

THE INTERNET AND ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

KEY CONCEPTS	
Adolescent sexuality	Socio-emotional development
Internet	Digital media
Cybersex	Sexting
Chatrooms	Social networking sights

This topic will look at how adolescents use the Internet to explore their sexuality.

In terms of socio-emotional development, children do not develop within a vacuum, but within a particular family, community and culture. The Internet and other digital media are now becoming an important social context for adolescents in the same way as their schools and peer groups are. Since technology enables adolescents to communicate with peers as well as families and even connect with their leisure interests, Saleh (2014:62) proposes that online communication may provide a promising venue for adolescents to deal with the socio-emotional stages of constructing identity and forming intimate relationships in line with their developing sexuality.

Saleh (2014:63) proposes what he calls a co-construction model, which attempts to connect the digital world to the developmental processes that adolescents are undergoing. He argues that, because the Internet is interactive, adolescents are constructing and co-constructing their online environments, as in chat rooms. They will, therefore, bring the people and their issues from their offline world into their online world. It follows that core adolescent issues (sexuality, identity, intimacy) will feature in their online activities. In terms of the co-construction model, it is argued that there will be a psychological connectedness between online and offline worlds, and this connectedness can involve healthy adolescent behaviour, like exploring sexuality and identity online. But the problem is that it can also involve unsafe behaviour like meeting and interacting with strangers, in much the same way as adolescents become involved in risky behaviour offline, like substance abuse (Saleh 2014:63).

Even though the model argues a connectedness between online and offline spheres, this does not mean that these spheres will be identical. The online world is very different from the offline world. According to Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011) the online environment is characterised by “disembodied users, potential for anonymity, and text-based nature.” Therefore, when adolescents use the Internet to sort out issues relating to sexuality and identity, Saleh (2014:63) suggests that they will adapt to the challenges of online communication, which may result in new ways of dealing with these issues. Thus their behaviour online may vary from their behaviour offline.

Since adolescents are dealing with their developing sexuality, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of online environments that will play a role in this development. Online sexual exploration can take the following forms: looking for information about sexuality and sexual health, constructing and presenting sexual images online, cybersex and access to sexually explicit content (Saleh 2014:63). Cybersex refers to sexual chatting that takes place between individuals online.

Characteristics of online environments

Cooper et al (1999) have identified 3 characteristics of online environments that support sexuality. These are: accessibility, affordability and anonymity.

Accessibility

The Internet provides unrestricted access to vast amounts of information, both sexual and non-sexual. In addition, it also provides easy access to networking sites and chat rooms which offer opportunities for communicating about sexual matters. All that an adolescent requires is a device and access to the Internet, and since the latter is freely available in many places, like malls and even townships, the Internet is very easily accessible.

Affordability

The Internet provides cheap access to pornography and sexual communication, because all you need is access to the Internet. The pornography and chat sites are free, and WiFi is often freely available in many places.

Anonymity

The Internet enables one to remain anonymous if one wishes to do so. Originally, online anonymity was the norm, especially since communication mainly took the form of text messages, but more recently communication has taken the form of photographs, videos and audio recordings which makes it more difficult to remain anonymous (Saleh 2014:64). There are websites where one can remain anonymous but the majority of popular communication applications today involve interactions with friends and acquaintances.

Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011) have identified further characteristics of online contexts that are relevant to sexuality: disembodiedness, self-disclosure and disinhibition. Disembodiedness refers to the lack of information about the face and the body used in imagery. This presents a challenge to sexuality because the normal cues associated with physical appeal (like age, gender, height, weight) are missing. Even when information is provided, face-to-face cues are not available, like body language. The Internet also enables people to be disinhibited – many people who are shy to interact on a face-to-face basis are much more confident in an online environment. People are also prepared more easily to make disclosures in this environment. All these factors make online environments a perfect venue for sexual exploration and presentation (Saleh 2014:64).

Online sexual exploration

Adolescents engage in online sexual exploration in four ways: they use it to look for information about sexuality and sexual health; they use it to construct themselves in terms of their sexual development; they use it to engage in sexual conversations (cybersex); and they use it to access sexually explicit content (Saleh 2014:65).

- **Finding information about sexuality and sexual health**

Adolescents are going through a stage of sexual maturation that involves an increase in sexual drive as well as an increased interest in sex. The increase in sexual interest is revealed in “time talking about sex, telling jokes, using sex slang and exchanging sex-oriented literature” (Rice 2001:385). In terms of the previous studies mentioned, the normal age for a first sexual encounter is approximately 17, although there are statistics that indicate some children participate at a younger age. Because of this awakening interest in sex, adolescents try to understand what is happening by searching for information about sex. To find this information, adolescents turn to their friends and peers firstly and then to media. Magazines, movies and television have for a long time been an important source of information about sex, but the introduction of the Internet has changed the media landscape. For instance, Saleh (2014:65) illustrates this with the following example: adolescents used to get their information from magazines like *Playboy*, whereas today pornography is widely available online.

Research studies have shown that adolescents use the Internet for health information, since the Internet provides free and unlimited access to information. Not only does it provide the information, but it also enables people to connect with others who have the same problem or even medical experts. A survey of a sample of children (aged 8 to 18) conducted in the USA found that half of the respondents admitted that they had searched for health information online (Saleh 2014:66). The most frequent topics accessed information relating to sexuality and relationships – pregnancy, contraception, dating, relationships, puberty, prevention of STDs, symptoms and testing of STDs as well as transmission and treatment, and virginity. It is clear that adolescents

turn to the Internet for information about these concerns as it is easier and less embarrassing to target information in this way.

- **Constructing and presenting a sexual identity online**

Initially online communication took the form of conversations in chat rooms, and was conducted anonymously. It was a space where adolescents could meet and interact, usually with strangers. These chat rooms offered researchers an opportunity to investigate how adolescents constructed their sexual selves (Saleh 2014:68). The research found that adolescents discussed a wide range of sexual topics, like abortion, contraceptives and premarital sex. Even though not all the participants take part in the conversations, they are nevertheless exposed to the content by participating passively. The research found the following (Saleh 2014:68-69):

- There was one sexual comment per minute.
- Twenty percent of all the nicknames used in the chat room were sexualised:
 - o sexually implicit (RomancBab4U)
 - o sexually explicit (SexyDickHed)
- Females were more likely to present themselves with implicitly sexual nicknames as well as implicit sexual communication.
- Masculine identity was associated with explicit sexual nicknames as well as explicit sexual communication

More recently the applications that have replaced chat rooms, such as Facebook and Whatsapp Messenger, are more private and it is, therefore, not possible to conduct the same kind of research that was conducted with chat rooms. But research is being conducted in the form of surveys to analyse how adolescents are constructing their sexuality within this sphere. According to Saleh (2014:69), adolescents are using these digital tools to exchange sexually suggestive content. This would include sexually explicit text messaging and nude or semi-nude personal pictures that have been taken with a cell phone or other camera and sent via text messaging, email or instant messaging.

Sexting is a form of digital sexual messaging, which has been defined as the act of “sending nude or semi-nude photos or videos, including sexually suggestive messages through mobile phone texting or instant messaging” (Burton and Tariro 2009). Reasons for sexting, according to studies referred to by Saleh (2014:70), include the following:

- boredom
- making intimate contact with the opposite sex
- influenced by peers
- to arouse the recipients
- unplanned or accidental.

- **Cybersex**

Cybersex can be defined very widely to include anything sexual, from viewing pornographic content to online sexual communication between people. Saleh (2014:71) defines cybersex as “sexual chatting/talking between two or more individuals that may or may not include role playing and masturbatory activities for one or more of them”. Originally this involved text-based messages, but now also includes video and voice messages. This would include talking about sex and sexual experiences as well as experimenting with sex on the Internet, using video or webcams to do so. According to Delmonico and Griffin (2008:432), webcams are used by adolescents to “experiment with seductive, voyeuristic, and exhibitionistic sexual behaviours.”

Because of the ethical issues related to research of this nature with adolescents, there are no studies in the USA, and Saleh (2014:72) refers to a study of 15 Czech adolescents between the ages of 12 and 22. Five participants admitted that they had engaged in virtual dating and cybersex activities, and that they had their first sexual experience on the Internet. In another survey of 692 Czech adolescents, aged between 12 and 20,

sixteen percent of the participants had tried cybersex on the Internet, with no significant differences between males and females.

From a developmental perspective, adolescents are experiencing identification and sexual awakening, which is manifested by an increased interest in sex, conversations about sex and sexual comments and jokes. It is, therefore, natural that they will be interested in cybersex and become involved in these activities. In addition, the above research has indicated that adolescents, who are sexually active offline, go online to continue with sexual exploration (Saleh 2014:72-73).

Although parents and adults may be very concerned about the involvement of adolescents in cybersex, Saleh (2014:73) argues that teenagers are “digital natives” because they have lived their whole lives immersed in a digital world, and cybersex activities may seem perfectly natural to adolescents. It is unknown whether cybersex is beneficial or harmful until further research has been conducted, although there is a valid concern about the potential for compulsive or addictive behaviour. Although Internet sex addiction is not classified as an addiction by the DSM-IV, excessive or problematic Internet use is possible, and virtual sexual behaviour has been identified as an area of addictive behaviour to which adolescents may be susceptible. However, Saleh (2014:73) argues that the online world may not necessarily be bad for adolescents:

“Given that online contexts are here to stay and young people are very comfortable within them, we feel that they offer a relatively safe venue to gain sexual experience, as long as youth follow basic rules and protect their privacy by not revealing identifying information such as their name, address, telephone number, etc.”

- **Accessing pornography online**

Pornography or sexually explicit material is readily available online with an estimated 420 million pornography sites in 2006 (Saleh 2014:74). Defining what is meant by “sexually explicit material” can be problematic. It has been defined as images of naked people or people having sex. Online sexual content has been described as including:

- pictures with exposed genitals
- movies with exposed genitals
- pictures of people having sex
- movies in which people are having sex
- erotic contact sites (Peter and Valkenberg 2006).

Saleh (2014:75) refers to a number of research surveys in which between 23 and 71 percent of adolescents report having been exposed to sexually explicit materials. This coincides with an adolescent’s interest in sexuality. However, all adolescents may not necessarily feel comfortable with pornography and exhibit ambivalent feelings about it, with a large number of females and males regarding it as degrading. This reaction also depends on whether the contact was unwanted, with a quarter of respondents in a study reporting that they had had unwanted contact with online sexual images in the previous year. This usually occurred when they were surfing the Internet or opening a link or an email. A quarter of these respondents said that they were very upset about the exposure (Saleh 2014:75). It would seem that half of the exposure to online sexually explicit material is accidental.

The following factors have been associated with high rates of sexual exposure:

- delinquent behaviour and substance abuse
- depression
- less emotional bonding with parents and family
- excessive Internet usage
- emotional problems
- dissatisfied with their lives (Saleh 2014:77-78).

Since adolescents are at a formative stage of sexual development, it is necessary to examine the possible effects of exposure to sexually explicit material. There are concerns that this could distort an adolescent's view about sexuality, influence their attitudes about sex, shape sexual arousal patterns and create unrealistic expectations. A Taiwanese study found that exposure in this regard was linked to a greater acceptance of sexual permissiveness and a greater likelihood of engaging in sexually permissive behaviour. A USA study found that increased exposure to sexually explicit material at a younger age predicted more permissive sexual norms for males 2 years later, and less progressive gender role attitudes for females 2 years later. It also predicted higher sexual harassment perpetrated by males. The study showed that exposure to this material was one of the strongest predictors of sexual attitudinal and behavioural measures (Saleh 2014: 78-79). In summary, the research suggests that exposure to sexually explicit material is linked to more permissive attitudes, greater preoccupation with sex and more casual sex exploration.

- **Accessing sexually violent materials**

Here a distinction is made between mainstream pornography, which is commercially available pornographic videos, and violent and extreme pornography. The latter would include pornography that focuses on non-consensual behaviour, like rape and bestiality. Unfortunately, violent pornography is easily accessible on the Internet, and an Australian report suggests that the use of violent pornography among adolescents is associated with sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviour, and have identified the regular consumption of violent and extreme behaviour as a risk factor for boys and young men in the perpetration of sexual assault. An analysis of violent pornographic sites identified that these sites emphasised the depiction of victims and unequal power relations between men and women in a sexual context.

SEXTING AND THE ADOLESCENT

Sexting is a combination of 'sex' and 'texting' and is the use of cell phones, smartphones, webcams and other digital technology to take and transmit sexually suggestive and explicit images of oneself. In some definitions it also includes sexually suggestive text messages. The concept of sexting has given rise to a legal and moral panic in many countries in the world because children, who were taking photographs or videos of their own genitals and sharing them, were in fact producing, distributing, watching and possessing child pornography (Saleh 2014:90).

There are numerous instances of children being charged and prosecuted in the USA for various crimes relating to the act of texting. A 17-year-old was charged with distributing sexually abusive material of a child after he sent a photograph of a naked 14-year-old girl to a friend. The girl had taken the photographs of herself and texted them to the accused (Aiken 2012:1). A 17-year-old girl was charged for sending sexually explicit photographs of herself to a 15-year-old boy, who showed them to other students; 3 teenagers were charged for sharing a photograph of a naked minor; a 13-year-old boy was charged for sending a picture of his genitals to a girl (Saleh 2014:90-91). Examples abound: Two 15-year-olds (male and female) were sentenced in juvenile court for sending each other nude pictures; a 15 year old boy received 12 months' probation for sending a picture of his private parts to a 13-year-old girl's cell phone; and an 18-year-old high school graduate committed suicide after a naked photograph of herself, that she had sent to her boyfriend, was circulated to hundreds of teenagers in her school (Bowker and Sullivan 2010:27). Eighteen-year-old Jessica Logan took a nude photograph of herself with her cell phone and sent it to her boyfriend, Ryan Salyers. After they broke up, he sent the image to several other students. The image went viral and was re-forwarded again and again, reaching hundreds of students in at least 7 high schools in the area. Girls, who saw the image, taunted Jessica and called her names like "slut" and "whore" until she finally committed suicide. This case also illustrates how sexting can become part of cyber-bullying.

In view of the developmental issues discussed previously, the concept of sexting amongst teenagers has created a major dilemma i.e. normal sexual development v criminal activity. Saleh (2014: 91) highlights the dangers inherent in this form of communication. Previously teenagers would explore their sexuality in terms of skinny dipping, streaking or flashing, activities which were in the moment, but the use of digital technology has meant that a permanent record of the sexual behaviour is created which can be stored for years. In

addition, there is the problem that sexted images can go viral. For instance, where there has been a break-up between a boyfriend and a girlfriend, the former may share intimate photographs with others out of revenge and these can, in turn, be passed on to others, causing immense embarrassment, shame and humiliation. In fact, there are even revenge porn sites which are dedicated to posting sexually explicit photographs of ex-lovers. For example, the site *AussieSluts*, which is hosted offshore, is full of location-specific threads, where users request nude photos of specific women in specific cities or towns which are sometimes successful.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2011:3) have attempted to develop a sexting typology, and they refer to the above abusive, non-consensual sexting behaviour as **aggravated sexting** as opposed to **experimental sexting**, which refers to minors taking photos of themselves and then consensually sending them to partners or potential romantic interests.

This highlights the difficulty that society has with sexting, since it can be viewed as normal adolescent behaviour, problematic sexual behaviour or even criminal behaviour. As Saleh (2014:91) points out, several US teenagers are serving prison sentences for sending and receiving photographs of their peers. There is grave concern that normal adolescent sexual exploration and legal ignorance could end with teenagers having criminal records as well as having their names appear on sex-offender registers. In a survey conducted in the USA in 2012, 81% of adults surveyed believed that teens who sext should attend an education programme or receive some form of counselling while 76% wanted schools to provide students and parents with information about texting. Most adults do not favour legal consequences for sexting among minors (Saleh 2014: 91-92), and do not believe that the law is the appropriate vehicle for dealing with adolescent cyberculture involving the use of sexual pictures. In fact, Bowker and Sullivan (2010: 30) give the following advice in the 2010 FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin:

“Juvenile sexting poses a challenge for numerous groups to act responsibly with common sense and sound discretion. Law enforcement officers and prosecutors must keep in mind that juvenile sex and child pornography laws exist to protect young people. While the activity associated with juvenile texting technically may violate criminal statutes, prosecutors must use discretion, vested with their position, to confront the activity appropriately. Every act violating a statute should not necessarily bring charges. Legislators must avoid the urge to legislate away instances of an abuse of prosecutorial discretion.”

This is highlighted by the case of Phillip Alpert, who at the age of 18 emailed nude photographs of his former girlfriend, that she had taken of herself and sent to him, to about 70 people out of anger. He pleaded guilty to transmitting child pornography charges and received five years' probation, which included having to attend recovery meetings with convicted paedophiles, and is listed as a registered sex offender. He will remain a registered sex offender until the age of 43 when he will be allowed to petition the courts to be removed from the register. This has had an immense impact on his life. If he moves, he has to register. There are areas he is not allowed to live in. For instance, he cannot live with his father, because the latter lives too close to a high school (Saleh 2014: 100).

Child pornography laws were initially designed to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, not to prosecute and punish them for “youthful indiscretions and hormone-charged sexual excitement” (Saleh 2014: 92). Because some prosecutors have been using this legislation to prosecute minors, some states have adopted new laws that substantially lessen the punishment for minors who are consensually involved in sexting. The topic of teenage sexting has, therefore, given rise to much debate.

What is sexting?

There is no generally accepted legal definition of sexting, which gives rise to complications since the term is interpreted differently by different people. In the broadest sense, sexting might consist only of suggestive or indecent text messages sent between individuals who are interested in each other. Defining exactly what sexting means when the message takes the form of an image is quite complicated because it depends on what the image is concerned with. Does the image have to be of unclothed private parts or can it be broader and

include sexually suggestive or provocative images? For instance, would it include an image of a teenage girl sitting with legs parted in a suggestive manner?

According to Saleh (2014: 94), the term “sexually suggestive” is vague and open to wide interpretation. He includes the following definitions from various authors:

- “youth-produced sexual images”
- “pictures created by minors (age 17 or younger) that depict minors and that are or could be child pornography under applicable statutes”
- “the sending and receiving of sexually explicit photos and/ or text using cell phones with digital cameras”
- “the transmission or reception by teens of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos or videos of themselves or of someone they knew on their cell phones”
- “a colloquial term that refers to individuals sending explicit photographs or messages to others”

But even if there was a universally accepted definition of sexting, there are a number of features of this activity that still give rise to problems:

- minor to minor
- adult to minor or *vice versa*
- voluntary consent on part of sender and recipient
- recipient unwilling or offended
- sender unwilling and coerced into taking photo
- sender unwilling to share photo
- primary self-texting (taking photo of oneself and sending)
- secondary, downstream-sexting (not the person who took and transmitted the image)

Why minors sext

The following reasons have been forwarded as to why adolescents sext:

- access to technology and increased cell phone use – as mentioned earlier, text messaging is the basic form of communication amongst adolescents
- adolescents are going through developmental stages that relate to experimenting with their own identities as well as intimacy and relationships

“[t]eenagers’ tendency towards exhibitionism and narcissism, their desire for intimacy in relationships, their desire and preoccupation with sexual exploration, and the hope of creating their identities as individuals who are attractive and desired may make them more vulnerable to the allure of sexting” (Sadhtu 2012:76)

- sex-focused culture (movies, videos, music, video games, television programmes) sexualises young girls and contributes to the normalisation of sexting by girls (Saleh 2014:102)

“kids are evidently getting the message that sexual behaviour is appropriate at very early ages. As they enter the tween years – eight to twelve – many of them begin to engage in sexual activity” (Durham 2008:48)

- objectification theory – this provides a framework for understanding the consequences for females in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). The objectification theory hypothesises that girls and women are acculturated to internalise an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. In terms of this theory, some girls start to “self-objectify by viewing and treating their own bodies as objects to be ogled, evaluated and desired by boys” (Saleh 2014:102). It, therefore, follows that girls would take and send images of their naked or partially naked bodies to be the focus of male attention.
- as part of an ongoing romantic relationship or to become involved in one
- due to peer pressure, or even coercion by a partner
- the need to cause harm, shame or embarrassment – to take revenge for being rebuffed or to get back at an ex-girlfriend

The legal position

From a legal point of view, if a 15-year-old girl takes a photograph of herself digitally penetrating her vagina and sends it to her boyfriend by means of cell phone, she is creating and disseminating child pornography. The boyfriend is then legally in possession of child pornography. But, as mentioned above, the primary purpose of criminalising child pornography is to protect children, and this has given rise to some dilemma within the legal fraternity.

In the USA, more than 16 states had introduced legislation regarding sexting by 2013. The legislative provisions vary from state to state, but do have in common the fact that they provide far more lenient punishment for types of consensual sexting by minors than would be imposed under the traditional pornography laws (Saleh 2014: 106).

Florida has one of the more comprehensive statutes relating to sexting, which is included here for purposes of illustration. Florida Statute 847.0141 (2012) provides as follows:

847.0141 Sexting; prohibited acts; penalties.—

(1) A minor commits the offense of sexting if he or she knowingly:

(a) Uses a computer, or any other device capable of electronic data transmission or distribution, to transmit or distribute to another minor any photograph or video of any person which depicts nudity, as defined in s. [847.001](#)(9), and is harmful to minors, as defined in s. [847.001](#)(6).

(b) Possesses a photograph or video of any person that was transmitted or distributed by another minor which depicts nudity, as defined in s. [847.001](#)(9), and is harmful to minors, as defined in s. [847.001](#)(6). A minor does not violate this paragraph if all of the following apply:

1. The minor did not solicit the photograph or video.
2. The minor took reasonable steps to report the photograph or video to the minor's legal guardian or to a school or law enforcement official.
3. The minor did not transmit or distribute the photograph or video to a third party.

(2)(a) The transmission or distribution of multiple photographs or videos prohibited by paragraph (1)(a) is a single offense if the photographs or videos were transmitted or distributed within the same 24-hour period.

(b) The possession of multiple photographs or videos that were transmitted or distributed by a minor prohibited by paragraph (1)(b) is a single offense if the photographs or videos were transmitted or distributed by a minor in the same 24-hour period.

(3) A minor who violates subsection (1):

(a) Commits a noncriminal violation for a first violation. The minor must sign and accept a citation indicating a promise to appear before the juvenile court. In lieu of appearing in court, the minor may complete 8 hours of community service work, pay a \$60 civil penalty, or participate in a cyber-safety program if such a program is locally available. The minor must satisfy any penalty within 30 days after receipt of the citation.

1. A citation issued to a minor under this subsection must be in a form prescribed by the issuing law enforcement agency, must be signed by the minor, and must contain all of the following:

- a. The date and time of issuance.
- b. The name and address of the minor to whom the citation is issued.
- c. A thumbprint of the minor to whom the citation is issued.
- d. Identification of the noncriminal violation and the time it was committed.
- e. The facts constituting reasonable cause.
- f. The specific section of law violated.
- g. The name and authority of the citing officer.
- h. The procedures that the minor must follow to contest the citation, perform the required community service, pay the civil penalty, or participate in a cyber-safety program.

2. If the citation is contested and the court determines that the minor committed a noncriminal violation under this section, the court may order the minor to perform 8 hours of community service, pay a \$60 civil penalty, or participate in a cyber-safety program, or any combination thereof.

3. A minor who fails to comply with the citation waives his or her right to contest it, and the court may impose any of the penalties identified in subparagraph 2. or issue an order to show cause. Upon a finding of contempt, the court may impose additional age-appropriate penalties, which may include issuance of an order to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to withhold issuance of, or suspend the driver license or driving privilege of, the minor for 30 consecutive days. However, the court may not impose incarceration.

(b) Commits a misdemeanor of the first degree for a violation that occurs after the minor has been found to have committed a noncriminal violation for sexting or has satisfied the penalty imposed in lieu of a court appearance as provided in paragraph (a), punishable as provided in s. [775.082](#) or s. [775.083](#).

(c) Commits a felony of the third degree for a violation that occurs after the minor has been found to have committed a misdemeanor of the first degree for sexting, punishable as provided in s. [775.082](#), s. [775.083](#), or s. [775.084](#).

(4) This section does not prohibit the prosecution of a minor for a violation of any law of this state if the photograph or video that depicts nudity also includes the depiction of sexual conduct or sexual excitement, and does not prohibit the prosecution of a minor for stalking under s. [784.048](#).

(5) As used in this section, the term "found to have committed" means a determination of guilt that is the result of a plea or trial, or a finding of delinquency that is the result of a plea or an adjudicatory hearing, regardless of whether adjudication is withheld.

(6) Eighty percent of all civil penalties received by a juvenile court pursuant to this section shall be remitted by the clerk of the court to the county commission to provide training on cyber-safety for minors. The remaining 20 percent shall remain with the clerk of the court to defray administrative costs.

The state of Nevada also has legislation relating to sexting, although it is not referred to as such by name. However, the statute also has a provision aimed at downstream sexters, which involves the knowing and wilful use of an electronic communication device by a minor "to transmit or distribute a sexual image of another minor who is older than, the same age as or not more than 4 years younger than the minor transmitting the sexual image." This provision targets minors who receive photographs of other minors and then forward them to others.

The applicable Rhode Island legislation refers only to the transmission of sexted images and not the possession thereof. It provides that "no minor shall knowingly and voluntarily and without threat or coercion use a computer or telecommunication device to transmit an indecent visual depiction of himself or herself to another person." This also only refers to a minor sending a picture of himself or herself, and, therefore, does not refer to downstream sexting (Saleh 2014: 112).

In South Africa the act of sexting could be punishable in terms of s19 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 2007, which provides:

Exposure or display of or causing exposure or display of child pornography or pornography to children

19. A person ("A") who unlawfully and intentionally exposes or displays or causes the exposure or display of—

(a) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence of child pornography or pornography;

(b) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence containing a visual presentation, description or representation of a sexual nature of a child, which may be disturbing or harmful to, or age-inappropriate for children, as contemplated in the Films and Publications Act, 1996 (Act No. 65 of 1996), or in terms of any other legislation; or

(c) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence containing a visual presentation, description or representation of pornography or an act of an explicit sexual nature of a person 18 years or older, which may be disturbing or harmful to, or age-inappropriate, for children, as contemplated in the Films and Publications Act, 1996, or in terms of any other law, to a child ("B"), with or without the consent of B, is guilty of the offence of exposing or displaying or causing the exposure or display of child pornography or pornography to a child.

Sections 21 and 22 of the same Act are also possible avenues to be used for prosecution:

Compelling or causing children to witness sexual offences, sexual acts or self-masturbation

21. (1) A person ("A") who unlawfully and intentionally, whether for the sexual gratification of A or of a third person ("C") or not, compels or causes a child complainant ("B"), without the consent of B, to be in the presence of or watch A or C while he, she or they commit a sexual offence, is guilty of the offence of compelling or causing a child to witness a sexual offence.

(2) A person ("A") who unlawfully and intentionally, whether for the sexual gratification of A or of a third person ("C") or not, compels or causes a child complainant ("B"), without the consent of B, to be in the presence of or watch—

(a) A while he or she engages in a sexual act with C or another person ("D"); or

(b) C while he or she engages in a sexual act with D,

is guilty of the offence of compelling or causing a child to witness a sexual act.

(3) A person ("A") who unlawfully and intentionally, whether for the sexual gratification of A or of a third person ("C") or not, compels or causes a child complainant ("B"), without the consent of B, to be in the presence of or watch A or C while he or she engages in an act of self-masturbation, is guilty of the offence of compelling or causing a child to witness self-masturbation.

Exposure or display of or causing exposure or display of genital organs, anus or female breasts to children ("flashing")

22. A person ("A") who unlawfully and intentionally, whether for the sexual gratification of A or of a third person ("C") or not, exposes or displays or causes the exposure or display of the genital organs, anus or female breasts of A or C to a child complainant ("B"), with or without the consent of B, is guilty of the offence of exposing or displaying or causing the exposure or display of genital organs, anus or female breasts to a child.

It is important also to note that the offender, in this case a child, could be registered as a sex offender in the National Register for Sex Offenders.

A further provision under s24B(1) of the Films and Publications Amendment Act 2009, provides that "any person who unlawfully possesses or creates or in any way contributes to, or assists in the creation or production of any film, game or publication which contains depictions, descriptions or scenes of child pornography or which advocates, advertises, encourages or promotes child pornography or the sexual exploitation of children, shall be guilty of an offence. Section 24B(2) provides that any person having knowledge of the commission of any offence under subsection (1) or having reason to suspect that such an offence has been or is being committed fails to (a) report such knowledge or suspicion as soon as possible to a police official of the South African Police Service and (b) furnish at the request of the South African Police Service, all particulars of such knowledge or suspicion shall be guilty of an offence.

Child pornography is defined in section 1 of this Act as "any image, however created, or any description of a person, real or simulated, who is or who is depicted, made to appear, look like, represented or described as being under the age of 18 years." The term "publication" includes under subsection(i) "any message or communication, including a visual presentation, placed on any distributed network including, but not confined to, the Internet."

The same Act defines sexual conduct in section 1 as including : (i) male genitals in a state of arousal or stimulation (ii) the undue display of genitals or of the anal region (iii) masturbation (iv) bestiality (v) sexual intercourse, whether real or simulated, including anal sexual intercourse (vi) sexual contact involving the direct or indirect fondling or touching of the intimate parts of a body, including the breasts, with or without any object (vii) the penetration of a vagina or anus with any object (viii) oral genital contact, or (ix) oral anal contact.

CHAT ROOMS AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

The previous sections focused on the influence of digital technology on adolescent development, and highlighted the manner in which adolescents use the online environment to communicate and how it has influenced the way in which they interact and form relationships. Two important digital vehicles that adolescents use to achieve this are chat rooms and social networking sites.

Chatrooms

A chat room is a Web site, part of a Web site or part of an online service that provides a venue for communities of users with a common interest to communicate in real time. Most chat rooms do not require users to have any special software, and, if they do, this is usually able to be downloaded from the Internet.

A chat room is, therefore, an online location where different people can meet. The primary form of communication in chat rooms is by text messaging, which can be seen immediately once they have been sent. Chat rooms also make use of text codes – these are abbreviated letters that represent words. These codes provide information about individuals to other people in the chat room. For example, “15/m/Port Elizabeth” would inform other members of the chat room that the individual is 15 years old, a male and from Port Elizabeth. Saleh (2014: 118) provides the following list of common chat room abbreviations:

ASL	-	age, sex, location
ASLP	-	age, sex, location, picture
CD9	-	parents are around
F2F	-	face to face
F2P	-	free to play
IAG	-	I am gay
ILY	-	I love you
IRL	-	in real life
LMIRL	-	let's meet in real life
NIFOC	-	nude in front of computer
PAW	-	parents are watching
PIR	-	parents in room
POS	-	parents over shoulder
P911	-	parent emergency
TAW	-	teachers are watching
WTGP	-	want to go private?
WYCM	-	will you call me?
53x	-	sex

Participants in a chat room usually create what is known as a screen name, and whenever they appear in the chat room, the screen name will be displayed. This enables participants to talk to specific individuals by using their screen names (Saleh 2014: 117). The screen name will usually give some indication of the user's interests. For instance, Saleh (2014: 117) gives the following examples of screen names that would imply an interest in sex: “sexyteenwantsu” and “hotboyforhotgirl”. Sometimes avatars are used instead of names. An avatar is a graphical representation of the user which provides an indication of how the user wants to be identified (Saleh 2014: 118).

Chat rooms are not private because any user who has entered the chat room can view what is being posted. However, members can choose to send each other private messages, which are then not viewed by others in the chat room. Chat rooms also have names, which indicate the focus of the chat room so that people with like-minded interests will be attracted. For example: Teen Chat; Music Chat; TeenSex; Dating Chat etc.

Chat rooms can be either monitored or unmonitored. In monitored chat rooms there is a trained adult host who observes the communications and sees that they comply with the rules laid down by the service provider.

These rules could relate to abusive speech, respect, or misrepresentation (Saleh 2014: 118). If the rules are not complied with, then the individual concerned can be electronically evicted.

Adolescents and chat rooms

The attraction of chat rooms for adolescents would seem to relate to the sense of anonymity it provides as well as the opportunity for adolescents to discuss personal issues, like sexual activity, interest or orientation. Participants only provide information about themselves that they want to so it is easy to “hide” in a chat room as well as not have much information about the other users. Saleh (2014: 119). In a study by Beebe et al (2004), they found that adolescents who use chat rooms excessively tend to report psychological distress, a difficult living environment and a higher likelihood of risky behaviour. Adolescents “who feel isolated, desire attention, or enjoy risk taking may participate in chat rooms as a way to help meet those needs” (Saleh 2014: 119). However, Lenhart et al (2007) are of the opinion that chat rooms are declining in popularity amongst teenagers. For instance, in 2000, 55% of online teens reported using chat rooms whereas this number decreased to 18% in 2006. This could be due to changes in technology and the use of other media.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

A social networking website is an online platform that allows users to create a public profile and interact with other users on the website. These websites then require a new user to input a list of people with whom they share a connection and then allow the people on the list to confirm or deny the connection. After connections are established, the new user can search the networks of his connections to make more connections. A social networking site may also be known as a social website or a social networking website. This enables users to share information about themselves and to view information of others.

According to Saleh (2014: 119), social networking sites allow users to post public information or updates about their life, comment about other people's posts, upload pictures, share links, play games and send private messages to other members. Online social networking is the most popular adolescent Internet activity, with Facebook, My Space and Instagram being the most popular. In fact, over one in five teenagers log onto their favourite social networking site more than 10 times a day (Saleh 2014: 119).

Many of the social networking sites have restrictions on the age of members. Facebook, for instance, requires a user to be at least 13 years of age and to agree that he or she is reporting personal information accurately. Policies relating to privacy also vary from one site to another. Some sites allow users to keep their profiles private if they choose. My Space, on the other hand, automatically sets the profiles of 13 and 14 year olds as private to minimize public exposure.

Sexual activities in chat rooms and social networking sites

Chat rooms and social networking sites provide venues for adolescents to take part in sexual discussions as well as post messages, pictures or videos that are sexually suggestive (Saleh 2014: 122). They are also used to obtain information about possible partners or even to meet partners. In a survey conducted by Wolak et al (2002) they found that 14% of adolescents surveyed had developed close friendships or romantic relationships through the Internet. These venues offer adolescents an opportunity to explore sexual topics as well as their own sexual identity in a fairly anonymous environment.

Subrahmanyam et al (2006) examined the content of 10 monitored and 10 unmonitored chat sessions and found the following:

- 19% of screen names were sexually suggestive
- 5% of chat room comments contained a sexual theme
- 1 sexual comment was made for every minute of chat room discussion
- Both males and females were equally likely to make sexual comments although males made more explicit sexual comments

Moreno et al (2009) also conducted a survey of sexual content in the MySpace public profile of 500 eighteen year olds. In this study sexual content included describing personal sexual preferences, posting pictures of underwear, disclosing personal sexual experiences, and using sexually suggestive icons. The study found that nearly a quarter (24%) of profiles contained sexual content, with women displaying more sexual content than men on their profiles. In another survey, 43% of teenagers admitted that they had been pressured by their peers to post sexy pictures or videos on their SNS profile (Saleh 2014: 123).

It is clear that chat rooms provide a space that children can turn to in order to find the information they need about sexual matters as well as an opportunity to explore their own sexual development. Social networking sites provide adolescents with a platform in which they can explore their identity in terms of their normal development.

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