

Online Mediated Sexual Activities and Behaviours Among College Students in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Participation of young people in online sexual solicitations is a strongly emerging theme in internet and social networking related studies. However, here in Kenya, studies that examine how young people engage in online solicitations that may later transform into offline sexual activities and behaviors are nonexistent. As well, studies that report on how young people participate in social networking sites' online groups dedicated to sexuality and sexual talk is virtually missing. Descriptive survey method was used to investigate whether college students in Nairobi participate in online solicitations and online social groups dedicated to sexual talk on social networking sites. A sample comprising of 300 college students drawn from a private university college in Nairobi completed a survey questionnaire. The survey assessed participation in online groups dedicated to sex and sexually, online solicitations and offline engagement in sexual activities and behaviors as a result of such solicitations. About 45% of the respondents confirmed to have participated in activities of online groups on Facebook that explicitly portray sexuality, sexual activities and behaviors. It also emerged that students used social networking sites for both online and offline connections and interactions. In fact, respondents confirmed to have attended social events invited through social networking sites where certain sexual activities happened. This study recommends further investigation of the extent to which youth people's engagement in online solicitations put them at risk of both online and offline sexual abuse and harassment.

Key Words: online sexual activities and behaviors, social networking, online solicitation, social connections

Introduction

Social networking sites have received overwhelming popularity from young people who are using these social platforms for social interaction, sharing ideas, photos, videos, artistic expressions and blogging. These online social platforms have also become excellent, convenient and appealing for young people to engage in sex and sexuality related conversations. Sexual talk and displays on social networking sites are increasingly frequent and explicit. Verbal and visual scripts on pornography, dating, intimacy, relationships and casual sex have become rampant on these sites. Social media is more sexually explicit than traditional media. Past studies indicate that that social media depicts a world in which unhealthy behaviors such as physical aggression, unprotected sex, smoking and drinking are glamorous and risk free (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012; Feona & Smith, 2014; Walker, Sancic & Temple-Smith, 2011). Content analysis by researchers has found that sexual content that range from flirting to sexual intercourse has increased tremendously on the internet and social networking sites (Brown, Keller & Stern, 2009; Collins et al, 2011; Chika & Ojih, 2013; Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Social networking

sites are full of photos and videos displaying underage drinking, provocative clothing and behaviors, and questionable or illegal activity (Brown, Keller & Stern, 2009; (Malar, 2012).

Social networking sites are places where youth not only encounter sexual text, photos, and videos, they also create and/or post such materials (Collins et al, 2011; Chika & Ojih, 2013; Peluchette & Karl, 2010). They are using their online social networking sites profiles to display information about their sexuality indicating their sexual orientation and sexual interests, posting songs and poems about sexual desires and experiences on blogs, sharing nude or semi-nude pictures and videos of themselves and discussing sexual practices and experiences (Brown et al, 2009). There is a growing phenomenon of youth portraying casual sex escapades. For example, among the Kenyan youth, among many other online activities, they create and join online groups where they upload or stream live videos, hold discussions and post links of pornographic web sites. Discussions on sexual intercourse episodes, alcohol and drug abuse is common place on these social groups. Public sex, reckless partying, nude sex photos, pornographic videos, public indecency and explicit sex comments are proudly posted on such virtual groups.

Social networks also allow users to enhance their social connections. Users may search for people they are interested in and compile a list of friends or contacts. For example in WhatsApp, young people can use the contact list to share information and comments on various issues. On these social connections young people share photos and videos that describe their online and offline activities and this facilitates both online and offline interactions (Tham& Ahmed, 2011; Karlan&Raffler, 2013; Grimus, 2014; Schrock, 2015). Findings on Facebook use shows that online social networking interactions spill over into real life (Barkhuus&Tashiro, 2012). This suggests an overlap between the young people's online and offline interactions. We therefore anticipate young people to extend their online sexual related discussions into the physical world. Young people experience both online and offline social worlds as "mutually constituted" (Evers et al, 2013). Young people hook up through friend requests and sometimes indulge in sex after meeting online or continue dating. Young people are using their online networks to extend friendships that they navigate in their familiar offline contexts of school, religious organizations, sports and other physical social interactions.

Studies have linked frequent and prolonged exposure to sexual content in social media to negative effects on aspects of social behavior and attitudes. Heavy consumers of online sexual media are likely to be preoccupied with sex and hold misconceptions that sex is common and normal among their peers which is not actually the case (Kelleher & Sweetser,2012; &Meyl, 2015; Manganello, et al, 2010) . Conversely, such youth are likely to have less or no respect for social norms and values on sexuality and sexual behaviors. Researchers have found youth who are exposed to uncensored high dosages of sexual content to be more likely to initiate sexual activity than their other counterparts (Primack et al, 2009; Martino et al, 2009; Voeten&Remes, 2011).

Despite the popularity of social networking among young people in Kenya, there is very little accompanying research to understand how these technologies have changed their social environment and online and offline social interactions. Most of the studies on online sexual solicitations and subsequent offline behaviors have been conducted in the Western countries yet young people in Kenya aresaid to use their online social networks to navigate both online and offline worlds besides displaying information about their sexual orientation and sexual interests. Kenyan youth postsongs and poems about their sexual desires and experiences on blogs, share nude or semi-nude pictures and videos of themselves on social networking sites and via mobile phones (sexting) and discuss sexual practices

and experiences on these platforms. They also 'like' and post comments on social groups dedicated to posts and comments on reckless partying, alcohol and drugs use, casual sex escapades, prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism and public nudity. Such online social groups include *Mpasho*, *Team Mafisi*, *HagaZa MothersUnion*, *African booty* among others.

It is also believed that young people are using social media to promote online prostitution. For example they hook up through friend requests on Facebook and other social platforms such as Whataspp and sometimes indulge in sex after meeting offline or continue dating. A glance at websites dedicated to online prostitution such as *Match.com* and *Adultfriendfinder.com* reveal photos of desperate youth who have uploaded nude photos with an aim of attracting those interested in engaging in sexual activities. Scholars have documented how online sexual activities such as online pornography and online relationships affect sex, sexuality, attitudes and behaviors of the young people (Bale, 2011; Samson &Grabe, 2012; Pascoe, 2011)

There are virtually no studies conducted to better understand how young people in Kenya use social networking sites to engage in online prostitution, online solicitation and subsequent sexual behaviors. This study sought to determine the extent to which college students in Nairobi use social networking sites to engage in online solicitation and offline sexual activities and behaviors as a result of such solicitations and whether they participate in activities of social networking sites groups dedicated to portraying sexual related activities. This study will add on the available literature relating to youth online sexual interactions, behaviors and activities.

Research Objectives

The aim of this study was to investigate whether young people engaged in online solicitations and offline sexual activities that followed and whether they participated in online groups and activities dedicated to portrayals of sexuality and sexual related activities and behaviors. Consequently, two research objectives were formulated for this study: (a) To investigate whether college students in Nairobi use social networking sites to facilitate both online and offline interactions that are likely to result to offline sexual activities. (b) To investigate whether college students in Nairobi joined and participated in activities of social groups and organizations that are dedicated to sexual portrayals, sexuality, sexual activities and/or relationships.

Research Methodology

This paper is prepared from results of an academic study that was conducted in 2013 to explore exposure and consumption of sexual content in the social media including sexual talk, sexual images and/or videos, online and offline sexual behaviors, memberships and participation in erotic online groups. Specifically the study aimed at unraveling the extent to which college students in Nairobi were exposed and consumed portrayed and mediated sexual content on social networking sites.

To achieve the objectives of the study, descriptive survey design was used that involved the use of a questionnaire to collect data from a group of college students. The questionnaire assessed use of social networking sites, online and offline sexual activities. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of students drawn from a private university college situated in Nairobi, Kenya. Stratified random sampling technique was used to obtain a sample of 300 respondents of both genders out of student population of about 3500 students. The questionnaires were administered by the research directly to the respondents and collected immediately the respondent provided the required responses. The questionnaire took the respondents about ten minutes to complete. Since the questionnaire was short and the researchers collected them immediately the respondent finished filling in, the completion rate was almost 100 percent. Before the actual questionnaire was used, prior pilot study had been conducted in a similar college in Nairobi. Results of the pilot study were used to improve on the questionnaire's readability and comprehension ability. After all the data was collected, data cleaning was done and the consistent data was coded and feed into the computer to aid in analysis using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Data already entered in SPSS was subjected to descriptive statistics analysis and information presented by frequency distributions and percentages.

Theoretical Approach

A number of models and theories that examine teens' engagement in online sexual communication consistently recognize the importance of understanding the role of peers and online peer group dynamics in explaining online sexual communication behaviors (Bond, 2010; Lippman & Campbell, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2012). Steele and Brown's Media Practice Model (Brown, 2000; Steele, 1999; Steele & Brown, 1995) is one of the many theoretical frameworks that underscores the importance of peer group dynamics while exploring the relationship between media uses and effects on young people's sexual development, behaviors and activities. In this model, it is presumed that social context (e.g peers) besides other developmental and demographic characteristics (e.g sexual maturation, age, sexual identity) and psychological factors (e.g self-esteem, self-efficacy, perceived peer pressure, need for peer popularity, peer acceptance, social recognition) cumulatively influence young peoples' social and sexual perceptions. Such perceptions later affect teens' selection of sexual media messages, interactions, application and the impact they may have on their everyday lives. Media messages are an important influence on the lives of the young people and information from such message also influences choices they make in life and media they choose to use (Escobar-Chaves et al, 2005). Creation and distribution of sexual content on social media, online sexual interactions, online solicitations and other similar communication practices which are rampant among adolescents can therefore be conceptualized by examining the role of peers and online peer group dynamics.

Presentation of the Findings

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Age and gender are important demographic characteristics in social media use related studies. From the findings as indicated in table 1, 47.7%) of the respondents were males, while 157 (52.3%) were females.

Table 1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

Gender		Age					Total
		16-19	20-23	24-27	28-31	Over 32	
Male	Frequency	37	94	9	3	0	143
	% percentage	25.9%	65.7%	6.3%	2.1%	.0%	100.0%
Female	Frequency	50	89	10	6	2	157
	% percentage	31.8%	56.7%	6.4%	3.8%	1.3%	100.0%

Majority of the respondents (61.0%) were between 20-23 years old while 29.0% were between 16-19 years old. 6.3% were between 24-27 years, 3.0% were in the age bracket 38-31 years and only 07% of age over 32 years. The ages between 16-24 years constitute the 90% of the total number of respondents and this confirms that college students are young people within the age category targeted by this research.

Online and offline social connections

One of the questions was used to find out whether friends who met through online social connections later met offline. Table 2 shows that the proportion of those who met through online network connections and later met offline comprised of the majority (67%) respondents.

Table 2 Respondent's responses on online and offline affiliations

Friends met online and later met in real world?	Frequency	%
Yes	201	67%
No	99	33%

This clearly shows that young people are negotiating both online and offline connections using social networking sites. The most popular online social activity among young people consist of connections with friends whom they interact with by sending each other messages, chatting, communicating with girl friend or boyfriends on and off college. The connections between online and offline are supported by our earlier findings that most respondents spent more time interacting with friends met online and offline (Barkhuus&Tashiro, 2012)

offline affiliations and just use online platforms to engage in online activities to supplement their offline life engagements (Karlan&Raffler, 2013; Grimus, 2014). To examine students online and offline sexual behaviors, the researcher asked questions that sought answers on whether online social networks were used to negotiate both online and offlinesocial contexts. These questions sought to seek information on the association between activities in both contexts, more specifically whether social networking sites were used as tools to make contacts with people online in order to engage in sexual activities offline.

Online and offline sexual activities

Research finding have revealed that young people who use social networking sites have strong

Table 3 Respondents' responses on online and offline affiliations

	Have you ever invited friends to social event through SNSs		Have you ever been invited by friends to social event through SNSs	
	Frequency	% Percentage	Frequency	% Percentage
Yes	183	61.0	252	84.0
No	117	39.0	48	16.0
Total	300	100.0	300	100.0

As indicated in **table 3**, the respondents (61.0%) who agreed that they had used social networking sites to invite friends to offline social event were more than those who disagreed (39.0%). The percentage of the respondents who had been invited by friends to social events through Social Networking Sites (84%) was also higher than of those who had not.

interactions are represented in **table 4**. The results which are analyzed in terms of gender show that 35.3% of the sample had attended an offline social event invited through social networking sites where kissing occurred.

Results on the examination of the frequency of sexual behavior measured in terms of online and offline

Table 4 Respondents' responses on online and offline interactions

	Have you ever attended a social event invited through SNSs that any of these happened?			
	Male		Female	
Sexual behaviors	Yes	No	Yes	No
a)Kissing	57(19.0%)	86(28.7%)	49(16.3%)	108(36.0%)
b)Sexual intercourse	34(11.3%)	109(36.3%)	16(5.3%)	141(47.0%)
c)Dancing	98(32.7%)	45(15.0%)	102(34.0%)	55(18.3%)
d)taking drugs or alcohol happened	73(24.3%)	70(23.3%)	60(20.0%)	97(32.3%)
e) sleeping out happened	71(23.7%)	72(24.0%)	52(17.3%)	105(35.0%)

More males (19.0%) experienced this than females (16.3%). About 16% of the respondents (11.3% males and 5.3% females) replied that they had attended social events invited through Social Networking Sites where sexual intercourse occurred but the majority (83.4%) replied no. The majority (66.7%) of the respondents replied that they had attended a social event where dancing occurred against 33.3% of the respondents who gave a negative reply. About 43% of the participants confirmed to have attended offline public gathering where taking drugs or alcohols happened and 41% confirmed to have gone to such events where all or some of those in attendance slept out.

Erotic Online groups

Respondents were asked questions to determine whether they were members of online groups that were known to display explicit sexual content and how often they participated in the activities (read and posted comments, videos and or photos on the profiles) of these online groups. Respondents confirmed being members of online groups on Facebook that explicitly portrayed sexual videos and images. About 45% of the respondents reported to have participated in the activities of these online groups. **Table 5** represents some of these groups and their membership frequencies.

Table 5 Respondents' responses on erotic online group membership

Erotic Social Group	Male	Female	Total	%
Nairobi club exposed stories and pictures you won't believe	50	37	67	29%
Mathare University of Insane Creativity	45	34	79	26.3%
Haga Za Mothers Union	31	23	54	18%
Campus Divas for Rich Men	29	27	56	18.6%
Nairobi Exposed-Criminal investigation department & undercover police	39	33	72	24%

Online groups that reported majority of members were Nairobi *club exposed stories and pictures you won't believe* (29%), *Mathare University of Insane Creativity* (26.3%) and *Nairobi Exposed-Criminal investigation department & undercover police* (24.0%). *HagaZa Mothers Union* (18.0%) and *Campus Divas for Rich Men* (18.6%) had almost the same membership.

Discussions

Analysis of the results revealed that college students used social networking sites for both online and offline connections and interactions (**Table 4**). Respondents confirmed to have attended social events invited through social networking sites where sexual activities and risky sexual behaviors occurred. This demonstrates that social networking tools are used by college students to facilitate both online and offline

interactions that likely to result to engagement in dangerous sexual activities. Of particular interest is the ability of the social networking sites to offer a media-rich interaction between young people. Social media allows young people to experience social interactions at a more active sense than the traditional media. Young people can easily identify and engage in social interactions that may ignite or reinforce engagement in risky sexual behaviors. A number of researchers have focused on the risks associated with online solicited relationships (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Online solicitation is heightened in the adolescent stage especially among the ones who have experienced other forms of sexual abuse (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). According to Mitchell et al (2014), youth are willing to engage or participate in relationships with online strangers. Wolak et al (2006) discovered that youth who engaged in online interactions with strangers had higher chances of receiving aggressive solicitations.

This makes offline interactions that are established through online solicitations a concern due to such potential consequences. Guan & Subrahmanyam (2009) observe that internet related sex crimes are characterized by offline seduction that may begin with online sexual solicitations.

From the responses, some participants confirmed being members of online groups on Facebook dedicated to sexuality and sexual activities. About 45% of those who were members of such online erotic groups confirmed to have participated in the activities of these groups. It was revealed that these online groups draw membership from people who wish to share or express opinions and interests on sexuality, sexual activity and sexual escapades. The profiles of these online groups portray items related to all manner of sexual activity, sexual interests and other unconventional and bizarre sexual activities such as homosexuality and lesbianism. The norm in these erotic groups' profiles are substantial amount of utterances of sexual talk in explicit language, encounter of sexual references and orientations, sexual attitudes, pictures and/or videos containing sexualized images of women and men, images and/or videos of suggestive or provocative behaviors such as touching genitals, depictions of exposed breasts, buttocks, or genitals, cleavage, large breasts, or provocative clothing, images and/or videos of nude or seminude male and female characters, images and/or videos of men and women engage in sexual intercourse, sometimes between members of opposite sex (homosexuality and lesbianism). Exposure of the youth to such sexualized environments is likely to affect normative perceptions. Researchers have speculated that these perceptions may result into problems that are likely to foster engagement in a variety of unhealthy and risky behaviors including initiating sexual intercourse early, online sexual solicitations, permissive sexual attitudes such as endorsement of oral sex as normative, acceptance of casual or premarital sex, vaginal sex than youth with less exposure to the same content (Martino et al, 2009; Njue et al, 2015). Depictions of women in sexualized clothing may foster perception of women as sexual objects among youth, suggesting that the primary appeal for a woman is sexual appeal implying that women exist for sexual use.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that college students are active users of social media and therefore are likely to be affected by the negative information portrayed in these platforms. The study however, did not intend to use the evidence gathered to support or reject the existence of a relationship between exposure and consumption of sexual content on social media and

sexual attitude and behavior of college students. Future studies should investigate the nature of these relationships using other research approaches and methods in order to substantially understand the role of social media in shaping sexual knowledge, attitudes and behavior of students. That is, further research should seek to establish the relationship between consumption of sexual information on social networking sites and sexual attitude in order to statistically obtain precise assessments on individual exposure to sexual content and sexual knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

There is also need for vigorous content analysis of the portrayed and mediated sexual content being consumed by young people and this would greatly help ascertain the specific contexts and sexual imagery which the young people are exposed to. This information could provide rich insights about the images/videos and themes of sexual talk in these online tools.

The study also revealed that college students use these platforms to engage in online solicitations that are likely to lead to establishment of offline relationships that may result to dangerous sexual activities and behaviors. The study did not analyze the risks that are associated with youth participation in relationships with online strangers. Studies have found that youth who are actively engaged in risky online behaviors and interact freely with strangers online are likely to experience aggressive solicitations that may sometimes lead to online sexual crimes such as harassment and abuse. Evidence has also linked heightened online solicitations among youth to lack of proper parental guidance, sexual abuse and parent conflicts (Mitchell et al, 2014). Further research is needed to determine the extent to which youth who engage in online solicitations are at risk of online related sexual abuse and harassment.

Overall, the researcher suggests that it is important to educate and socialize young adults toward the use and abuse of their online platforms and make them understand the effects of online solicitations and pornography.

Study Limitations

The results of this study are based on only one college and not in any way a nationally representative sample, so we must not generalize the findings to the wider youth population. The descriptive survey design used in this study does not allow the establishment of the cause and effect. The researchers did not measure the effects of peer dynamics on engagement in sexual behaviors and activities in social networking activities. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and give it out immediately. This may have had the potential to reduce the amount of details one could remember about their online activities.

Study Implications

Social networking sites are at the forefront of sexual socialization of the youth especially given their expanding and accessibility nature. Sexuality and sexual activities in most African cultures are shrouded in taboos and myths and therefore parents, teachers and religious leaders rarely discuss sexual matters openly with young people. Online sexual activities and interactions in such cases become important source of sexual information. Studies suggest that peer groups influence individual and group perceptions on sexual media contents and this greatly affects the selection and use of sexual media and their subsequent effects. It is therefore very important to investigate how young people engage in online sexual activities. Drawing from the popularity of social networking sites, young people are using these

platforms to seek sexual partners who they sometimes later meet and engage in sexual activities offline.

Establishing how peer groups influence individual and group online sexual activities will help understand and discuss the effect of use of social media for sexual interactions and solicitations. When we know the potential impact of social networking sites on young people's sexual health, we can equip them with necessary skills required to practice safe online sexual interactions. This information will also be useful in crafting mechanisms for promoting improvement of adolescent sexual health and media especially on issues relating to government regulation, media policy and advocacy, sexual health campaigns and safe online interactions.

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