UNVEILING THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE: SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADOLESCENT SEXTING IN GAUTENG SCHOOLS, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In today's digitally interconnected world, adolescent sexting is a critical concern for school social workers. The study aimed to explore the knowledge and perceptions of school social workers regarding adolescent sexting in Gauteng and their actions in response to it. A qualitative approach was adopted utilising a phenomenological research design supported with elements of explorative, descriptive and contextual elements to highlight the multifaceted nature of sexting, which is influenced by societal dynamics, emotional needs and evolving family structures. Non-probability sampling techniques, including purposive and snowball sampling, were utilised to select 36 participants, representing diverse perspectives in the school social work profession. Data collection involved face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews, guided by a structured interview guide. Data analysis followed the methodological framework outlined by Tesch in Creswell, encompassing eight steps to systematically analyse interview transcripts. Sexting behaviours were examined through the lens of ecological systems and social learning theories, with an emphasis on the need for comprehensive interventions. Recommendations include targeted training programmes, collaboration with experts, integration into school policies, educational seminars for parents and continuous professional development for social workers. This research provides nuanced insights to support evidence-based interventions as well as to safeguard adolescent wellbeing in the digital age.

Keywords: adolescent(s); knowledge; perceptions; school; school social worker; social work

INTRODUCTION

The increasing incidence of sexting among adolescents within South African schools has emerged as a significant concern in recent times, amplified by the pervasive influence of digital connectivity. This contemporary challenge underscores the crucial role of school social workers in navigating the complexities of adolescent behaviour in the digital age, with scholars such as Kemp (2014) and Vergottini and Weyers (2020) emphasising the importance of school social workers identifying at-risk adolescents, providing crisis intervention and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

However, the efforts of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to address psychosocial issues, including sexting, have revealed notable deficiencies such as the absence of standardised guidelines and inadequate coordination (DBE, 2020). Amplifying the expertise of school social workers is vital in addressing complex issues such as sexting and supporting adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing within South African schools. Clearer guidelines increased social worker presence and better collaboration among stakeholders are essential for effective intervention strategies.

In response to this pressing need, the qualitative study conducted aimed to explore the knowledge and perceptions of school social workers regarding adolescent sexting in Gauteng and their actions in response to it. The study seeks to:

- Investigate the level of knowledge and awareness among school social workers regarding adolescent sexting;
- Explore the perceptions and attitudes of school social workers towards adolescent sexting;
- Identify the challenges faced by school social workers in addressing adolescent sexting;
- Examine the strategies employed by school social workers to respond to instances of adolescent sexting;
- Provide recommendations for enhancing the capacity of school social workers to address adolescent sexting effectively.

This article is structured as follows: it begins with a clarification of the problem and a presentation of the rationale underlying the study. This is followed by a comprehensive review of relevant literature, focusing on sexting within school environments and the pivotal role of school social workers. The literature pertaining to ecological systems and social learning theories is cited. Lastly, the findings are discussed, offering insights into the factors shaping social workers' understanding of sexting dynamics, along with practical recommendations offered with the intention of enhancing social work practices and empowering professionals with effective strategies to address sexting challenges within school settings.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Adolescent sexting has emerged as a pressing concern in South African schools, posing risks such as aggression and violence despite legislative efforts to protect children's rights (Barroso et al., 2021; Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a, 1996b, 2005). Despite the implementation of psycho-social school-based violence mitigation strategies by the DBE, deficiencies in

standardised guidelines and social work services persist (DBE, 2020). Social workers, instrumental in addressing adolescent behaviour issues, have to deal with unclear roles and inadequate support within the DBE's strategies, threatening their effectiveness (Van Sittert & Wilson, 2018; Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). This context underscores the need for targeted research into school social workers' understanding of adolescent sexting to enhance intervention strategies.

The literature acknowledges the prevalence of adolescent sexting, but reveals a research gap regarding school social workers' perspectives and expertise, particularly within the South African context (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020). While studies extensively cover sexting and cyberbullying, few focus specifically on school social workers' roles and experiences. This gap emphasises the need for research to address the knowledge deficit among school social workers and improve intervention strategies tailored to the South African school environment. Therefore, this study aims to explore school social workers' knowledge and perceptions of adolescent sexting, identify challenges faced, and propose recommendations to enhance intervention strategies and support adolescent wellbeing in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to sexting

In the 21st century, the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) has transformed social interactions, including the rise to sexting, a global phenomenon that has also become pervasive in South Africa (Antonie, 2018). Sexting is defined as the practice of sending, receiving or forwarding sexually explicit content through electronic means (Megele, 2017). Alarmingly, a 2017 survey by the Kinsey Institute identified South Africa as the top global participant in sexting, revealing that 77% of South Africans reportedly engage in this behaviour (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2022). This prevalence underscores the urgency of the need to address sexting and its associated challenges within the South African context.

Digital dynamics of sexting among adolescents

The integration of technology into youth culture brings both advantages and challenges for school learners (Ragona et al., 2023). Many South African children actively engage in sexting, indicating the need for a comprehensive examination of the impact of technology on adolescent behaviour (Geldenhuys, 2015). Advancements in technology, including text messaging, Bluetooth, and webcams, facilitate the rapid transmission of explicit content into the digital realm, altering traditional notions of appropriate social interaction (Harris & Steyn, 2018; Olabode & Olushola, 2018). To mitigate risks, imperative actions include education on digital ethics and consent. School social workers play a crucial role in creating a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment, equipping adolescents to navigate the digital landscape safely, while understanding the dynamics of sexting to effectively address and prevent sexting behaviours (Ragona et al., 2023). Proactive measures, including education and the involvement of school social workers, are essential for creating a safer digital environment for adolescents (Kritzinger, 2020), requiring collaborative efforts and comprehensive strategies to overcome the problems posed by sexting among South African youths.

Role of school social workers in addressing sexting and bullying

Despite extensive research conducted internationally on the role of social workers in addressing issues such as sexting and bullying among adolescents, there is a notable gap in the South African context. Internationally, Underwood (2020) emphasises the need for more detailed measures to capture understudied subtypes of violence, including nonconsensual sexting. Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers (2024) highlights the importance of creating school environments free from harassment and bullying, advocating for social workers to educate and support students and staff in preventing such behaviours. Programmes that integrate anti-bullying education into the general curriculum have proven effective in other countries (Getz, 2024). Mercado-Crespo et al. (2022) underscore the critical role schools play in creating safe spaces through group education and staff training.

However, in South Africa the literature focuses primarily on broader social work interventions in schools, such as crisis intervention and restorative justice (Jordaan, 2025), with limited specific research on dealing with sexting. This gap in national studies suggests a need for focused research on how South African social workers can effectively address sexting and bullying, thereby filling a serious void in the current academic discourse and guiding more comprehensive prevention efforts within the country's educational settings.

Roles and tasks of school social workers

Vergottini and Weyers (2020) highlight the unique demands placed on school social workers within the South African education system. These professionals must navigate 'host settings' dominated by non-social workers to address the needs of children, a vulnerable group (Statistics South Africa, 2013). The roles and tasks of school social workers vary based on their employment level within the education system. At the national level, their responsibilities are primarily managerial and administrative, including policy development and monitoring (National Committee for School Social Work Education and Practice (NACOSSWEP), 2015). At the provincial level, they manage and support district social workers, coordinate services, and facilitate training and networking (NACOSSWEP, 2015). District-level social workers provide direct support to learners, parents, educators and school teams, engaging in screening, project implementation and infrastructure development (NACOSSWEP, 2015).

Kemp (2014) outlines ten roles and functions of school social workers during service delivery: identifying learners who need support, assessing their needs and problems, interpreting these needs and problems to school staff, learners, parents and other role-players, providing direct and indirect services, providing consultation, collaboration and coordination, promoting parental involvement, promoting community involvement, liaising with resources, developing inter-professional teams and developing a proper administrative system. These roles indicate that social workers should be skilled in working with different role-players and fulfilling a mediation role between learners experiencing psychosocial problems and the other role-players in their lives.

Vergottini (2018) groups these roles into six focus areas: services to learners and parents/guardians; services to educators; the development and implementation of programmes and projects; policy development; contributions to a multidisciplinary team; and general roles

and tasks that do not fall within this framework. Van Sittert and Wilson (2018) emphasise roles within inclusive education, such as supporting learners with emotional barriers to learning, collaborating with professionals, implementing prevention programmes and training educators (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2010).

Gaps in addressing sexting

While these roles cover a broad spectrum of activities from individual interventions to policy development, there is a significant gap in the literature dealing with the way that school social workers specifically address sexting. Kemp (2017) defines school social work as a practice-based profession within the school setting, addressing social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning. These services support learners, parents, educators and the school community, aiming to provide an environment conducive to learners reaching their full potential through early identification of their psychosocial barriers and providing appropriate interventions. However, there is no specific mention of ways for school social workers to deal with sexting, which is a significant gap in the literature.

Framework for social welfare services

Pretorius (2020) outlines the framework for social welfare services in South Africa, highlighting the legacy of apartheid and the development of a rights-based, developmental approach to social welfare. This policy promotes collaborative and integrated social welfare services, focusing on community and family-based strategies. The Integrated Service Delivery Model for Developmental Social Welfare Services emphasises comprehensive, integrated and rights-based social welfare services, stressing the importance of partnerships between the public and private sectors.

The National Department of Basic Education is tasked with developing policies and strategies to guide social welfare services in schools, recognising the crucial role of social service professionals in learner support programmes. Despite these frameworks, the implementation of school social work services across South Africa is inconsistent, with significant variability in the number and roles of social workers employed by the Departments of Education and Social Development in different provinces (Pretorius, 2020). While Pretorius (2020) provides a detailed overview of the roles and challenges faced by school social workers, there is no specific mention of how these professionals address the issue of sexting. This gap underscores the need for further research and policy development to equip social workers with the tools and strategies to effectively manage sexting and related digital safety concerns within the school environment.

Collaborative efforts and future directions

Effective collaboration between the Department of Education (DBE) and the Department of Social Development is crucial for addressing social and educational challenges (Department of Education, 2015). Successful collaboration hinges on shared goals, explicit roles, mutual benefits, trust, regular communication, and balanced power and control (Pretorius, 2020). While the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing various social and educational challenges is acknowledged, there is a notable gap in the literature specifically as far as

mentioning sexting is concerned. This highlights the need for additional policies and collaborative strategies to address modern digital-age issues such as sexting, which may require updated frameworks to protect and support learners.

While there is substantial literature on the broad roles and functions of school social workers in South Africa, there is a clear gap when it comes to addressing specific issues such as sexting. Addressing this gap through focused research and policy development can enhance the effectiveness of school social workers in managing sexting and related digital safety concerns, ultimately contributing to a safer and more supportive educational environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this study, the foundation for the investigation was grounded in the integration of two influential theoretical frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and social learning theory. This comprehensive approach acknowledged the direct relevance of these theories in unravelling the complexities of how individual, social and environmental factors contribute to sexting among South African adolescents (Brodie et al., 2019).

Ecological systems theory serves as a crucial lens for understanding sexting behaviour, as it identifies the interconnected systems that shape individual actions. This theory offers insights into microsystems such as family, peers and educators, shedding light on the distinctive roles of social workers within these systems (Laff & Ruiz, 2019). Additionally, it highlights mesosystems, including schools and neighbourhoods, which influence perceptions and responses to sexting, necessitating collaborative efforts by various stakeholders to mitigate risky behaviours (Dodaj & Sesar, 2021). The broader sphere, macrosystems, encompassing societal conditions and cultural norms, significantly influence attitudes toward sexting (Dodaj & Sesar, 2021), while chronosystems take into account historical events and environmental changes, in this was contributing to understanding sexting behaviour among South African adolescents (Laff & Ruiz, 2019).

Integrating social learning theory and ecological systems theory further enriches the study by exploring how adolescents learn and engage in sexting behaviour. Processes such as internalised definitions, differential association, differential reinforcement and imitation/modelling shed light on the mechanisms through which South African adolescents acquire and perpetuate sexting behaviours (Brodie et al., 2019).

In summary, the purposeful selection and integration of these frameworks provide a strong theoretical foundation for the study, directly addressing the research question and taking into account the interconnected systems and diverse influences within the South African context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach incorporating a phenomenological design with elements of explorative, descriptive and contextual research designs to systematically investigate the knowledge and perceptions of school social workers regarding adolescent sexting in schools in Gauteng, South Africa, and their actions in response to it. The strength of qualitative research in this instance lay in its ability to offer a deep, interactive and subjective comprehension of school social workers' understanding of adolescent sexting (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological design focused on describing the lived experiences and perceptions of school social workers regarding adolescent sexting. Additionally, explorative, descriptive and contextual designs were utilised to analyse and describe the pertinent literature and research findings, providing insights into school social workers' understanding within their specific contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The population of a study pertains to the broader collection of individuals or entities that have similar characteristics that can be applied to the larger group (Strydom, 2021). In this study, conducted in the Gauteng region, the population consisted of 127 school-based social workers employed by the Department of Basic Education, including 2 social work managers, 13 social work supervisors, and 112 social workers (DBE, 2022). Additionally, given the complexity of school social work, the Department of Social Development (DSD) collaborates with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to provide intervention services in cases of adverse events at schools that do not have a resident social worker. However, specific figures for these additional social workers are not readily available.

Sampling in qualitative research involves selecting a group of participants to represent a larger population (Tshabangu et al., 2021). For the study reported on here, both purposive and snowball sampling methods, which fall under non-probability sampling, were employed. Purposive sampling, characterised by the intentional selection of elements based on their relevance to the purpose of the study, was utilised to recruit participants in alignment with the research question and sample frame criteria related to social workers' understanding and knowledge regarding sexting among adolescents (Crossman, 2020). Snowball sampling, a method where the initial participants refer to additional potential participants, was employed because of the sensitive nature of the topic (Picardi & Masick, 2014).

The inclusion criteria for school social workers rendering intervention services relating to adolescent sexting were:

• Registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions;

• Employed by the Department of Basic Education or a school governing body, and servicing schools in Gauteng;

• Possessing experience and knowledge in providing welfare services to adolescents exposed to sexting;

• Accessible and willing to participate in the study;

• Proficient in communicating in English.

The researcher designed sampling and recruitment strategies with ethical considerations in mind, prioritising the anonymity of potential participants. Seeking support from the Psycho-Social Services Department of the Department of Basic Education, the researcher connected with school principals to gain access to school social workers. Through telephonic discussions, the presence of full-time social workers in schools was confirmed and interviews were arranged accordingly. Additionally, the Department of Social Development provided a list of social

workers who render services at schools. Contact was made with the social work supervisor, who arranged for interviews with the social workers providing services at different schools.

Meanwhile, school-based social workers employed snowball sampling, reaching out to acquaintances who expressed an interest in participating in the study. This collaborative approach facilitated the recruitment process, while respecting ethical and legal guidelines.

The study followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) approach to sampling until data saturation was reached. Data saturation, characterised by the absence of new information or insights from participants, occurred after 36 participant interviews, signifying the point at which further sampling was deemed unnecessary.

Two distinct data-collection methods were employed: semi-structured interviews served as the primary method; they were conducted both face-to-face and online via Teams. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore topics openly and gather data that facilitated the natural emergence of concepts and theories, aligning with recommendations for flexible and open-ended approaches to data collection. The interviews utilised open-ended questions contained within an interview guide (Lune & Berg, 2017). All interviews, whether conducted face-to-face or online, were audio-recorded to ensure the accurate capture of data. Prior to the commencement of the study, the research instrument, including the interview guide, was pre-tested or piloted with two participants. This pre-testing phase aimed to evaluate the effectiveness and clarity of the instrument, ensuring it adequately captured the necessary information.

Following the transcription of interviews, the author conducted an independent analysis of the data, concluding that data saturation had been attained. Employing Tesch's systematic data analysis approach, as detailed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the author engaged in a process of inductive coding, identifying themes and subthemes within the data. To ensure analytical rigor, the coder and independent coder engaged in extensive discussions to compare and align the themes and subthemes.

The author implemented four key strategies to ensure rigor in qualitative research, addressing truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability) based on recommendations by Guba (1981), Krefting (1991) and Daniel (2019). To ensure credibility, the author engaged in prolonged interaction over three months, fostering rapport for sensitive data exploration. The author also employed thorough data analysis techniques, including rich participant descriptions, and also made use of independent analysis and regular discussions for objectivity and bias mitigation. For transferability, the researcher described a comprehensive study context, detailing constraints, participant information, data-collection methods, session durations and timeframe, addressing limitations and achieving data saturation. Dependability was upheld through minimising assumptions, acknowledging biases and utilising systematic data-analysis methods. Confirmability was assured through accurate recording, verbatim transcriptions and the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail, enhancing transparency in the research process and participant selection. This comprehensive approach aligns with established principles in qualitative research methodology.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee at Unisa granted ethical clearance for the study (ethics clearance number 90187709_CREC_CHS_2023). Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and participants gave their explicit consent to take part. Prior to the commencement of the study, participants were provided with a written consent form outlining the purpose of the research, their rights as participants and the procedures involved. For both face-to-face and online interviews, participants were emailed the consent form in advance. For face-to-face interviews, participants were given the opportunity to read through the consent form and to bring the signed form to the interview session. The signed consent forms were collected immediately after the interviews.

For online interviews conducted via Teams, participants were also asked to read through the form, sign it electronically, and send it back to the researcher before the scheduled interview, indicating their consent to participate. There were no substantial risks and the participants responded comfortably and confidently to all the questions.

To safeguard the participants' privacy, the author ensured anonymity by refraining from collecting their names or identity numbers, instead using a code to represent each participant. The importance of confidentiality was clearly conveyed, with participants receiving assurance that the information they shared would remain confidential and be utilised solely for research and academic purposes.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations.

- The study sample was comprised primarily of individuals of African and White ethnicities, with minimal representation from Coloured and Indian populations. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the perspectives and experiences of these groups within the broader South African context.

- The geographical scope of the study was limited to the Gauteng region of South Africa. The findings of this study are constrained by the specific region in which the research was conducted, limiting their generalisability to other provinces or regions within the country. While the study provides valuable insights within its contextual framework, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to broader populations or different geographical contexts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research findings are outlined in two sections, namely biographical information, followed by a presentation of four themes and subthemes.

Biographical information

The study involved school social workers affiliated with the Department of Social Development and social workers in schools across the Gauteng region. The majority of participants (30) held a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree as their highest qualification.

Three participants had a Master of Social Work (MSW) qualification and three participants a PhD. In terms of experience, the most represented category was 2–5 years of experience (16 participants). Ten participants had 6–10 years of experience, while 4 participants had 11–15 years of experience. The least represented categories were 16–20 years of experience (3 participants) and 21+ years of experience (3 participants).

Themes emerging from the study

The four identified themes relate to the understanding and knowledge of school social workers; their experience of sexting; common types of sexting; and factors contributing to adolescent sexting. A summary of the themes is presented in Figure 1, followed by a discussion of each theme.

Figure 1: **Themes and subthemes related to school social workers' knowledge and perceptions of adolescent sexting**

Theme 1: Social workers' accounts of their understanding and knowledge of sexting among adolescents

This theme provided an indication of how much school social workers know about sexting among adolescents. Two subthemes based on the research findings are discussed, focusing on those who are aware and those with limited awareness.

Subtheme 1.1: Clear awareness and understanding

The statements from research participants highlighted a comprehensive awareness and understanding of adolescent sexting, showcasing a nuanced comprehension of the phenomenon.

> *I believe it refers to the sending, the receiving and the distribution of explicit images; it can be video clips and various forms of images. Video clips using various platforms such as your YouTube, TikTok and pornography sites.*

> *I think my understanding is basically that sexual content is sent between minors, so that could be anything between text messages or WhatsApps exchanged, or it could be pictures and pornography exchanged.*

The insights shared by participants in the study align with the literature, particularly the work of scholars such as Barrense-Dias et al. (2017), who aim to define and comprehend the multifaceted phenomenon of sexting. In the digital age, where sexting evolves alongside changes in social media platforms, standardised measurement becomes imperative for research assessments, as highlighted by Barrense-Dias et al. (2017). Morelli et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive definition of sexting as the sharing of sexually explicit messages, photos or videos, commonly known as 'sexts'. Dodaj et al. (2022) further categorise sexting according to four key dimensions: (1) actions encompassing sending, receiving and forwarding content; (2) types of media involved (images, text or video); (3) the explicit sexual nature of the content; and (4) various transmission models. These dimensions underscore the integral role of sexting in representing adolescent sexuality online within the framework of ecological systems theory, which highlights the interconnected influences shaping adolescent behaviours in the dynamic digital communication landscape.

Subtheme 1.2: Limited awareness and understanding

Another group of participants exhibited a more limited awareness and understanding of sexting among adolescents, indicating less detailed knowledge of the phenomenon.

> *I don't have an understanding. I think maybe when they do things related to technology which are out of order.*

> *I don't want to lie to you, we don't really experience that at our school.*

The literature on the understanding and knowledge of South African school social workers regarding adolescent sexting reflects identified gaps in regulatory laws and international frameworks, particularly the absence of specific measures relating to cyberbullying and sexting at school level in South Africa (Mthembu, 2022). Furthermore, the participants in the study

also demonstrated limited awareness and understanding of sexting, highlighting the significant gaps in regulatory laws and international frameworks within South Africa's internet landscape. The observed lack of specific measures for regulating cyberbullying at school level, coupled with the limited awareness among school social workers, underscores the challenges they face. This convergence of factors highlights the urgent need for comprehensive research and legal frameworks to effectively safeguard children from harmful and illegal online content, especially in the context of sexting within the school environment.

Theme 2: Social workers' experience of sexting among adolescents

Although these committed professionals are aware of the phenomenon, their roles primarily focus on early intervention and intervention rather than ongoing support. As a result, the provision of specific services related to adolescent sexting remains largely unexplored.

Not that much personally. We have had some incidents here at school, but very limited.

I have never experienced it as a social worker.

I only had one case of sexting.

The limited involvement of school social workers in direct interventions underscores the complex interaction between ecological systems theory and social learning theory. This perspective sheds light on the intricate dynamics of social workers' interactions with adolescent sexting, incorporating both ecological systems and social learning principles within their professional roles. Within the microsystem, the experiences of the social workers involve direct interaction with individual adolescents and the school environment (Hunter et al., 2021). The constrained provision of specific services may be influenced by broader contextual factors in the exosystem, encompassing school policies and societal norms (Hunter et al., 2021). Social learning theory accentuates how social workers, as role models, observe adolescent sexting behaviours and respond to these actions through their professional interventions. In doing so, they not only guide and shape their own approaches but also influence the behaviours of the adolescents they serve by reinforcing positive behaviours and addressing negative ones (Brodie et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Social workers' knowledge of the types of sexting adolescents engage in

The social workers' narratives shed light on their understanding of common adolescent sexting activities.

They use WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Texting but not only texting; they use videos, to walk around nude or to dance or whatever and then send it to the other person or do it together on the phone.

Well, what we find a lot is especially amongst the male learners, the boys form groups and they will be sharing sexual pornographic photos that they download. Then also things like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat. Your social media platforms.

Nudes. It is also the suggestive texting. So they will use the emojis for the Peach emoji and the eggplant, the aubergine plant or vegetable. Then I have seen things from my adolescent sister and also the water spraying.
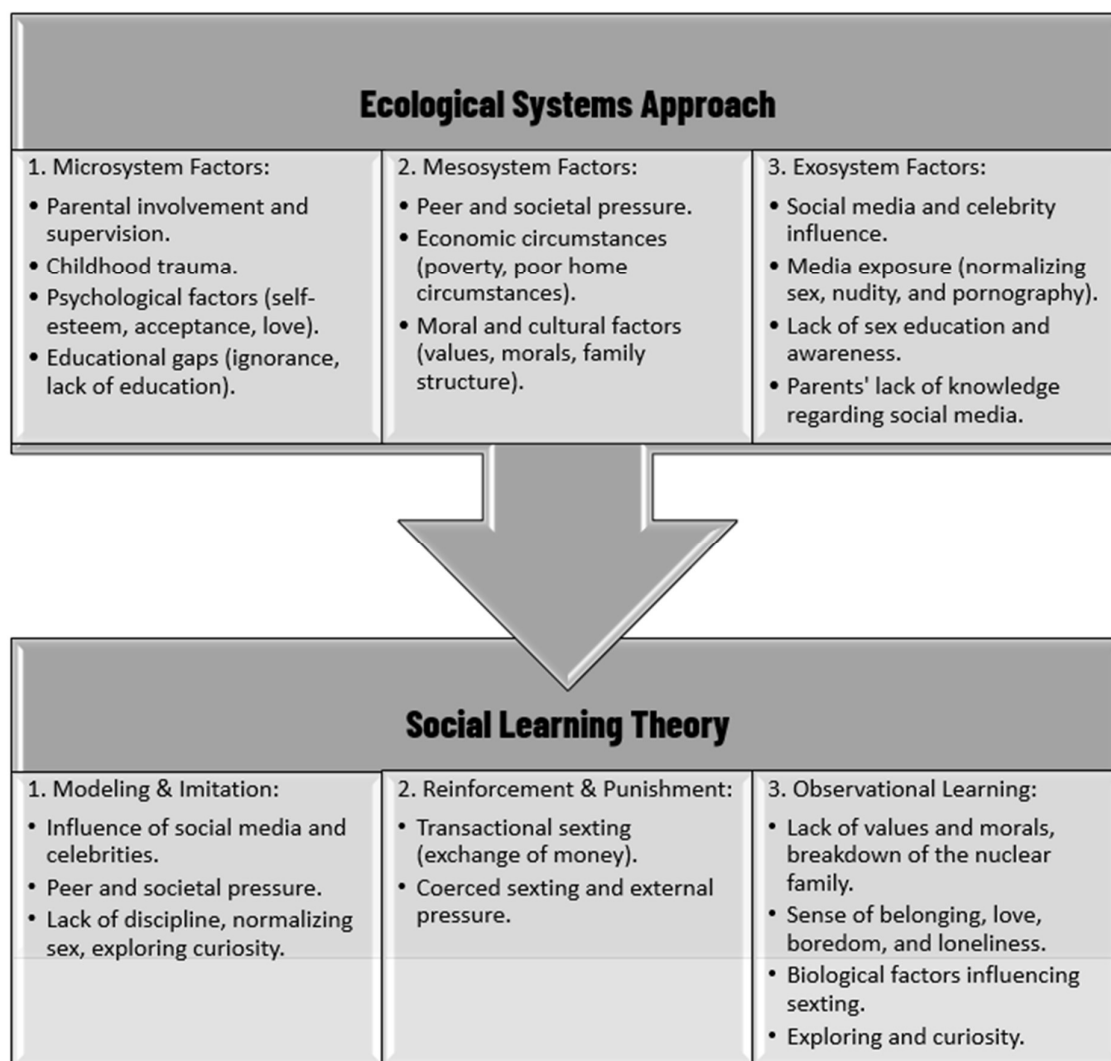
They are using audios, mostly it means that the person wants you to hear what you're saying and also some form of being too explicit, so that in terms of seeing, you're sending a video.

The literature reveals that sexting among adolescents involves various types facilitated through messaging apps and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Darmayanti & Idrus, 2024). Instagram stands out as a leading platform for sexting, with direct messages and video calls being primary modes, attributed to perceived accessibility and privacy features (Darmayanti & Idrus, 2024). Sexting is categorised as either active or passive, where active sexting involves creating or sharing explicit content, while passive sexting involves receiving or requesting such material (Bomester, 2022). Popular platforms such as WhatsApp and social networks serve as mediums, with adolescents employing unique encrypted methods for message exchange. Moreover, emojis, particularly sexual ones, play a crucial role in sexting, providing diverse visual means of expression in electronic communication (Bomester, 2022).

Social workers' understanding of adolescent sexting types will benefit from an understanding of ecological systems theory. This theory relates individual experiences, relationships, community dynamics and cultural influences, and can assist in recognising how immediate environments and relationships influence sexting behaviours. Insights from broader societal and cultural contexts further enhance comprehension. Integrating this perspective into their assessments will enrich social workers' understanding of the complexities of sexting and inform their intervention strategies (Morelli et al., 2023).

Theme 4: Social workers' accounts of the factors contributing to sexting among adolescents

Here the complexities of adolescent sexting are viewed through the lens of the ecological systems and social learning theories, with insights from social workers' experiences making it possible to explore the multifaceted layers of sexting from within these theoretical frameworks. Figure 2 illustrates the subthemes derived from social workers' accounts, shedding light on the factors contributing to adolescent sexting.

Ecological Systems Approach

1. Microsystem Factors:	2. Mesosystem Factors:	3. Exosystem Factors:
• Parental involvement and supervision. • Childhood trauma. • Psychological factors (self-esteem, acceptance, love). • Educational gaps (ignorance, lack of education).	• Peer and societal pressure. • Economic circumstances (poverty, poor home circumstances). • Moral and cultural factors (values, morals, family structure).	• Social media and celebrity influence. • Media exposure (normalizing sex, nudity, and pornography). • Lack of sex education and awareness. • Parents' lack of knowledge regarding social media.

Social Learning Theory

1. Modeling & Imitation:	2. Reinforcement & Punishment:	3. Observational Learning:
• Influence of social media and celebrities. • Peer and societal pressure. • Lack of discipline, normalizing sex, exploring curiosity.	• Transactional sexting (exchange of money). • Coerced sexting and external pressure.	• Lack of values and morals, breakdown of the nuclear family. • Sense of belonging, love, boredom, and loneliness. • Biological factors influencing sexting. • Exploring and curiosity.

Figure 2: **Integration of social workers' accounts with ecological systems and social learning theories on adolescent sexting**

The subthemes are intricately connected to both ecological systems theory and social learning theory, as illustrated in the figure. Their influence is evident throughout the study, offering a comprehensive understanding of ecological and social learning dynamics in a way that avoids redundancies and ensures each aspect is addressed uniquely and distinctly.

Ecological systems theory

Microsystem factors

In terms of the microsystem, the study explored a number of interconnected factors, including lack of parental involvement and supervision, childhood trauma and psychological elements.

Subtheme: Lack of parental involvement and supervision

Participants highlighted that inadequate parental involvement and supervision play a role in adolescent sexting:

> *Two parents are either working two jobs and they are tired. You know there are smart TVs now we have Wi-Fi at home, but we don't have the parental guidance.*

> *Absent parents. Busy parents. Parents leaving it over to school systems to train their children or other children to mould their kids and teach their kids.*

> *Children are unsupervised by parents so they have access to a lot of things that their parents are not aware of, so they would be engaging in those things and there won't be parental supervision.*

> *Children are left unattended watching inappropriate movies and visit inappropriate sites.*

Sexting poses challenges for parents, teachers and society, particularly concerning young people's internet use. Parents' unfamiliarity with sexting contributes to their uncertainties in managing and responding to the behaviour (Bomester, 2022). Studies on parental supervision vary in terms of findings, suggesting that controlling mobile phone use may not prevent sexting, while monitoring social media and establishing clear rules can decrease its likelihood (Yépez-Tito et al., 2020). A lack of family communication is negatively associated with sexting, especially in girls, and parental knowledge about sexting and technology use remains limited (Bianchi et al., 2021). Bomester (2022) stresses the importance of parents and educators being informed and monitoring online activities, yet limited knowledge among parents in South Africa hinders effective support. Studies link poor parental involvement to online sexual behaviours, emphasising the formative role of family structure, relationships, control and communication (Turzák et al., 2021).

The subthemes of the lack of parental involvement and supervision highlight how family dynamics, within the microsystem of ecological systems theory, influence adolescent behaviour. Social learning theory underscores the influence of parental modelling and guidance on adolescent behaviour, particularly in the context of sexting (Van Ouytsel, 2017).

Subtheme: Childhood trauma

A participant noted that childhood trauma, especially sexual abuse, significantly affects adolescents' participation in sexting.

> *Children have been sexually abused and the majority exposed to pornography or viewing their parents having sexual intercourse or doing sexual acts, bestiality and these contributes to sexting.*

Childhood trauma, notably sexual abuse, significantly influences adolescents' engagement in sexting, particularly in low-resource urban communities (Titchen et al., 2019). This behaviour is associated with exploitative relationships, early sexualisation and confusion about boundaries. Sexting, especially with strangers, is known to be unsafe, posing risks such as unwanted solicitations and increased vulnerability for LGBTQ adolescents (Burén et al., 2021).

Abusive sexting is closely tied to childhood trauma, resulting in higher levels of aggressiveness, social problems, anxiety and depression, often stemming from a history of childhood abuse (Barosso et al., 2021). Victims of abusive sexting manifest various emotional and behavioural problems, which demonstrates the impact of childhood trauma in instances of both engaging in and being a victim of sexting (Barosso et al., 2021). The literature underscores the need for targeted research and interventions in low-resource urban communities to address the intersection of childhood trauma and sexting among adolescents (Titchen et al., 2019).

Subtheme: Psychological factors (self-esteem, acceptance, love)

Participants highlighted how psychological factors such as self-esteem, acceptance and the pursuit of love influence adolescents' involvement in sexting.

> *Then it comes back also to a low sense of self and low self-esteem and then adolescents will engage with anyone who they don't even know sexually, because that person is giving them attention and they feel accepted and they feel someone is interested in me.*

> *They will engage in sexting just to feel like someone is seeing me, feel loved.*

It is evident from the literature that self-esteem is a key factor influencing adolescent sexting behaviours. Findings reveal a clear connection between frequent sexting and lower self-esteem, influenced by social media. Adolescents dissatisfied with their body image and who have low relationship confidence are more likely to engage in sexting, while higher self-esteem and self-control act as protective factors (Verrastro et al., 2023). However, perspectives vary. Morelli et al. (2023) find no direct link between wellbeing (including self-esteem) and sexting, while Ragona (2023) hypothesises that individuals whose self-image is negatively affected by sexual messages may engage in reinforcing behaviours linked to an unsound self-image.

Subtheme: Educational gaps (ignorance, lack of education)

From the participants' statements educational gaps, characterised by ignorance and a lack of education, emerged as a clear subtheme.

> *I would say mainly it's because of the lack of education, because our kids don't really understand the dangers of social media and of engaging with strangers and all of these social media platforms that are there these days. They don't really know what they're getting themselves into when someone tries to educate them, they think that they already know everything.*

The literature strongly underscores the theme of educational gaps contributing to problems in this area. In seeking to mitigate sexting risks among South African adolescents, Futcher et al. (2023) highlight the absence of a formalised cybersafe education curriculum, minimal governmental intervention and additional complications arising from financial constraints, language barriers and unclear roles of key players. Current initiatives lack specificity, in that they target both primary and high school learners and do not offer tailored approaches based on age group. While the Department of Basic Education provides guidelines, these lack specificity in terms of the target audience for suggested topics (Futcher et al., 2023).

The literature also reveals that current educational campaigns often use scare tactics, emphasising dangers without recognising the expanded learning space of adolescents, including various media interactions (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2020). Nevertheless, there is consensus regarding the urgent need for a formalised cybersafe education curriculum in South Africa that can be applied within the financial constraints, language barriers, and unclear roles to effectively mitigate sexting risks among adolescents (Futcher et al., 2023, p. 117). Additionally, there are advocates for educational campaigns that adopt more nuanced approaches than scare tactics, acknowledging the diverse nature of the media interactions within adolescents' learning spaces (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2020).

Mesosystem factors

An exploration of the mesosystem reveals a complex web of influences on adolescents' sexting behaviours, encompassing peer and societal pressures, economic circumstances, and moral and cultural factors.

Subtheme: Peer pressure

Peer pressure is a significant factor influencing adolescents' involvement in sexting, as emphasised in participants' discussions.

> *Peer pressure and cohesion. They are curious, because other learners do this, I would also want to experience it. Seen as relevant, having fun and the need for you to be popular among your peers.*

> *The fear of missing out, or peer pressure, or I want to fit in with friends.*

The literature underscores the influential role of peer pressure, particularly as exerted by popular peers, in driving adolescents' engagement in sexting behaviours. Adolescents conform to behaviours perceived to be common among dominant peers, with sexting actions notably influenced by perceptions of peer acceptance within friend and romantic circles (Hunter et al., 2021). However, there is no research gap on the impact of popular peers on individual sexting behaviour. In the broader social context, adolescents turn to peer group norms for guidance in their sexual development, with these norms playing a pivotal role during adolescence. Factors such as perceived susceptibility to peer and romantic pressure, parental support and school connectedness are associated with active sexting behaviour (Burén et al., 2021).

Ecological systems theory was invoked to highlight the impact of mesosystem interactions, with peers forming a very important part of the individual's social environment in shaping these behaviours (Hunter et al., 2021). The subtheme relating to peer pressure and societal pressure aligns with the principles of modelling and imitation in social learning theory, emphasising how individuals learn by observing and replicating the behaviours of those in their social environment. This dynamic underscores the influential role of peer and societal models in shaping individual behaviours and choices (Van Oytsel et al., 2017).

Subtheme: Economic circumstances

Adolescents' engagement in sexting is markedly influenced by economic circumstances, including poverty and unfavourable home situations, which shape their digital choices.

> *The area that I work in is areas of squatter camps, informal settlements and there's high crime and poverty and also in areas like that we get learners who are not being guided and get involve in sexting.*

> *When the community is unemployed and there's nothing else for them to do than drink, have sex, procreate, do drugs. They then start dating older men which can contributes to sexting. This person buys them then an iPhone, he will definitely say, you know, send me nudes.*

> *Poor socioeconomic circumstances which let them feel they don't receive a lot of attention and through sexting they feel they get attention and love.*

Economic circumstances, correlating with exploitative and abusive relationships, shape adolescents' engagement in sexting to a considerable degree. Research consistently confirms this impact, particularly highlighting the role of poverty. Titchen et al. (2019) demonstrate an independent association between sexting and exploitative sexual relationships in a low-resource urban community. Nwaobolie et al. (2023) extend these findings, linking sexting to factors such as peer pressure, inadequate parental guidance and insufficient control of sexual content on social media, especially among higher education learners.

Furthermore, economic disparities influence adolescents' decisions and behaviours, including their involvement in sexting. Hunter et al. (2021) underscore how economic circumstances shape opportunities and constraints within adolescents' immediate environments, such as families, schools and communities. Financial disparities may lead adolescents to perceive sexting as a means to seek attention, validation or financial support (Nwaobolie et al., 2023).

Subtheme: Moral and cultural factors

In the mesosystem, family and community values significantly influence adolescents' perspectives on sexuality, influencing their involvement in sexting according to cultural norms, family expectations, and moral beliefs within their social environment.

> *I think number one, the breakdown of the nuclear family and the value system that tolerates and allows this kind of engagement. Morals and values have completely disintegrated in the nuclear family and the home where the child comes from. There's a moral decay. There's a value system that's no longer in existence.*

> *The value systems ... of parents are very low. Then I also see unclear boundaries in the nuclear home. Parents are becoming children's friends. They're not parent the way they should.*

The influence of morals and cultural factors on sexting is substantiated in the literature. Ricon and Dolev-Cohen (2023) make the observation that conflicts in moral values within a group may result in hostility, underscoring the dynamic nature of moral values influenced by social interactions and external factors. Dodaj and Sesar (2021) expand on this, highlighting indirect influences from systems such as social communities, neighbourhoods, media and broader cultural and political factors. Living in a community with a sexualised culture provides opportunities for young individuals to explore sexuality and engage in sexting as part of sexual behaviour.

The theme of the lack of values and morals, associated with the breakdown of the nuclear family, corresponds to social learning theory, in particular observational learning (Brodie et al., 2019). As they observe societal dynamics, particularly family structures and moral values, individuals internalise behaviours, underscoring the influence of observational learning on sexting practices.

Exosystem factors

With regard to the impact of broader influences on teen sexting, exosystem factors such as social media, celebrity influence, media shaping norms, limited sex education and parents' limited social media knowledge play a crucial role.

Subtheme: Social media and celebrity influence

As we delved into the insights provided by participants, a compelling subtheme emerged, shedding light on the pervasive influence of social media and celebrities.

> *They've been given too much access to the Internet, access to phones which aren't monitored and even if you say you will monitor your child's phone, some parents don't even know how to monitor these phones and there's free Wi-Fi at schools where they can do anything.*

> *Social media and I think how celebrities are portraying their music videos. Our children, they look up to celebrities which are their role models. Unsupervised access to Wi-Fi, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, those type of social media apps. Children have a validation addiction so that is why they don't have an internal locus of control anymore because of what they are exposed to.*

The literature consistently highlights social media and celebrity influence on adolescent sexting. Social media shape body image, especially among girls emulating idealised appearances (Verrastro et al., 2023). Communication technologies such as social media are central to adolescent social exchange, contributing to risky behaviours such as sexting (Ragona et al., 2023). Adolescent vulnerability during this stage is linked to problematic internet use and social media addiction, increasing the prevalence of sexting (Ragona et al., 2023). In summary, the literature emphasises the role of social media and celebrity influence in shaping adolescent attitudes towards sexting, necessitating an understanding of these dynamics in the context of emerging technologies (Ragona et al., 2023; Verrastro et al., 2023).

This subtheme aligns with ecological systems theory, particularly the microsystem, where social media and celebrities influence adolescents' perceptions and behaviours in sexting (Verrastro et al., 2023). The exploration of social media and celebrity influence aligns with the principles of modelling and imitation in social learning theory, emphasising how influential figures shape individual actions (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

Subtheme: Media exposure (normalising sex, nudity and pornography)

As we navigated through the narratives shared by participants, the role of media exposure in normalising aspects of sex, nudity and pornography came to the fore as a subtheme.

I think it is, because of the way we have normalised sex and there's no discipline. Abstinence is no longer the main thing and there is not respect attached to it.

Sex is normalised. Nudity is normalised if you even look at the ratings of movies. So we expect of them not to do stuff, but is so exposed and they're exposed to pornography on phones.

We live in a global and technological society now, and it makes sense that children's expression of their sexual desire is expressed on a cell phone. Think it's quite often you find that the cell phone is almost surgically attached to their hands and they live their lives on that they socialise, they speak with their friends, they hang out on their cell phones. Children have easy access to things like pornography.

I have seen children that started sexting with porn and remember, pornography falls in another level of addiction than any other addiction. It's a Poly drug [using multiple substances].

The literature consistently emphasises the influential role of media exposure in shaping adolescent sexting behaviours by normalising sexual content. Distinct characteristics emerge across various media outlets, contributing to the perception of sex as casual and non-committed (Lin et al., 2020). This theme of media exposure is closely tied to the influence of pornography, which is an important influence on sexting among teenagers (McEachern et al., 2012).

Furthermore, research conducted in a number of countries has established a substantial link between viewing pornography and adolescent sexting, highlighting the connection between media exposure and sexting behaviours (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). The literature confirms the association between media exposure and sexting, as well as underlining the legal implications of sexting and emphasising the significant impact of pornography consumption.

The identified subtheme of media exposure, particularly as it relates to normalising aspects of sex, nudity and pornography, aligns with ecological systems theory, specifically the exosystem. Media, as part of the exosystem, indirectly influence individuals through cultural norms and portrayals, illustrating the impact of external systems on individual experiences within the broader societal context (Hunter et al., 2021).

<u>Subtheme: Lack of sex education and awareness</u>

Participants' narratives underscored the profound influence of inadequate sex education and awareness on individuals' experiences and perspectives.

The lack of detailed or in-depth sex education at schools. I don't think the schools are up to date with things like pornography and the use of cell phones or tablets or any other kind of technology.

Life Orientation as a subject in school because sometimes they give too much information for someone who knows very little. So it just creates a curiosity and the teenager just want to explore.

Inadequate and outdated sex education programmes contribute significantly to adolescent sexting behaviours, often either addressing the issue through fear-based strategies or else excluding it from the curriculum altogether (Dully et al., 2023). The literature advocates for comprehensive sex education that also covers sexting, equipping young people with skills for responsible technology use (York et al., 2021). Difficulties associated with discussing cybersafety among adults highlight the need for effective communication about online misadventures (Nguyên & Mark, 2014), and existing school-based sex education requires a paradigm shift to address privacy and consensual relations in the digital age (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2020).

Inadequate sex education, analysed within the context of ecological systems theory, highlights external influences shaping individual development. Societal structures within the exosystem contribute to a gap affecting individuals at the microsystem level, emphasising the crucial role of sex education in human development within the broader societal context (Hunter et al., 2021).

<u>Subtheme: Parents' lack of knowledge regarding social media</u>

Participants consistently pointed out that parents have a limited understanding of social media.

> *Parents are not familiar with smartphones or the different apps and social media.*

> *Sometimes it's the issues that parents don't even know. They are uneducated on what is available on phones and even the different apps.*

Despite adolescents' growing autonomy, parents play a crucial role in guiding online behaviours, including sexting. However, a knowledge gap arises as technology evolves, leading parents to underestimate online risks, such as inappropriate content and risky internet behaviours at home (Hill, 2017). Understanding social media dynamics poses challenges for both parents and teenagers, requiring digital competence. Family factors influence online behaviours, yet not all parental strategies promote safe conduct (Tomczyk & Potyrala, 2021); moreover, parents' underestimation of the effects of online advertising makes both parents and children vulnerable to its impact (Lin et al., 2019).

The literature underscores the impact of parental influence on adolescent behaviours, emphasising challenges arising from a technological knowledge gap and dismissive attitudes towards online risks (Lin et al., 2019; Tomczyk & Potyrala, 2021). The subtheme highlighting parents' limited understanding of social media aligns with ecological systems theory, affecting adolescents indirectly at the microsystem level within immediate social environments (Hunter et al., 2021).

Social learning theory

Modelling and imitation

In the context of social learning theory, we identified subthemes such as modelling and imitation, highlighting how individuals observe and adopt behaviours with their origins in social media, the influence of celebrities, peer pressure, societal expectations and a lack of discipline.

Subtheme: Lack of discipline, normalising sex, exploring and curiosity

Exploring individual behaviour revealed a subtheme involving the interplay between a lack of discipline, normalised sexual content, and curiosity, highlighting challenges relating to self-regulation and societal influences on attitudes towards sexuality.

> *Sex has been normalised and there's not so much discipline. I think from both sides, parents and teachers, If there's no discipline at home, it becomes difficult for the teacher to have discipline because the school is a secondary environment. It makes it easy for children to do sexting.*

> *It can be curiosity, it could be they want to explore and the adolescent stage ends on that and then if they are not taught because I believe in teaching the kids each and every stage of life that they will enter into. So that it won't be like a surprise when you they have such feelings, or they such curiosity to say this is where I am now, this is how to behave.*

The literature strongly suggests that a lack of discipline, normalisation of sex, and adolescent curiosity contribute significantly to sexting. Games are suggested as an educational tool to foster positive cybersafe attitudes among primary school learners (Futcher et al., 2023). Although sexting is not inherently criminal, it poses risks for vulnerable teenagers with limited self-regulation and high susceptibility to peer pressure (Gassó et al., 2019).

Adolescents engage in sexting for various reasons, normalising such behaviours within peer dynamics. Sexting with strangers reflects sexual curiosity and a desire for excitement among adolescents (Burén, 2020). The correlation between sexting and the typical curiosity of adolescence emphasises the need for targeted interventions promoting responsible online behaviour (Del Rey et al., 2019; Ojeda et al., 2019). Understanding the motivational factors behind sexting is crucial for effective prevention strategies.

This subtheme aligns with social learning theory, highlighting how individuals learn by observing and replicating behaviours, including those relating to discipline, sexual attitudes and curiosity. In the context of sexting specifically, the focus on exploration and curiosity emphasises how individuals may adopt and normalise behaviours through observation (Brodie et al., 2019).

Reinforcement and punishment

The subthemes falling within this theme offer insight into how individuals navigate rewards and consequences in their social context; this illuminated the complexities of sexting behaviours influenced by modelling and imitation principles in social learning theory.

Subtheme: Transactional sexting (sexting in exchange for money)

The subtheme of transactional sexting in contemporary interpersonal dynamics involves the exchange of explicit content for money. This prompts an exploration of motivations, societal implications and the impact of rewards on human behaviour, offering insight into the intricate dynamics of sexting practices.

We've seen cases of learners sending their pictures to people they don't know because in exchange of money; sometimes some would think maybe the other person on the other side would be a celebrity.

As part of grooming the child will accept money and in exchange send a nude picture or video.

The literature consistently confirms the fact that transactional sexting, involving the exchange of explicit content for financial gain, contributes significantly to adolescent sexting behaviours, giving rise to risks such as revenge pornography and sextortion (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2020). Turzák et al. (2021) identify diverse risks in this context, including cyberbullying, emotional distress and unwanted attention, all of which affect adolescents' mental health.

Ragona and Mesce (2023) distinguish between experimental and aggravated sexting motives, emphasising financial gain, pleasing peers or partners, and engagement in cyberbullying as riskier motivations. The literature underscores the role of transactional sexting as a significant contributor to adolescent behaviours, emphasising the need for interventions and awareness campaigns to address associated risks and protect adolescents' wellbeing.

This subtheme aligns with social learning theory, specifically modelling and reinforcement principles. It highlights how individuals may learn and adopt such behaviours through observation, with monetary gain serving as a reinforcing factor, offering insights into the complex dynamics of sexting practices (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

Subtheme: Coerced sexting and external pressure

A participant mentioned coerced sexting, where external pressures compel individuals to engage in sexting against their will; this prompted an exploration of coercive dynamics and societal implications in sexting practices.

At some point, the children are coerced, telling them it is our little secret.

Studies by Burén (2020) and Ricon and Dolev-Cohen (2023), among others, consistently emphasise coercion and external pressure as significant factors in adolescent sexting, with potential negative impacts and gender disparities (Burén, 2020). Ricon and Dolev-Cohen (2023) describe coerced sexting, driven by perceived relationship obligations, as potentially overshadowing genuine desire. The study by Titchen et al. (2019) reveals gender-specific pressures, with girls often feeling coerced, threatened or bribed, and boys experiencing pressure from male peers. The subtheme aligns with social learning theory, particularly the principles of reinforcement and punishment (Brodie et al., 2019), revealing coercive dynamics and external pressures acting as forms of punishment within sexting practices. This underscores the importance of tailored interventions to safeguard emotional wellbeing and sexual development.

Observational learning

The theme of observational learning, which refers to the process of learning behaviours through observing others, gave rise to a number of subthemes, which will be elaborated on below.

Subtheme: Sense of belonging, love, boredom and loneliness

Within the intricate tapestry of human experiences, the subtheme of a sense of belonging, love, boredom and loneliness unfolds, shedding light on the multifaceted emotional dimensions that influence individuals' behaviours within the context of sexting practices.

> *Youth are very vulnerable to say yes to any opportunity where their sense of belonging and acceptance can be satisfied.*

> *I think a contributing factor is loneliness or lack of closeness with unknown. Under those reaches that support that a lack of a father figure can contribute to a needing a sense of belonging.*

> *Boredom is a contributing factor. They hear from friends and now they explore.*

The literature on this complex subtheme as it contributes to sexting is limited. Girls often share explicit photos with boyfriends as a manifestation of love or a surprising gesture. An underlying pressure is placed on girls to engage in sexting to "prove their love," while boys typically use persuasion and reassurance rather than threats. Lack of experience in romantic relationships may lead some adolescents to misconstrue such behaviours as signs of affection rather than potential threats (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). In addition, social media as a perceived source of emotional support becomes a refuge for those grappling with loneliness, potentially leading to online socialisation resulting in sexual encounters or involvement in the sex trade (Tokovska et al., 2022; Turzák et al., 2021). Emotional struggles, such as emotion dysregulation, have been identified as predictors of risky sexting among young individuals (Ragona et al., 2023).

This subtheme aligns with observational learning in social learning theory. It suggests that individuals observe and learn sexting behaviours under the influence of emotional dimensions such as a need to belong, love, boredom and loneliness within their social environment (Brodie et al., 2019).

Subtheme: Biological factors influencing sexting

As we explored factors shaping sexting behaviours, the subtheme of biological factors took centre stage, prompting an investigation into physiological dimensions influencing individuals' engagement in sexting practices.

> *The biological aspect can be a contributing factor, when your body is starting to evolve and you start to experience new things. The young person is sexually aroused.*

> *The hormones starts to develop and they want to experiment and they want to enter relationship, romantically relationship and it can start with sexting.*

Biological factors, falling within the cognitive, affective and physiological dimensions, significantly shape sexting behaviours. Currin (2022) attests to the broader context of the drive for sexual behaviour. Recent studies, including that by Morelli et al. (2023), highlight sex differences in sexting behaviour, and indicate that females are more likely than males to receive sexts. Turzák et al. (2021) emphasise the complexity of sexting, taking biological, psychological, cognitive, socio-cultural and environmental factors into account. Adolescence,

marked by critical changes (Burén, 2020), exposes adolescents to risks, since their lack of maturity means that they do not always understand the consequences of their actions (Molla-Esparza et al., 2021). Understanding the biological aspects of sexting requires recognition of the intricate interplay between cognitive, affective, and physical elements during this developmental stage.

The subtheme of biological factors influencing sexting aligns with observational learning in social learning theory, emphasising how individuals may adopt sexting behaviours by observing others, and focusing in particular on physiological dimensions contributing to their engagement in such practices (Brodie et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The exploration of school-based social workers' understanding of adolescent sexting illuminates the complexity of this phenomenon. Sexting behaviours among adolescents are not isolated occurrences, but are profoundly influenced by a myriad of factors, including societal dynamics, emotional needs, biological factors and evolving family structures. These multifaceted influences highlight the need for comprehensive interventions that address the root causes of sexting rather than merely its manifestations. Observational learning, as explained by Bandura's social learning theory, significantly contributes to the normalisation of sexting behaviours among adolescents. This theory emphasises the role of social environments, indicating that sexting behaviours are often learnt and reinforced through observation and interaction with peers and family members, and media influences. However, alongside this theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory illuminates the broader ecological context within which sexting occurs. This theory underscores the interplay between various environmental systems, including the microsystem (the individual's immediate environment), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (external environments indirectly affecting individuals) and macrosystem (cultural values and norms).

Understanding these ecological dimensions is crucial for devising effective prevention strategies and interventions that respond to the complex interplay of factors shaping sexting behaviours. Emotional dimensions such as a sense of belonging, love, boredom and loneliness play a significant role in shaping sexting behaviours among adolescents. These emotional needs, if unmet, may drive individuals to seek validation, intimacy or excitement through digital interactions, including sexting. Interventions aimed at mitigating sexting risks should therefore address these underlying emotional needs so as to effectively promote healthy digital communication habits. However, despite the prevalence and potential risks associated with sexting, a significant gap in education and awareness is evident among both adolescents and school-based social workers. This gap underscores the urgent need for targeted educational programmes that not only provide information about the risks associated with sexting, but also offer practical strategies for healthy digital communication and relationship-building. By equipping adolescents and professionals with the knowledge and skills to navigate the complexities of sexting, these programmes can serve as vital tools in preventing and resolving sexting-related issues. Dealing with this issue effectively requires a nuanced understanding of these influences and the implementation of comprehensive interventions that target the root causes of sexting behaviours. Extensive further research on cyberbullying is needed, especially

in the light of the changing nature of information and communications technology. If they are to have a meaningful impact, intervention strategies should ideally be grounded in relevant research and continuously evaluated so as to determine their real effect. By integrating these insights into policy and practice, stakeholders can work together to promote responsible digital behaviour and safeguard the wellbeing of adolescents navigate their way in the digital age.

The following recommendations are offered as a possible means to enhance school-based social workers' understanding of and responses to sexting among adolescents.

- Develop targeted training programmes for school-based social workers to enhance their understanding of adolescent sexting behaviours, including:
  - Providing clarification of the relevant terminology used in discussions about sexting;
  - Offering insights into popular apps and platforms commonly used for sexting, along with guidance on identifying and addressing sexting incidents on these platforms;
  - Collaborating with technology experts or law enforcement agencies to provide up-to-date information on emerging trends and new digital platforms related to sexting.
- Collaborate with tech experts and law enforcement to keep school social workers informed about emerging digital trends, aiding in effective identification and resolution of sexting incidents.
- Integrate sexting awareness into school policies and curriculum with support from social workers so as to foster responsible digital behaviour among adolescents.
- Host educational seminars/webinars for parents led by school social workers or community organisations to raise awareness of sexting risks and offer practical tips for promoting online safety and healthy relationships at home.
- Create a detailed glossary of sexting and online safety terms to ensure that school social workers share a common understanding when addressing these issues with adolescents, parents and colleagues.
- Offer continuous professional development for school-based social workers as a way to enable them to stay abreast of best practices and emerging trends in addressing adolescent sexting so that they are able to support adolescents and families effectively.

Recommendations for parents, primary caregivers and guardians

- Parents, primary caregivers and guardians should be provided with educational resources and support to navigate conversations about sexting effectively. Hosting educational seminars or webinars led by school social workers or community organisations can raise awareness of sexting risks and offer practical tips for promoting online safety and healthy relationships at home.
- Encourage open communication between parents and their children about digital behaviours, including sexting. Providing resources such as discussion guides or conversation starters can facilitate these conversations and help parents address sensitive topics with their children in a supportive manner.

- Assist parents in establishing clear boundaries around digital use within the home. This can include setting guidelines for appropriate online behaviour, establishing technology-free zones or times, and monitoring children's online activities in a respectful and non-invasive manner.
- Parents can serve as positive role models for responsible digital behaviour by demonstrating healthy online habits themselves. Encouraging balanced screen time and respectful communication and developing critical thinking skills can help children to navigate the digital world safely.
- Provide parents with access to resources such as online safety guides, parental control tools and support networks where they can seek advice and guidance from experts and other parents facing similar challenges.

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