

Exchange of Sexually Inclined Messages in Contexts of Dating and Romantic Relationships Among Young Students in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The surge in the use of smartphones and internet has coincided with an increase in sexting among the youth. Existing studies have hardly provided comprehensive analyses of perspectives and experiences of Kenyan youth on prevailing social contexts of sexting, particularly the nexus between the practice and processes of dating and forming romantic relationships. This study aimed at analyzing how the use of smartphones interrelated with the exchange of sexually inclined messages in daily social life of middle level college (MLC) students in Nairobi, Kenya. The research question that yielded the findings of this article was: how does exchange of sexting messages relate to daily social activities among the selected MLC students? The study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The study used a qualitative research design conducted using multiple case study. Urbanized students with diverse characteristics who used smartphones to create and share sexually inclined messages were selected for the study. Non-probability sampling techniques were employed to identify 65 students aged 18-24 years from five MLCs that were purposively selected. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to generate the data, and the ethical issues that were considered included consent, confidentiality and anonymity. The data were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematic coding procedures were used to organize the data into themes and subthemes. The findings revealed that the selected students' sexting perceptions and practices shaped and were shaped by online and offline sexting activities of romantic partners. The study concluded that most students had misconceptions and harmful perceptions about the role of sexting in romantic relationships. Therefore, the study recommended use of responses that encourage bold and open discussion about sex, sexting and dating between children and adults, and that foster healthy parent-child relationships.

Keywords: Sexting, Dating, Smartphones, Sexual Communication, College Students, Romantic relationships, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Scientific studies conducted in Africa and other continents portray an increasing demand, ownership, and use of smartphones by young people (USIU-Africa, 2020; AlTameemy, 2017). The increased use of the smartphones has widened the scope and breadth of sexual communication and expression among youth and older people (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Sexting is a

combination of the words ‘sex’ and ‘texting’ and refers to the activity of creating and sending or receiving sexually explicit or implicit text messages, photos and /or videos through digitally enabled communication technologies (Walrave, Van Ouystel, Ponnet & Heirmann, 2014). Sexting precedes the digital age but the advent of smartphones and the internet has accelerated the pace, making the practice become a trend, especially among the youth (Hasinoff, 2013).

Two contrasting standpoints namely risky (deviant) framework and normalcy framework have emerged from the unprecedented scholarly attention given to sexting (Doring, 2014). The risky framework has tended to examine sexting in the context of the risks, harms, social sanctions and deviant behaviours associated with the practice (Hasinoff, 2013). Adolescence sexting has particularly attracted more attention because of the vulnerabilities and risks associated with the emotional and psychological development of this stage (Campbell & Park, 2014; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2013).

Normalcy framework on the other hand analyzes sexting in relation to the feelings, motivations, positive outcomes and delectations young people associate with the behaviour especially in dating and other peer social interactions (Doring, 2014; Burket, 2015). Scholarly perspectives such as sexual agency and emancipation frameworks (Lippman & Campbel, 2014) that conceptualize sexting as important in the development of social and sexual freedoms, and ‘emancipation’ of the youth for exploration and expression of sexuality are hinged on normalcy frameworks (Hasinoff, 2013; Doring, 2014). Contemporary studies that contextualize sexting in the context of daily social interactions of young people also make heavy reference to the normalcy scholarly discourse (Lippman & Campbell, 2014, Doring, 2014).

Problem Statement

In Kenya, studies that examine how sexting occurs among young people in dating relationships and related peer social interactions are limited. Studies that have delved into the social world of Kenyan adolescents to clearly understand the dating contexts and terrains of sexting are nonexistent. Therefore, the interplay of sexting with daily social interactions and communication activities of youth in dating is largely unknown. It is therefore unclear how activities of dating and romantic partners influence sexting, and how the intention of sharing explicit messages is

interpreted by dating partners. Prior research mainly reports statistics without providing elaborate analysis of the perspectives and experiences of the youth who practice sexting in dating. It is important to analyze the perspectives of the youth with firsthand information on how sexting takes place in dating, particularly how the practice is interpreted and perpetuated. It is crucial to understand how sexting takes place during daily social interactions of Kenyan youth, what sexting means to them, and particularly how the behaviour is shaped by the prevailing social norms in dating and romantic relationships.

Dearth of elaborate literature on important social contexts and terrains of sexting such as dating and romance will make it challenging to contextualize and localize youth sexting in Kenya. This will in turn negatively impact development of strategies to address unhealthy social norms Kenyan adolescents may have about sexting in dating and peer social interactions. Some scholars opine that in order to formulate effective responses to youth sexting, the practice should be conceptualized as complex and multifaceted (Harris et al, 2010; Doring, 2014; Hasinoff, 2014). In other words, solutions to adolescence sexting should be sought in the same social context it is practiced but this will require the behaviour to be treated as complex and multifaceted (Chege & Masibo, 2020). In that sense, research should penetrate the ‘social world’ of youth and seek multiple perspectives and experiences on how sexting is practiced and interpreted in interpersonal and group interactions and the concerns and challenges around the practice.

Aim of the Study and Research Objective

The aim of the study was to analyze the perspectives, experiences and activities of middle level college (MLC) students on the use of smartphones to create and send sexually inclined photos, videos and text messages during daily social interactions. The study aimed at penetrating the social world of adolescent sexting by drawing on elaborate perspectives and experiences of how sexting was practiced by young students during daily interpersonal and group interactions.

Research objective

How does exchange of sexting messages relate to daily social activities among the selected MLC students?

Scope of the study

The study analyzed daily sexting activities and experiences of students aged 18-25 years in Nairobi, Kenya. The study did not focus on sexually inclined content downloaded from the internet

and shared during interpersonal and group interactions. Use of sexting by sexual predators and cyber-bullies to exploit the youth was not addressed by this study. The study examined both positive and negative experiences of sexting in youth dating.

Assumptions

This study assumed that sexting was a social activity practiced daily in both interpersonal and group settings by romantic partners and close trusted friends. It was therefore assumed that elaborate analyses of perspectives and experiences of young people who engaged in sexting with dating and romantic partners would help us penetrate the social world of youth sexting with regard to how the activity is practiced.

Significance of the study

This study contributes to the academic/scientific discourses on practices of sexting in teen dating and romance. The study further addresses gaps by providing information needed to contextualize the social world of youth sexting in Kenya. The study is relevant to stakeholders and practitioners interested in fostering desirable norms and perceptions about sexting in dating, and formulating strategies to address youth sexting in general.

Limitations of the study

The study worked with a purposively selected sample and therefore the findings cannot be transferred to a wider population of students in Nairobi unless the characteristics and settings are similar. This study analysed the experiences and activities of sexting by the selected participants and therefore the findings could not quantify the extent of the behaviour. The study used a qualitative design conducted using multiple case study which may incur varying degrees of subjectivity. Another limitation is that use of self and group-narrated data on perspectives, experiences and activities of sexting may have biases in expression by the participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF SEXTING IN YOUTH DATING

Most empirical studies indicate that sexting predominantly takes place in the context of dating and romantic relationships, and peer social interactions (Cooper, Quayle, Johnson & Svedin, 2016; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014; Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco, Cattelino & Chirumbolo, 2021). Empirical studies further conclude that sexting in contexts of romantic relationships is a "new kind of sexual and intimate communication" (Bianchi et al., 2021, Hasinoff, 2014). Depending on definitions adopted in different research studies, the prevalence of sexting among youth in dating relationships ranges between 14% to 48% (Bianchi et al., 2021). Scholars have tended to agree

that sexting escalates at puberty and this trend worsens in young adulthood (Walrave et al, 2014; Burkett, 2015).

An online survey of 533 teenagers from South West Wales revealed that 40% of the participants had friends who engaged in sexting (Lennon & Murray, 2018). A similar large-scale survey conducted in the US indicated that 60% of the youth shared sexually explicit photos with dating partners, 20% sent to someone they wished to date and 40% shared the photos to experience fun (Angelides, 2013). Milton et al. (2019) noted in their study that young Australians who endorsed two-way sexting had increased to more than 42% by 2014 and those who talked about receiving sexting content grew from 27.39% to 30.93% the same year. Among the Italian youth, 63% acknowledged to have sent sexts and about 47% shared explicit images or videos about themselves (Morelli, et al., 2016).

A study of a large sample (N=1354) of teenagers in Lagos Island, Nigeria, aged 10-19 years, showed that 30.8% had either sent or received sexually explicit content via email, instant messaging and Skype. In the same study, about 27% had created and sent sexy messages, videos or photos about themselves (Olatunde & Balogun, 2017). Another study conducted among secondary school students in southwestern Nigeria concluded that prevalence of using mobile phones to send sex messages and nude pictures was on the rise (Kolawole & Ayeni, 2018). A study of sexting among high school adolescents in Nairobi revealed that 65% sexted daily and 25% did it weekly while only 2% avoided the practice (Stephen, Nyagah, Kaithuru & Vincent, 2017). In their study, Wamathai, Sirera & Mwenje, 2013) showed that 93% of the male respondents in selected Kenyan universities had accessed sexually explicit content in some form.

It is inconclusive whether gender differences affect sexting behaviours in romantic relationships (Bianchi et al., 2021). Some findings however suggest that boys engage in dangerous sexting more and are responsible for aggravated sexting against girls (Hasinoff, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2013). Girls mostly suffer non-consensual sexting perpetuated by boys with the intention of destroying the reputation of the girls (Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016). In Western countries, research has concluded that ethnicity influences sexting in the context of dating relationships (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018).

Previous research results indicate that sexting in dating contexts is mostly consensual and voluntary and perceived as a convenient way of expressing sexual interests and feelings (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). About 80% of the Italian youth engaged in consensual sexting while 12% of them were motivated by intention to harass or embarrass others (Bianchi et al., 2018). Normalcy discourse mentioned earlier considers consensual and experimental exchange of explicit messages to be driven by desire for sexual exploration, expression and identity formation (Doring, 2014) and constitute 56% and 88% of all sexting activities in adolescence (Bianchi, et al., 2016). In dating relationships, sexting messages are used to flirt romantic partners or express sexual behaviours and communicate mutual feelings (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al, 2013; Walrave, Heirman & Hallam, 2014). Hasinoff (2013) perceives the increasing rate of sexting among adolescents as driven by desire for sexual expression, intimacy and interpersonal communication.

Nonconsensual forwarding of someone's explicit content which is considered to be an aggressive form of sexting may also take place in dating (Ringrose et al., 2013; Eraker, 2010). Adolescents engage in aggravated sexting to damage the reputation of dating partners, "implying sexual victimization or exploitation" (Bianchi et al., 2021, p. 3). Damage of reputation or bullying as a result of aggravated sexting and association of the behaviour with substance abuse and sexual behaviours primarily constitute what is perceived to be perils and social risks of sexting by deviancy discourse scholars (Doring, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Nyongesa et al., 2019).

Results have further shown that some adolescents have been coerced and blackmailed into sexting by dating partners (Wolak et al., 2012). In their study, Kernsmith, Victor & Smith-Darden (2018) found that 12% of the youth were coerced into sexting while 8% pressurized partners to sext. More than 3% of Italian youth were coerced into sexting by romantic partners while 12% forwarded sexts of partners without their consent (Morelli et al., 2016).

Theoretical framework

Theory of planned behaviour (TPB) guided the study. TBP was formulated by Ajzen (1991) to explain how people perform different behaviours in specific contexts. TPB posits that intention to perform behaviours of different kinds is determined by three conceptually related predictors,

namely, attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Attitude towards the behaviour is “the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation or appraisal of the behaviour in question” (Ajzen, 1991: p. 11; Kan & Fabrigar, 2017). Subjective norms are social factors that refer to “the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behaviour” (Ajzen, p. 1). Perceived Behavioural Control refers to “people's perceptions of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest” (Ajzen, 1991: p.6; Walrave et al., 2014).

Analyzing attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and intentions will make us understand why young people engage in sexting. TPB was relevant in assessing the reasons and social contexts in which sexting took place, particularly how social norms and perceptions of peers and dating partners shaped the way the students engaged in sexting, and interpreted their sexting perceptions and activities.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this article are based on a study that was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, to analyze the experiences and activities of young students on the use of smartphones to compose and share sexually inclined messages during their daily social interactions and communication activities.

Research Method and Design

Qualitative research methods approach was adopted for the study. The study strived to provide a qualitative analysis of the perspectives and activities of sexting among young students. Qualitative research approach is linked to the relativist-interpretivist research paradigm. This philosophical paradigm is appropriate when the researcher intends to provide an in-depth and elaborate analysis of the experiences and perceptions of people concerning a particular social phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The study used multiple case study design and was carried out between July 2017 and March 2019. Multiple case study design allowed the researcher to generate multiple perspectives and experiences of how smartphones were used to compose and send sexting messages by the selected MLCs during daily social interactions.

Location of the Study

Nairobi was chosen for the study because it was assumed that the colleges found there would have students with diverse social demographic characteristics such as courses studied, age, level of study, gender, marital/dating status, living arrangement, religion etc. It was also assumed that

young students in Nairobi frequently used smartphones to communicate with peers and dating partners. The participants for the study were drawn from five middle level colleges that were purposively selected. The colleges considered for inclusion had diverse characteristics in terms of courses offered, examination bodies of courses offered, location within Nairobi, affordability in terms of fees paid, gender representation, no discrimination in terms of religion, number of student population etc

Study Population

The study population was urbanized students from diverse social, academic and religious backgrounds, aged 18-25 years, who used smartphones to create and send sexually explicit and/or implicit text messages or videos and/or pictures. 18-25 years was considered because consensual sexting escalates at this stage, and it is also the age at which formation of sexual relationships and peer social interactions intensify (Burkett, 2015). Peers and romantic partners influence exchange of sexually inclined messages among the youth (Lippman & Campbell, 2013; Angelides, 2013). In addition, age of consent (18 years and above in Kenya) was a key consideration owing to the sensitive nature of the study. Moreover, important characteristics such as course, religion, year of study, dating status and living arrangement were taken into consideration.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was employed to select five MLCs, and then purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify 65 students who created and exchanged sexual messages using smartphones. The participants were between 18 and 25 years of age. The first set of participants was purposively selected then progressively the existing participants provided referrals to recruit more participants through the researcher, based on willingness to participate.

The sample size was determined by the richness and saturation point of the data. Different participants were recruited to participate in the interviews and FGDs. To recruit the participants, the researcher obtained authorization permits from the MLCs and worked in consultation with the lecturers and administrators of these institutions. Students were told about the study during classes and while sitting outside during breaks, especially between 10am and 5pm. Contact details of the students who volunteered to participate in the study including the time they wished to be contacted were recorded in the field notebook. At the onset of the recruitment, students were sensitized that

the study was about how they used smartphones to create and share sexually inclined text messages, photos and videos with colleagues and romantic partners.

Data Collection Tools

Data was obtained through in-depth interviews and FGDs. Interview and FGD guides were developed based on the research questions to guide on the areas to elucidate responses. Prior to data collection, a pilot was conducted in one college that had similar characteristics with the ones selected for the main study. The interview and FGD guides were pretested in the pilot study with two interviewees (1 male and 1 female) and five FGD attendees (2 males and 3 females). The college selected for the pilot was not included in the main study. The questions and probes in the research tools were revised following findings of the pilot. Additionally, the pilot showed that when participants felt in control of the conversations during interviews, it eliminated the perception of a dominating researcher interrogating submissive respondents and this allowed them to easily disclose personal matters concerning their own sexting activities. Moreover, the pilot showed that participants were willing to discuss sensitive matters pertaining to sexting and did not perceive any risk.

Data Collection Procedures

This study combined in-depth interviews and FGDs in order to generate rich insights about sexting activities from multiple perspectives and experiences of those who engaged in the activity. Thirty interviews with 11 males and 19 females (N=30) and seven FGDs with 35 participants were conducted. The FGDs comprised of five members both males and females. The interviews lasted for 45-125 minutes and 75-105 minutes for FGDs. The researcher used the guides to conduct the interviews and FGDs, take notes, and moderate and guide the conversations. All the interviews and FGDs were recorded using an audio recorder with the permission of the participants to document actual responses for later transcription and to minimize chances of missing important information.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted in the college environment when participants were free, in secure and quiet places (away from other students) to guarantee privacy and confidentiality. In-depth interviews interrogated participants on personal sexting activities and sexual behaviours. During FGDs, respondents were advised to refrain from talking about their own sexting activities but address group sexting activities and perceptions. Further, participants were warned against mentioning names of colleagues in FGDs in order to protect their privacy and anonymity. In both

interviews and FGDs, how confidentiality and anonymity of their disclosure were to be guaranteed was clearly communicated.

Validity and reliability

Credibility is important for achieving rigor in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2011). In this study, triangulation and providing thick and rich descriptions were used to validate the findings. Data from interviews and FGDs were triangulated to ensure credibility of the results. Reliability was achieved by using a large sample size, and also by use of both in-depth interviews and FGDs to collect data until saturation point was reached. Different participants were involved in the in-depth interviews and FGDs and this further enhanced the richness of the results. Furthermore, reporting of findings incorporated direct quotes from the respondents to further enhance credibility of the results.

Data Analysis Procedures

The audio data were transcribed verbatim using the Listen N Write transcription software. The researcher then carefully read the transcripts severally to familiarize with the data, putting down important analytical notes and jottings. Then systematically and interactively, salient segments of the transcripts were identified and assigned codes. The salient data segments and codes were then cut out and pasted on fresh documents. The codes and information in the fresh documents were carefully read and grouped into similar categories. The categories were then reviewed and structured into themes. Similar and overlapping themes were reviewed and collapsed to form overarching themes which were ultimately used to interpret and present the findings. The process of developing the themes was iteratively done and involved naming, renaming and dropping some of the themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed by Moi University Postgraduate Research and Ethics Committee and subsequently approved. Consequently, a research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI [Ref No: NACOSTI/P/17/16600/15390]). Written permission was obtained from each college to conduct the study while consent and permission was sought from each participant by signing and filling the consent forms with the researcher.

Issues of ethical concern that were considered in the study included anonymity, confidentiality and consent. Symbols were used (e.g F1INT-first female interview) in order to protect confidentiality and anonymity of participants, while use of their names was avoided during interviews and FGDs. When recruiting participants and before the start of interviews and FGDs, students were given pertinent details about the nature and purpose of the study. Further, the researcher informed participants that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without affecting the relationship with the college and the researcher. They were also informed that their responses would be confidential and only to be used for the purposes of the study.

RESULTS

Only one female participant was aged 26 years, the rest were 18-25 years old. Participants studied various courses in the colleges. 37 were in dating relationships, 2 were married and 26 were not dating. 58 of them were Christians, 5 were Muslims while 2 did not profess either Christianity or Islam. 32 lived with parents, 13 stayed with non-parents and 20 resided in hostels or rented rooms away from home.

Some female participants recorded and stored in their smartphones images that showed their derriere covered in pants or very tight skirts, or breasts covered in bra. Four of these girls admitted to have sent these photos to their boyfriends. One of them claimed that the boyfriend experienced sexual satisfaction when he looked at the explicit images she sent to him while she was in school:

yeah i share with my boyfriend sometimes I'm here in school and he is like i miss you today i did go for job I'm just in bed I'm missing you blah blah just to shut him up i just send a nude and then he is wow you have calmed me down[F4INT]

A section of female participants said that creating and sending intimate photos to boyfriends was sometimes as a result of the need to reciprocate. One of these girls sent her explicit images after receiving some from her boyfriend, (*laughs*) *hmmm yeah sometimes I send back to him...hmm yeah (F1INT)*. This behaviour of reciprocating portrays the transactional nature of sexting in dating relationships.

All the participants concurred that exchange of self-made raunchy photos in dating relationships was consensual. Several boys requested revealing photos of their girlfriends. Some girls sent the photos while clad in short or revealing skirts, bras or panties. One of them said that his girlfriend sent normal and “*seminude ones*” and always did so to “*hear his opinions*” on her looks. They had the “*same taste of things*” and that’s why she sent her racy images to seek his feedback “*on the outfits she was wearing*” (M2INT). Lippman and Campbell (2012) found that some girls in romantic relationships engaged in sexting to receive male approval.

The married female participant requested and received genital images of her husband, “*yeah private parts*” (F2INT). Two boys were requested by girlfriends to send images showing bare chest or private parts. One of them said the girlfriend specifically wanted to see his genitals, ‘*ok, my manhood, yeah such stuff yeah*’ (M7INT). These findings are consistent with prior studies that concluded that sexting mostly occurs in contexts of dating (Ringrose et al., 2012). It was further revealed that some dating partners sent raunchy images without being requested to do so. Girls who sent racy photos without being requested were perceived to be insecure or were seen to compete for attention of boys whom multiple girls were interested in dating, ‘*to catch the attention, if you see if she is cooler than the other chic [girl] yeah*’.... *sometimes may be the guy requests or sometimes it is the chic [girl] who just wants to send to the boyfriend, yeah*” (F5INT). Some of the girls expressed how they were likely to use naked images to seduce or get attention of prospective boys, “*you can forward it, like to your crush yeah see what will happen may be will fall for you*” [FG02].

A few respondents who felt that sexting was not always consensual argued that depending on one’s position in the relationship, some students are vulnerable and subject to pressure or coercion to send their naked photos. Two girls reported to have experienced pressure from their boyfriends to record and send raunchy photographs

..he pressurized me, he told me I was not serious if can refuse to give him my nude image, I told him no it is not that I’m not serious but I could not do it yeah....around that time we disagreed, we stayed a whole week without talking to each other, then he told me I must have another man who I send my nudes to apart from him if I can’t send him my nudes, I told him to continue talking negative about me (F16INT).

Most female and male participants however strongly contested the view that individuals were under pressure to send naked photos. They insisted that recording and sending of explicit photos in romantic relationships was largely consensual and voluntary, “*no, they don’t coerce them, the guy (boy) just asks may be persistently but won’t blackmail the girl to send them*” (F9INT). In this quote, it is clear that pestering was not considered to be a form of blackmail or coercion.

Some boys who disputed the use of force to get racy photos from girlfriends felt that instead of pestering, trust should build in the relationships to a point where the girl is comfortable in sending such content. “*I can’t say about that because, mine is really hard to press but for my case it took a little bit of time, but now she is free to send anytime yeah*” (M7INT). Numerous studies have similarly established that romantic partners are a constant source of pressure to engage in sexting (Drouin et al., 2013). Apart from peer pressure and perceptions on social norms, romantic partners are more likely to exert influence on young people to engage in sexting (Vandeen Abeele et al., 2014).

It was interesting to hear some female participants confess that they desired to receive racy images from certain boys. One of the girls wished to receive photographs showing chest or genitals, “*maybe if the guy is built, I’m mostly attracted to build up guys may be because of such*” (F13INT). Similarly, another girl wished to look at photos of genitals and chest of her former boyfriend, “*mostly the chest and may be the private parts*”. She was also willing to share her seminude photos with the boyfriend but she was never asked to send the time they dated, “*...he never asked for them so I did not send*”. I could have sent him the “*... seminude ones, may be in those tiny shorts, crop tops, spaghetti yeah*” (F8INT).

Perspectives from a number of participants diverged on whether boys sent photos of private parts to girlfriends. Most boys noted that they preferred sharing the ones downloaded from the internet. One boy claimed to have declined to send his genital photos despite being requested to do so severally by the girlfriend. “*she knows I cannot send to her, she knows I can ask but she knows I cannot send yeah* [M11INT]. A section of female participants however felt that boys readily sent naked images than girls, “*private parts, he only sends that one thing nothing else, I have not seen*

anything else he sends than that one thing only” (F7INT). One girl (aforementioned) confirmed to have received genital photos of her boyfriend after sending hers, “yeah he sends then you look and then hmmmmm (laughs)” (F4INT). Another girl often received ‘bathroom’ images from her boyfriend, although she did not specify whether the images showed genitals or not, ‘he just sends something like.... hi I’m from the bathroom ’ [laughs] yeah (F11INT)’. Gender differences have been perceived to influence practices, attitudes and frequency of sexting among the young people (Liong & Cheng, 2017; Ringrose et al., 2013; Jewell & Brown, 2013).

Experiences of three girls demonstrated how sexting took place among partners who were away from each other. One of them was frequently requested to send genital photos to the lover but she preferred sending the ones that showed her bare breasts ‘.... ok when he says he is far and tells me he misses me and requests for nudes I would send to him.... mostly boobs sometimes he wanted to see my private parts but I never sent him that (F11INT)’. The other girl described how the boyfriend communicated feelings of sexual stimulation and intention to have sex with her through sexually charged text messages, “when we are chatting, may be when we are far, may be once in a while he just like says I miss you and I miss the whole of you so you just know like he misses sex” (F15INT). The aforementioned married female participant sometimes sent images of her private parts to her husband whenever he was away from home, “.... he goes for two weeks or one week and in that he tells me, can you do this for me.... [laughs] the private parts [F2INT]

A section of participants felt that dating older partners for money or gifts (‘sponsor’ relationships) was widespread and socially accepted among young people. A number of the girls discussed both online and offline issues related to dating sponsors. Two of them claimed to have female friends who were involved in such relationships, “.... yeah, many females, they talk about that, they have sponsors and they talk about them a lot, my sponsor....” (F18INT). It was felt that these transactional relationships were intertwined with recording and sending sexually inclined photos and videos.

One male and two female participants claimed to have been requested by older people to record and send raunchy photos. The boy claimed to have received a request to send images of his genitals from a 37-year old woman, *I say, I’m around 24 years, I have had someone 37 years requesting*

for my naked photo yeah... (M4INT). The first girl claimed to have been requested to send what she suspected to be racy photos by an old man she met in a public office, "he used to request for my picture when I'm sleeping, I wondered what pictures he wanted from me....." (F6INT). The second girl claimed to have dated older men for money to whom she frequently sent her genital photos, "but I send them without showing my face yeah, I hide the face, ok I show them my private parts and boobs yeah. She also claimed that the men recorded images of her naked body, no they only take around my waist and behind, they don't capture my face (F7INT). Studies that examine the interconnection between sexting and transactional or intergenerational sexual relationships are missing and this implies that certain social-sexual contexts of sexting are unknown (Chege & Chebii, 2020).

Nearly all participants felt that social media and smartphones have made it easy for young students to form sexual relationships and express interest in dating. A number of participants said they often sent messages to people they wished to date, fondly referred to as the crush, *"yeah I want this guy to be my boyfriend, you have that crush on him, I want this guy (laughs)" [FG04].* Nearly all girls said that they received explicit pictures or text messages from boys or men interested in dating, *"yeah some have told me over the phone, yeah my friends a few in school we chat and they ask whether I mind sending them my nude picture...." (F18INT).*

A number of boys sent sexual text messages or racy images downloaded from the internet to multiple prospective girls. Two boys further sent images of their chest to prospective girls through Instant Messaging. The first boy sent bare chest 'selfies' recorded while in the gym to several prospective girls while chatting on WhatsApp:

what I would send mostly are my photos, you know I work out a lot, so at some point I had a very good physique yeah, so every girl who sees me outside then will inbox me, I would like to see you that body, those muscles so, when I go back to the gym I find myself taking those photos" (M4INT)

The other boy also sent photos of his bare chest to random girls who requested for the images, *'but I did not send nude photos, but photos showing my chest and photos of me wearing clothes' (M3INT).* These findings are consistent with earlier studies that showed how young boys interested

in dating send sexts to prospective girls to communicate their intentions and vice versa can also happen (Ringrose et al, 2013; Abury & Crawford, 2014).

Furthermore, use of social connections on social media was said to have increased opportunities for self-disclosure for students which had in turn amplified interactions and engagements with online strangers. Experience of interactions with online strangers was however described as predominantly awful for most of the participants, especially girls. Majority of the female participants said they frequently received requests to record and send naked photos from strangers interested in dating on Facebook and Instagram, “*yes, someone asked for my photo in Facebook, I told him to take one from the account, he said he wanted a nude photo I told him that it was not going to happen...*” (F3INT). It emerged that strangers mostly used ‘inbox’ to privately send unwanted sex videos once the girls started interacting with them. A boy who was sent what he described as a lesbian video by a strange girl on Facebook claimed he was requested to send his naked video and make plans to meet the girl:

yeah just a clip, she was with another girl engaging in lesbian activities and after that she texted me sent those clips saying that I’m in real need of you for sure saying that she did not have a boyfriend and so I should try to at least visit her once I find what she sent to me (M5INT).

These findings suggest that sexting is perceived to be a form of self-disclosure when the sender or receiver shares personal and intimate information with dating partners or strangers online. Participants however did not realize the dangers associated with using sexting for self-disclosure especially with online strangers and acquaintances. The naked photos and videos could be used to blackmail the students or the images could be posted online resulting in serious psychosocial problems.

Participants perceived sharing of self-recorded naked images or videos as dangerous and reckless despite acknowledging that it occurred among some of those in dating. They were concerned about the numerous harms and risks associated with exchange of explicit imagery in both dating and non-dating contexts. Majority were however more concerned about harms likely to come from showing or forwarding to unintended recipients or post to public audiences on social media, “*you will suffer and have low self-esteem for exposing your sexual organs to other people*” (FG05).

This perception of dangers of exchanging their own naked photos or videos in dating made participants endorse exchange of explicit text messages instead. They perceived text messages as likely to cause less harm since they did not show the face of the subject. Explicit text messages were frequently exchanged with present and future dating partners, and the practice was fondly known as ‘sex chatting’. A girl in one of the FGDs exclaimed, ‘sex *chatting is normal in relationships and it is the in thing....*’ (FG01). Another girl wondered what people in a relationship would be doing if not texting about sex, “*if in a relationship people are not talking about sex what do they talk about.....what else do they text about*” (FG07). Most boys had sexual textual conversations on WhatsApp with girls, ‘*ended sexual and.... continued sex chatting*’ (M6INT).

Sexually charged text messages were used to flirt and share jokes with the girls that the boys were interested in dating, “*that is a very easy one because let’s say you are not dating as a boy but the girl you are interested in dating you will only have sexual chatting you will not meet intimately*” (F3INT). A number of boys expressed how they felt sexy and excited as they flirted with the girls. Sexual excitement and pleasure were interpreted as major motivation for boys to send explicit texts to random girls:

“*mostly, we talk may be, when will meet one more night.... may be funny stuff, maybe your boobs are funny, just fun, making fun yeah*” (M7INT).

.... *I respond soon, yeah such, when you text her she has nice breasts, she replies really, when she replies that she has already fallen into that chat*” (M1INT)

As a concern, participants demonstrated how exchange of sexually inclined messages was a prelude to sexual activities and expression of sexual behaviours. They expressed that exchange of explicit messages with romantic partners made them get sexually stimulated and feel the desire to have sex, “*once you start sex chatting, there is a way it brings the sexual desires, arouse and it is usually for that time you are chatting*” (M2INT). One of the girls “*at times did feel sexually stimulated*” when she looked at naked photos sent by her boyfriend (F8INT). Another girl whenever she was “*alone got stimulated*” when she looked at explicit messages sent by the boyfriend [F12INT]. The married female participant claimed to have released sexual tensions after looking at the photos showing genitals of her husband, “*I feel ok and satisfied*” (F2INT). She

further believed that the husband also experienced sexual satisfaction when he looked her at naked photos.

Some of the participants who engaged in sex said they used the text messages to discuss the place and time when the sexual activity should take place, *yeah, he did at times, and I would also ask for sex, we used to plan when to meet and when sex should occur yeah*” (F8INT). One girl pointed out that whenever “*they were talking about sex*” with the boyfriend “*at some point he could tell her to come and have sex*” (F13INT). A boy who claimed to have frequently engaged in sex with his girlfriend said, “*... you have to ask her through chats so that if she agrees then from there you can arrange to have that fun [sex]....*” (M5INT). Another boy said that after sex he used text messages to express affection and appreciation to the girlfriend, “*.... we talk about the previous sex we had, what she is wearing*” [F1INT]. Similarly, some studies have described how sexting is the first step in the debut of sexual activity within romantic relationships (Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). Lippman and Campbell (2014) however argued that sexting is to some extent an alternative to penetrative sex by some adolescents.

Despite the perceived negative concerns, most participants felt that sexting was associated with positive outcomes in romantic relationships. For instance, according to the married female participant, exchange of naked photos with the husband enhanced affection, faithfulness and commitment in the marriage

the pictures will help him to cool down because he is away for two weeks or three weeks and maybe he is faithful to me and I'm faithful to him, so when I send him my nude images, he will feel I love him and he remembers me and feels he should not betray his wife because he loves her, the nude images make him remember about me as the wife yeah [F2INT]

These findings reveal that visual and textual contents of sexting messages were perceived differently with respect to potential dangers. In addition, the results suggest that participants were fully aware of the negative consequences related to youth sexting, especially cyberbullying, damage of reputation and social shaming, and engagement in risky sexual behaviours. They however practiced sexting in dating and romantic relationships. Therefore, young people need

education, awareness and information on how to avoid sexting or engage in the activity safely or deal with negative consequences associated with the behaviour.

DISCUSSION

Results showed that exchange of sexual messages frequently took place in romantic relationships. Dating is a common online and offline social sexual activity among adolescents and this explains why sexting was prominent in such contexts. Similarly, past studies have majorly mentioned dating and peer-social engagements as key contexts in which exchange of raunchy messages takes place (Englander, 2021; Henderson, 2011).

Most participants perceived sexting to be normal and necessary and sometimes inevitable in romantic relationships. This underscores the need for health professionals and (prevention) researchers to thoroughly understand the issues of peer pressure, dating norms and perceptions about sexting. Peer pressure and perceptions of sexting norms have been found to be key determinants of sexting in a number of past studies (Walrave et al., 2014). Interventions that dispel harmful perceived social norms and the prevailing misconceptions about the importance of sexting within dating and romantic relationships are needed (Bianchi et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers should provide relevant data to illegitimize the misconceptions that sexting is normative in peer social interactions and dating relationships.

With reference to TPB, peer norms and attitudes influence sexting and expression of sexual behaviours and activities through videos and photos among adolescents (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walrave et al., 2014). The prevention efforts should therefore focus on teaching young people how to deal with peer pressure and manipulation from romantic partners to send explicit photos and how to dispel negative misconceptions about sexting in relationships.

In romantic relationships, sexting was considered a convenient way of communicating sexual interests and expressing affection. Sexual messages were used to flirt and play with the opposite sex and the experience was described as fun, self-fulfilling and somehow led to achievement of sexual satisfaction. This implies that if young students within romantic relationships hold positive perceptions about the importance of sexting, they are likely to engage in the behaviour more. It also implies that when dating partners are a source of influence to undertake sexting, then they become “important normative referents” (Walrave et al., 2014, p. 4).

In the context of TPB, if sexting is associated with positive outcomes related to ways of enhancing intimacy and showing affection, students in romantic relationships are likely to engage in the behaviour more. The finding that some girls felt that sexting enhanced prospects of dating emphasizes the need for parents, teachers and counselors to discuss with adolescents on how to engage in the activity safely and responsibly with romantic partners (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Findings revealed that 40% of the participants were dating, and that sexting was rife in these relationships. Therefore, parents and health practitioners should teach adolescents about relationships, especially power relations, bullying, harassment and blackmail because all these are related to sexting (Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014). Adolescents should be taught rational and negotiation skills and effective communication in order to improve their capacity to discuss misconceptions about sexting and defend their position about refusal to send explicit photos to romantic partners (Gordon-Messer et al, 2013; Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014).

Young people should be taught how to appreciate and uphold desirable values and ideals of dating such as mutual trust, caring, strong character and personality, affection and academic progress instead of sexting. Adolescents in dating need support and guidance from family members in order to develop positive self-concept, self-esteem and confidence required to tackle the challenges of modern-day romantic relationships and use of mobile phones. Moreover, young people, especially girls, need skills on how to deal with issues related to negative perceptions about sexuality, beauty and self-worth. Young people who are adequately nurtured towards positive self-concept are likely to recognize and evaluate situations that pressurize them to share explicit pictures and use the knowledge and strategies they have to deal with such situations (Norman, 2017; Chege & Masibo, 2020; Hasinoff, 2013).

As noted in literature described earlier, sexting tends to escalate during adolescence and young adulthood because this is the age of sexual exploration, expression and forming sexual relationships. Findings of this study have corroborated sentiments from these studies that sexting is rife in contexts of dating and romantic relationships. This implies that educators and adolescent health professionals should adopt programs that guide on children sex and sexting and implement strategies that teach and promote sex education in schools and at home (Dolev, 2020; Clara et al., 2019).

Sex education and similar intervention efforts should strive to promote open dialog on matters related to sexuality and dating between adolescents and parents, school counselors, teachers and other relevant stakeholders. In African settings, topics bordering on sex and sexuality are shunned and this is dangerous because young people will have to rely on the internet and peers to get such information (Gakahu & Kaguta, 2011).

It was encouraging to note that all the participants were aware that sexting interrelates directly with engagement in risky sexual behaviours and other negative outcomes. It was however disheartening to learn that they were more concerned about the perceived social risks of having the private photos forwarded to other people or posted on public sites than the consequences related to premarital sex. This has serious health implications because youth will continue to engage in sexting and sex but disregard the consequences of the latter which are arguably more severe (Chege & Chebii, 2020; Herper et al., 2013). This underscores the importance of having intervention efforts to teach adolescents how to resist pressure to engage in sex with dating partners who could be using sexting and pornography to lure them into sexual activity (Ringrose et al., 2013). The strategies should as well emphasize on mechanisms to reduce risks of sexual activities such as messages about abstinence, and negotiating for safe sex and use of condoms (Asare, 2015; Herper et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that exchange of sexually inclined messages was intertwined with processes of dating and forming romantic relationships. Participants who were dating had positive perceptions that sexting is fun, common and important in romantic relationships. Majority perceived sexting as a pleasurable, and a convenient way of communicating intentions in dating and expressing affection. It was further concluded that exchange of sexually inclined messages was a precursor to engaging in risky sexual activities. In addition, participants were more concerned about aggravated sexting more than the connection between sexting and premature sex.

Furthermore, it was concluded some students had misconceptions and lacked proper information about the practice. The study therefore recommends the need by (intervention) researchers to thoroughly analyse the feelings and perspectives about the perceived positive and negative consequences of sexting. Teachers, school counselors and parents should particularly focus on

efforts that dispel prevailing misconceptions and harmful perceived social norms that promote sexting as normative and common in processes of dating.

The research further recommends that teachers and parents need to teach youth effective communication and negotiation skills in order for them to effectively speak against the negative experiences of sexting in dating and romance. Adolescents should also be equipped with relevant information on the consequences of premature sex. To improve adolescents' awareness on sex, sexuality and dating, bold and open dialogue between teachers, parents and young people on such matters should be encouraged. Moreover, healthy parent-child relationships should be promoted as this will foster bold and open communication on a wide range of issues affecting the youth.

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