

Cell Phone Sexting And Its Influence On Adolescence Sexual Behaviour In Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: - Cell phones have emerged as one of the most vital communication gargets worldwide. Nearly every family in the general population possess at least one cell phone. In Kenya, cell phone use by high school students within the school premises, remains outlawed. Educationists and parents have continued to associate poor performance in Language subjects with the increasing use of cell phones due to overuse of the short message service. In the recent past, cases of sexual promiscuity have been reported to be on the rise. There have been incidents of students from various schools in Nairobi and its environs being arrested engaging in sexual activities in clubs and buses. Teenage pregnancy and H.I.V prevalence remains high among the adolescents and youth. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between use of cell phones and adolescent sexual behavior in Nairobi. The study adopted exploratory sequential mixed method design. A sample of 200 high school students was selected through simple random sampling technique. Qualitative data was collected using focused group discussion and analyzed by use of thematic analysis. Quantitative data was collected by use of questionnaires and analyzed by use of simple descriptive statistics. The findings show high prevalence of masturbation, pornography, multiple sex partners and frequent sexual intercourse among adolescents who engage in sexting in Kenya.

Key Words: *Sexting, Cell phone, sexual behavior, Adolescence.*

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Adolescents today are adopting new digital technologies almost as quickly as they are being introduced. They consider different forms of technologies such as mobile phones, internet and social media to be an integral and essential part of their lives (Consumer Electronics Association, 2008). Technology has altered the way teenagers communicate and interact with their peers. Approximately 78% of teenagers own cell phones and use them for text messaging. Research shows Mobile phone owners ages 12–18 are the most frequent users of text messaging, sending and receiving an average of 3,705 texts per month (Nielsen Company, 2010). This form of interaction among teens ranks higher among 12–18 year olds than talking face-to-face (Lenhart, 2010). In a typical day, 46% of 12–18 year olds report sending text messages on a cell phone (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). They also found out that Girls reported slightly more texting than boys. In many instances, the use of sexting is a part of this form of communication. Sexting is the act of sending and/or receiving of sexually suggestive images or messages to peers through a cell phone (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak, 2012). Though relatively new, this behavior has gained national attention as a very serious problem among the adolescents. The danger involved with sexting is that private material can be exchanged and widely propagated, and the originator has no control over who receives and views the message or photograph. Sexting occurs when sexually suggestive text messages (SSTMs) or naked or semi-naked images (NSNIs) are created and sent via digital media. As today's cell phones (mostly "smartphones") are linked to cameras and the Internet, their ease of use in sexting has been highlighted (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). The self-created, sexually provocative image is generally what constitutes the central and most controversial feature of youth sexting (Chalfen, 2009) Sexting can be an extension of the term "cyber bullying" when a person or group purposely attempts to harm, distress, threaten, or disgrace someone else as a direct result of the sexting content, or solicited to pose or perform sexual acts which makes the recipient feel distress (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). In a 2008 online survey of 653 teenagers (age 13-19 years) in United States was conducted. 20% of these teenagers admitted to sending or posting nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves, and 38% of teens admitted to sending or posting sexually suggestive messages (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Similar results were reported in an online survey conducted by Music Television"(MTV) and

the Associated Press (AP) of 1,247 teenagers (age 14-24) (MTV-AP, 2009). Twenty-four percent of 14-17 year old teenagers reported being involved in some type of naked sexting, and 29% of respondents reported receiving sexually suggestive messages (MTV-AP, 2009). These data revealed that a substantial proportion of teens were engaging in sexting. Young people's use of mobile phones has been seen to expand dramatically in Africa over the last decade in both urban and rural contexts (Nyamnjoh & Brinkman, 2009). For instance, cell phone ownership in South Africa used to be the domain of the privileged, today it is essential to adolescent culture and communication across all social groups (Bosch, 2011). According to the UNICEF report of 2012, South Africa teenagers and youth are the first adopters of mobile technology, with 72% of 15-24 year olds owning a cell phone. Local media sources have reported anecdotal incidents of sexting among South Africa youth; however, the lack of Afro-centric research compels them to use international statistics to contextualize the issue. Research done by UNICEF (2012) found that the primary risks facing South Africa adolescents are talking to and meeting strangers, cyber bullying, and sexting among others. Their report calls for urgent legislation and programs in information and communication technology development and education, to meet the needs of South Africa's newly connected digital citizens (Beger, Sinha, & Pawelczyk, 2012). Considering the above trends of increased sexual activity and prolific cell phone usage among adolescents, it is likely that sexting affects young people across population groups in South Africa.

In Kenya, the availability of cheap internet and camera-enabled cell phones has made the sending of sex messages a common activity for some teens (Nyamnjoh & Brinkman, 2009). There are a number of reasons that explain why this occurs. Often, teenagers get involved in sexting as a result of peer pressure or a need to fit in. For instance a boyfriend or girlfriend may ask for images to be sent, or in some cases the teen may send the images without prompting or encouragement. In other cases, a teen may send a picture as a prank or to get the attention of the person that they are attracted to. Statistics show that approximately 20 % of teens between the ages of 13 and 19 have sent nude images of themselves to others. Between 67 and 71 % of teens have sent them to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Roughly 38 to 39 percent of teens have received or seen nude texts of other teens (UNICEF, 2012). These images were either sent to them directly or shared by someone else. One out of ten sexting senders have sent sexting messages or images to someone they did not know directly or knew only online (Internet Watch Foundation Annual Report, 2008). These harmful behaviors have created concern among parents, healthcare professionals, educators, and law enforcement (Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011). This is because adolescents may potentially engage in communicating with or being solicited by prospective sexual predators as they publicly post sexual images of themselves and others (Mitchell, 2012). Sexting also has other adverse issues associated with the behavior. For instance, Reyns, Burek, Henson and Fisher (2011) have found that youth who sext have an increased likelihood of being victimized online in other ways such as interpersonal relationship violence, and cyber bullying. This victimization can result in psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Further, other studies have found a correlation between sexting and unsafe sex practices. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that teenagers who sext are more likely to have unprotected sex, while Temple (2012) determined that sexters will have multiple sexual partners and use drugs or alcohol before sex. This study therefore sought to establish the influence of sexting on adolescents sexual risk behaviors.

II. METHODS

2.0 Research Design

The study adopted exploratory sequential mixed method design. Sampling was done through simple random sampling technique. The entire study involved 2 phases: The qualitative and quantitative phases. The researcher collected qualitative data using focused group and analyzed it by use of themes. Based on the themes from the qualitative analysis, the researcher developed questionnaires which were used in collecting quantitative data. Quantitative data was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The quantitative data was meant to help the researcher compute prevalence and generalize the qualitative findings to a larger population.

The sample was collected from 9 day high schools in Nairobi County. The schools were selected from all the 9 sub counties of the County.

2.1 Population and sample

The target population comprised of 1000 high school students mostly in form 2 and 3. These two classes were preferred as a way of controlling the intervening variables: final examination pressure and parental and school expectations on new students. These variables could likely have affected the form ones and fours, which is the key reason of their exclusion. The researcher assumed that mobile phone use among adolescents is high among form 2 and 3 as compared to form 3 and 4 despite having been outlawed in the country. In form 2 the zeal from parents and new school environment are on the decline yet in form four students may be mostly focused on the national examinations. The researcher sample 9 schools out of which 20% of the target

population of students was selected giving a sample of 200 participants. The 9 sampled schools were all mixed day schools, one from each of the 9 subcounties of the county. Simple random sampling was used to select the required sample.

2.2 Instruments

Focused group discussion was used to collect qualitative data from 63 participants. The discussion sought to collect data on the rationale for sexting among high school adolescents and their perception on the various sexual behaviors promoted by sexting. Demographic information such as age, gender and class was also captured during the discussions. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from 147 participants. The questionnaire items collected demographic information, information on sexting prevalence and frequency of various sexual behaviors among adolescents. Some of the questionnaire items were developed from the themes in qualitative phase.

2.3 Data Collection procedure

The researcher obtained permission from the various district education offices in each of the 9 district to conduct the study. During the actual study the researcher presented himself to the school principal and got permission to access various participants in the school. The researcher approached class teachers of form 2 and 3. After consenting the class teachers were requested to avail the class registers from which the researcher selected the sample per school through simple random sampling. The researcher conducted phase 1 of the study in all the 9 sampled schools and analyzed the data before embarking on phase 2. Phase 1 consisted of qualitative paradigm where the researcher recruited 1 group of 7 members each per school and conducted focused group discussions aimed at answering certain research questions. After analysis of the qualitative data, the researcher developed questionnaires from the themes in phase 1. The self-administered questionnaires were presented to 147 participants in the same schools where the qualitative phase had been conducted. The questionnaires were filled and collected after one hour.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data from phase 1 was transcribed, coded and categorized. Various themes were then obtained, defined and named. Questionnaire data was analyzed by simple descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages and presented in form of charts. Finally, the qualitative and quantitative results were interpreted and conclusions drawn.

III. RESULTS

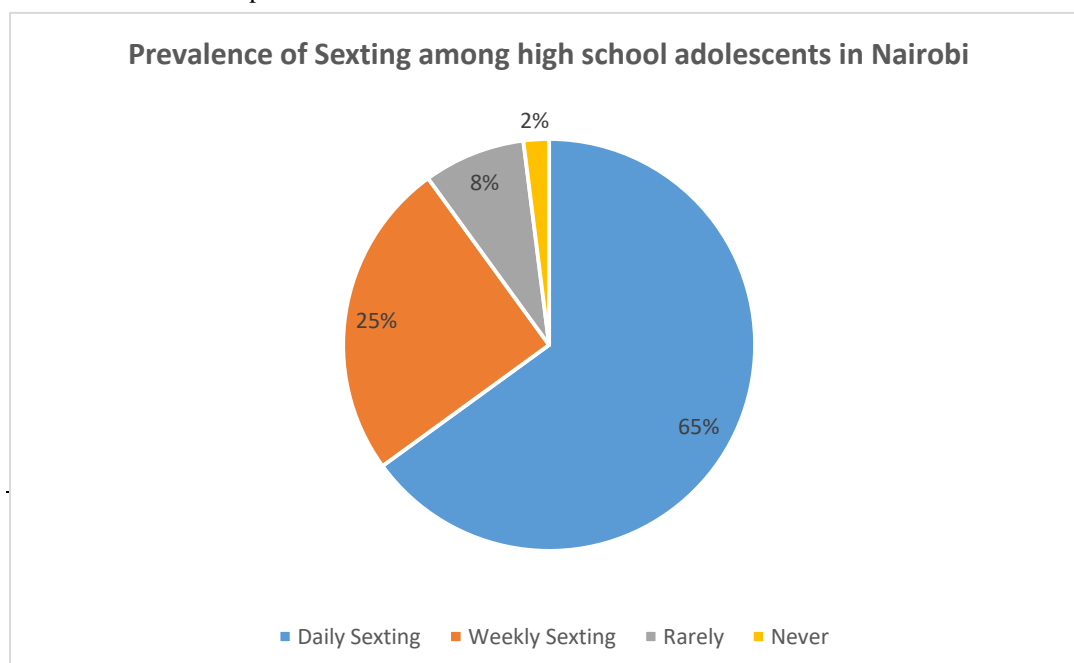
3.1 Demographic Information

The demographic information of the participants comprised of gender, age and class. Out of the total sample 120 were boys (60%) while 80 were girls (40%). The mean age of the participants was 17.5 years.

PHASE 1: QUALITATIVE

3.2 Prevalence of Sexting among high school adolescents in Nairobi

The participants were required to indicate if they had access to mobile phones. They were also required to indicate how often they send or receive sex messages to or from others. All the participants (100%) reported to have access to mobile phones.



The results show that majority of high school adolescents (65%) send or receive sex messages daily; 25% send or receive sex messages weekly; 8% send or receive sex messages rarely and 2% have never sent or received sex messages. The findings indicate that sexting prevalence is very high among high school adolescents in Nairobi.

3.3 Rationale for sexting among high school adolescents in Nairobi

The focused group discussion sought to find out the reasons why high school adolescents engage in sexting. Six major themes emerged out of the group discussions.

3.31 Sex talk in public is taboo

Most of the participants felt it was embarrassing to verbally discuss sex publicly. Sexting was therefore seen as a less embarrassing way of talking about sex among peers. One participant said, “My parents always discouraged me from mentioning the word sex or even verbalizing my sex organs. It was considered bad manners and it remains taboo for me. It is easier to win a girl for romantic relationship through phone text than face to face or verbal conversation.” Other participants also felt that sexting helps to strengthen their romantic relationships. They reported to feel closer to their romantic partners who sext regularly. One girl reported, “When he texts me daily I tend to stick and get addicted to him more. “

3.33 Sexting is information hub for adolescents’ sex questions

The participants reported to have so many questions about sex and sexuality, which the adults do not freely talk about. It was a general feeling of many of the adolescents that sexting helps them get answers from their peers about the questions they have about sex. A participant said,

“What mum never tells me about sex and sexuality, my peers tell me we chat on the phone.”

3.34 The phone gives privacy for sex expression

The participants felt that society is always monitoring them and that they could therefore not get quality private time and space to talk about sex and sexuality. The only available uninterrupted private space for them is through sexting. They reported that the fact that many parents are not able to operate latest phones like smart phones, it naturally keeps them out of reach of controlling the adolescents on sexual behavior. A participant said,

“My parents, teachers and adults are always watching over me to punish or condemn me. In sexting, adults do not interfere.”

3.35 Platform for non-judgmental sex expression

Participants reported that phone sexting makes them feel accepted irrespective of the vocabulary they use in their sex expression. It was a general feeling of the participants that fellow peers do not condemn them for using sexually charged language, as the rest of society always does to them. Some participants said,

“Every time I talk about sex, the adults call me spoilt.”

“My religion condemns adolescence sex and treats it as capital offense compared to other evil behavior.”

Adolescents felt that at a time when the society has imposed strict rules to regulate sex expression, sexting enables them express their sexual urges freely without judgment.

3.4 Sexual behavior that is associated with sexting among adolescents in Nairobi

During the focused group discussions, participants were asked to identify some of the sexual behaviors that accompany sexting. Four major themes emerged during the discussions:

3.41 Masturbation

Most participants reported to have increased self-sexual stimulation whenever they engage in sexting. Participants felt that sexting arouses them sexually which they complete by engaging in masturbation as a way of regulating their heightened sexual feelings. A participant said,

“Sexting arouses me to an erection and leads me to masturbation to help me cool off.”

3.42 Multiple sexual partners

Most participants indicated having several phone sex partners. They reported to simultaneously chat with several partners. Some participants reported to be regularly using the broadcasting function of their phone to send one sex message to many people. A participant said, “The phone makes it possible for me to discretely handle romantic relationships and drastically reduces the danger of being caught.”

3.43 Pornography

Participants reported to back phone texts with downloaded or nude photographs of self or videos during sexting. Many adolescents agree that social media function of their phones has made it so easy to transfer and receive pornographic content to and from their peers. A participant said, “My girlfriend resists exposing certain parts of her body to me when we meet physically. However when sexting she easily sends me her half- naked photographs on Whatsapp.”

3.44 Frequent sexual intercourse

It was noted that most participants who sext yet do not engage in masturbation or pornography reported to struggle with frequent sexual intercourse. A participant reported, “Whenever I visit my boyfriend a day after sexting, we usually engage in unplanned sex”

PHASE 2: QUANTITATIVE

3.5 Rationale for sexting among high school adolescents in Nairobi

The questionnaire sought to find out to what extent participants agreed with the rationale for sexting which had been identified during focused group discussion. Table 2 shows the findings

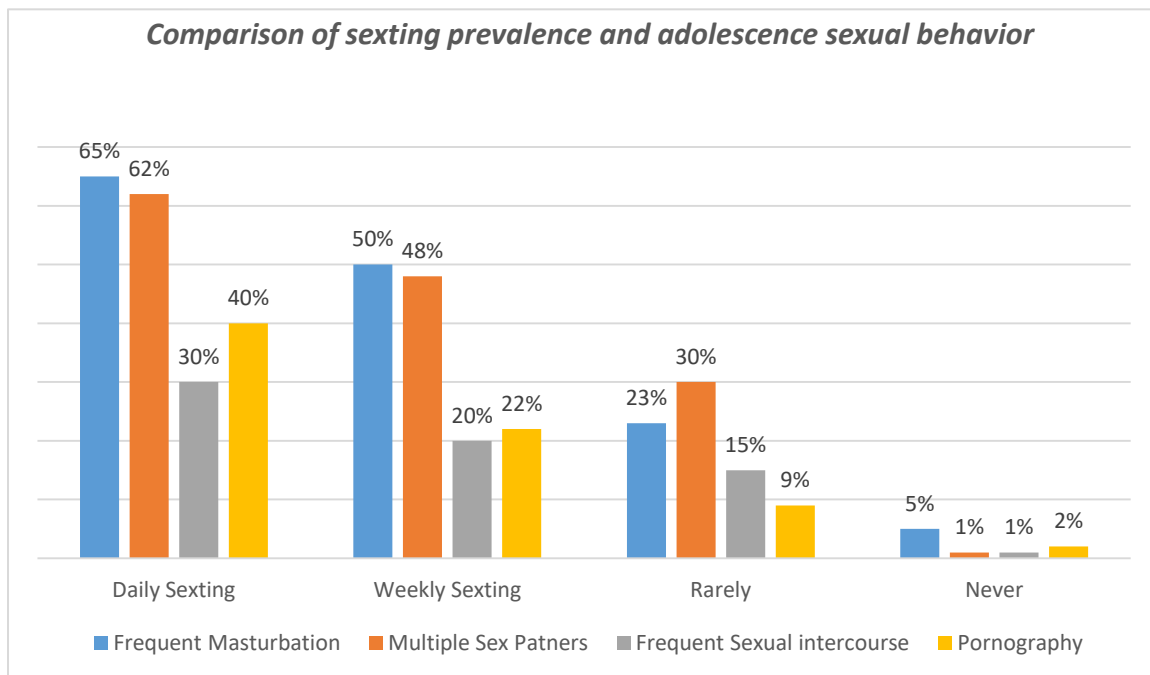
Table 1: Rationale for sexting among high school adolescents

Rationale for sexting among high school adolescents	frequency	Percentage
Sex talk is taboo in public	110	75%
Easier way of initiating and strengthening romantic relationships	121	82.5 %
Information hub for adolescent sex questions	124	84.5%
Privacy for sex expression.	109	74.2%
Platform for non-judgmental sex expression	119	81%

The results show that majority of participants agreed with the various reasons for engaging in sexting identified during the focused group discussions. Information hub for adolescent sex questions was approved by the highest number of participants (84%) followed by easier way of initiating and strengthening romantic relationships (82.5%) and platform for nonjudgmental sex expression (81%). Participants also reported to engage in sexting for the reason of sex talk being taboo in public (75.5%) and others viewed sexting as offering the privacy for sex expression (74.2%). The results indicate that high school adolescents have justifiable reasons for engaging in sexting.

3.6 Influence of sexting on adolescence sexual behavior in Nairobi

The questionnaire sought to find out to what extend the participants engaged in the various sexual behavior identified during the focused group discussions. The responses were analyzed in relation to the prevalence of sexting among high school adolescents. The findings are shown in table 3.



The results indicate that majority of participants who engage in sexting daily reported the highest prevalence in various sexual behavior: frequent masturbation (65%); multiple sex partners (62%); frequent sexual intercourse (30%); and pornography (40%). The participants who sext on weekly basis reported slightly lower prevalence in various sexual behavior: frequent masturbation (50%); multiple sex partners (48%); frequent sexual intercourse (20%); and pornography (22%). The participants who sext rarely reported low prevalence in sexual behavior: frequent masturbation (23%); multiple sex partners (30%); frequent sexual intercourse (10%) and pornography (9%). The participants who never sext reported the lowest prevalence in various sexual behaviors: frequent masturbation (5%); multiple sex partners (1%); frequent sexual intercourse (1%) and pornography (2%). The results indicate that sexting, to a large extent, influences high school adolescence sexual behavior.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.0 Prevalence of sexting among adolescents

This study showed high prevalence for sexting among high school adolescents in Nairobi standing at 65% daily sexting, 25% weekly sexting, 8% rare sexting and 2% reported never to be sexting. This appears higher than what other similar studies found. Mitchell et al (2012) found that 2.5% of participants reported appearing in or creating sexually provocative images to be sent to others and 7.1% reported that they had received provocative images from others. In a sample of Internet-recruited adolescents and young adults by Van Manen (2010), 19% of teenagers (ages 13–19) and 32% of young adults (ages 20–26) reported sending a nude or semi-nude picture or video of themselves to someone via text or e-mail. In this same study, 31% of teenagers and 46% of young adults reported receiving a nude or semi-nude picture or video from someone else. In a second sample of youth (ages 14–24), 13% of females and 9% of males reported sending a nude photo or video of themselves to someone else. However the other studies did not test sexting prevalence in terms of the number of times per day or week as the current study did.

4.1 Reasons why Adolescents engage in sexting

This study identified various reasons why adolescents engage in sexting. The largest number of participants (84%) reported to engage in sexting as a source of information for their questions on sex. Others engage in sexting expecting it to offer privacy for sex expression. This is in agreement with Petronio and Durham’s (2008) communication privacy management. The theory asserts that youth sexting exhibits high amounts of boundary turbulence precisely because the protection of private information is expected but NOT adhered to. Also according to some researchers, sexting occurs within various youth relational scenarios: as an exchange between romantic partners, between partners but shared with others outside of the relationship, or between two people not necessarily in a relationship but where at least one of them wants to be (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Other adolescents (82.5%) engage in sexting to initiate or strengthen romantic relationships.

NCPTUP (2008) study found that sexting is often used to initiate sexual activity, as an experimental phase prior to having sexual intercourse, and as a way to improve current sexual relationships. It may take place outside of consensual, committed relationships: 21% of girls and 39% of boys sexted someone whom they wanted to hook up with and 15% of adolescents sexted someone whom they knew only online. The continued view of sex talk in public as taboo by most adolescents (75%) pushes them more into sexting. This agrees with other findings that sexting takes place instead of actual sexual activity, and is considered safer than real sex (Lenhart, 2009). In this case sexting is viewed as a lesser evil than actual sex. Adolescents also reported to participate in sexting as a platform for non-judgmental sex expression. A study done by MTV-AP (2009) indicates that young people have unrealistic notions of privacy in the electronic age. This is especially apparent in the existence of two conflicting facts. First, the majority of my participants consider sexting to be a form of private communication.

4.2 Influence of sexting on adolescents sexual behavior

The study identified various sexual behaviors that were associated with sexting. They included masturbation, having multiple sex partners and pornography. Mott's Children's Hospital National Poll placed sexting among the Top Ten Health Concerns for young people in 2011 (Knowledge Networks, 2012). Various studies have confirmed pornography as a prevalent sexual behavior associated with sexting. In a cross-sectional survey by Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward (2012) of 13–18-year-olds across the United States, those who had sexted shared pictures of themselves nude or nearly nude via any means in the past year had elevated odds of having engaged in every type of sexual activity examined. For some subgroups, reports of recent sexting also were associated with elevated odds of using condoms inconsistently, having concurrent partners and other risky behaviors. The results of this study also show high levels of engagement in frequent sexual intercourse among the adolescents who sext. A longitudinal study of Texas high school students by Stern (2007) showed similar results where sexually inexperienced youth who sexted had an increased likelihood of subsequently initiating vaginal intercourse. In that study, however, sexting was not related to students' likelihood of subsequently engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Nearly half (45%) of sexually active participants who reported having had sex within the last seven days in this study also reported being involved in at least one sexting related activity. Those who were sexually active were also twice as likely to send naked photos of themselves (17%) compared to non-sexually active participants (8%) (MTVAP, 2009).

V. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that sexting prevalence is very high among high school adolescents in Nairobi. All the participants reported to have access to a cell phone with majority reporting to sext on daily basis and only few reporting never to have texted. The study further found that high school adolescents had various reasons of engaging in sexting: Sex talk is taboo in public; Sexting is viewed as an easier way of initiating and strengthening romantic relationships; Sexting is information hub for adolescent sex questions; Sexting offers privacy for sex expression and finally, offers platform for non-judgmental sex expression. Finally, the study concluded that sexting influences adolescent sexual behavior. There was high prevalence of certain sexual behaviors among the adolescents who sexted frequently. The behaviors included frequent masturbation, multiple sex partners, frequent sexual intercourse and pornography. However adolescents who sexted less frequently showed low prevalence in these behaviors.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY

As a way of addressing some of the challenges posed by cell phone sexting, this paper recommends a number of measures. Strengthen peer counseling programs in schools with component of cell phone chatting as a medium of intervention. As noted in the rationale for sexting among adolescents, most of those who sext yearn for information about sex. With sex talk being taboo and adults seemingly shy to talk about sex, adolescents choose to get this information from their fellow peers who are inadequately informed. The trust they have towards their fellow adolescents can be tapped by training student peer sex educators and releasing them to engage their colleagues on the sexting platforms to give the right information in their chat groups. Develop toll free telephone counseling centers for adolescents to access information on sex. By so doing adolescents will be encouraged to use their mobile phones to access the required facts about sex and disseminate the same to others. Policy that seeks to harness the cell phone adolescent networks should be developed. Focus should shift from fighting the use of cell phones among adolescents and instead focus on how to use the same platform as a learning resource and knowledge dissemination medium. Open and candid talk about sex between parents, teachers and the adolescents. The continued avoidance of sex talk leaves adolescents vulnerable to accepting nonfactual information from the media and their peers.

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