanging out with friends, with about 86.7% admitting to this. Of these, 66.7% smoke and 73.3% drink alcohol, which is similar to the findings in Hizlinda et al.'s (2021) study, where teenagers engaged in risky activities such as smoking, drinking alcohol, drug use, clubbing, and watching pornography to alleviate the stress and boredom of their home environment. Besides, 53.3% of the participants revealed that they engaged in sexual activity during the age range of 13–18 years old, which is alarming as early sexual activity among adolescents is frequently associated with unintended teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, and HIV. A large proportion of the participants, specifically 66.7%, held the belief that having sexual intercourse with their boyfriend would not result in pregnancy. This perception could be associated with the age at which they had their first boyfriend, as more than half of them had their first boyfriend between 13 and 18 years old. This finding is comparable to a study by Izugbara et al. (2018), where a considerable percentage of both young females and males reported engaging in sexual activity before the age of 18. This lack of understanding regarding pregnancy and sexual health plays a role in the early onset of sexual behaviour among teenagers.

Conclusion

According to this study on teenage pregnancy perceptions and lifestyle determinants, it was found that poor lifestyle choices and misconceptions about pregnancy are the primary causes of unintended teenage pregnancy. This study found that many of the participants engaged in unhealthy social activities such as loitering, attending nightclubs, consuming alcohol and drugs, and engaging in sexual activity with their boyfriends, believing that it would not lead to pregnancy. Easy access to pornographic materials and social media was also found to contribute to early sexual activity among adolescents. They believed that sex education could be beneficial and that the use of contraceptives should be permitted without parental consent. The adolescents in the study recognized that early and unprotected sexual activity could negatively affect their physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. They acknowledged that teenage pregnancy could limit their future opportunities and affect their plans, and that being married against their will often resulted in divorce.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that parents play a crucial role in instilling good values and attitudes in their children, which can prevent teenage pregnancy. Parents should pay more attention to their children and set a good example. Teachers should also maintain good communication with parents or guardians and take strict disciplinary action to prevent promiscuity and changes in attitude in school. Adolescents themselves should be firm, maintain a sense of appreciation, and respect their bodies.

To further understand teenage pregnancy, it is recommended that a more detailed study with reliable survey questions be conducted among younger teenagers who are not yet pregnant, particularly those in secondary school. Conducting the study on the school compound would be beneficial in obtaining more information and increasing awareness about pregnancy among teenagers. Collaborative studies among hospitals and institutions in the country could produce better results in preventing teenage pregnancy. The government should prioritize the implementation of sex education in schools, and strong support from the public, including parents, adolescents, ministries, politicians, and non-government organizations, is necessary to prevent teenage pregnancy.

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