

The Role of Problematic Internet Usage in the Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence among Undergraduate Students in Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to investigate the role of problematic internet usage in the risk of addiction to online sexual violence among undergraduate students in Kenyan universities. The study utilized Behaviourist Theory and Social Learning Theory. *Ex-post facto* research design was used for this study. The target population for the study was 97284 comprising all the undergraduate students in four universities and the accessible population was 2nd and 3rd year students comprising of 18911. The sample size comprised of 391 undergraduate students, 16 peer counsellors and four (4) student counsellors making a total of 411 participants. Data was collected by use of a questionnaire, an in-depth interview schedule and focus group discussion. The questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students, in-depth interview schedule was used on the student counsellors and focus group discussion was conducted among peer counsellors. Each focus group discussion comprised of four participants. Purposive sampling was used to select the universities of study. Purposive and simple random sampling was used to select the respondents. One university with similar characteristics with the sampled universities was purposively selected for piloting to ensure reliability of the research instruments. The pre-test was administered to and the instruments were modified accordingly. The reliability coefficient was online sexual violence 0.770. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages and means were used to analyse data. Chi square was used to test the null hypotheses while t-test was used to compare the study variables. Quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23.

Key terms: Addiction risks, undergraduate students, problematic internet usage, online sexual violence

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Introduction

Internet usage has risen globally; currently, it is used in numerous communications such as e-mails, WhatsApp, web browsing, movies and social media communications. Secondly, internet usage is being incorporated in learning organizations towards enhancement of research and educational work (Deusen, et al., 2015). Internet technology is greatly used in Africa and Kenya and is adopted by most universities as a means of enhancing learning (Waithaka, 2013). Like other countries, in Kenya, a great number of institutions of higher learning provide free and limitless internet to students and staff.

Although internet is very significant in the modern day, studies conducted indicate that problematic internet usage may lead to addiction risks such as online sexual violence (Nakanya, 2015). The students who are more susceptible to the addiction risks caused by problematic internet usage are within the age bracket of 19 to 24 years (Ambad, et al., 2017). The researchers maintained that due to provision of internet connectivity and internet technologies, young people spent many hours online, which predisposed them to addiction risks. The researchers continued to argue that lack of satisfactory transition into adulthood might lead to low self-esteem and result into one lacking confidence engaging in interpersonal relationship and confident in interacting through the internet. A study done by Arjunan and Moncy (2016) in Malaysia to investigate internet dependency among university entrants revealed that university students had a likelihood of developing addiction risks because, apart from accessing the free and limitless internet, they also experienced freedom away from the control of parents where, they remain unrestricted on the online activities.

Online platforms and technologies facilitate sexual identity and encounter among the young people (Henry, & Powell, 2015). The researchers made these assertions in a study to ascertain technology facilitated sexual violence and harassment against adult women. The researchers termed

distribution of sexual images among the youth as sexual violence because at time it was sent without the consent of the receiver. Further, sexting could be termed as a behaviour that was abusive, exploiting and coerced the receiver to comply with the demands of the perpetrator. The findings of a study by Holladay (2016) showed that the rise in online activities in addition to social mass media caused a high increase in sexual violence. The availability and accessibility of internet and technologies facilitated further stalking, harassment and terrorism among the victims.

The researcher further affirmed that majority of the victims of online sexual violence were females. The violence involved sharing of nude photos, sexually explicit materials, unwanted sexual advances and sexting. Problematic internet usage could predispose undergraduate students to online sexual violence. The students could be more vulnerable to cyber criminals in search of finances for sustenance and seeking to develop relationships. The prepositions of the researchers indicated that young people preferred to interact on the internet and mass media in place of interpersonal interactions. This is an indication that problematic internet usage could lead to spending more time on the internet and cause online sexual violence. The relationship between problematic internet usage and addiction risks, needed to be ascertained through a study. This study therefore, attempted to cover the gap by researching on the role of problematic internet usage in selected addiction risks among undergraduate students in universities in the counties of Nairobi and Meru, Kenya

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual violence includes harmful acts that may be physical or psychological (Srensson, et al., 2018). The findings of the study by the researchers to investigate the level of knowledge among adolescents and helpful attitudes towards sexual crime in the Swedish setting found out that

the acts took place in secret amidst communities. The study continued to acknowledge that, apart from the internet facilitating other forms of violence such as hacking and theft it also facilitated sexual violence. The behaviour if not controlled could lead to an addiction risk and affect the individual negatively such as forming anti-social behaviours.

Powell and Henry (2016) referred to online sexual violence as any unwanted sexual behaviour transmitted electronically through means such as video call, voice call, text message, email and picture messages which could be through virtual worlds, social media or online discussion forums. In a study to establish technology-facilitated sexual violence among an Australian adult community, the researchers ascertained that online sexual violence was facilitated by use of digital technologies, which took three forms namely: sexual coercion where an individual was put into pressure to cooperate sexually through bribery, threats or blackmail. In sexual coercion, the victim could be required to release intimate pictures, be involved in virtual sexual acts or person-to-person sexual acts.

The second sexual violence through digital technology according to the researchers was sexual offense where a meeting was organised with the victim, which led to sexual assault. The third sexual violence was taking pictures of sexual assault and distributing the pictures through technology. Researchers have investigated online sexual harassment mostly on adolescents and children. Therefore, there was a gap in the present study into university students' risk of addiction to online sexual violence because of problematic internet usage.

According to Holladay (2016), sexual violence involves rape, sexual harassment and sexual assault, which have negative effect on the psychological, physical, and social well-being of an individual. Further, technology facilitates sexual violence using social media and internet sites. The researcher further acknowledged that online sexual violence had increased due to availability of technology, which made it easy for the perpetrators to harass or assault

their victims in privacy. Moreover, the harassment could be extended to face-to-face relationships. Majority of the victims of online sexual violence were females. The methods of violence used were sending of sexually explicit materials in form of photos or videos, advancement of unwanted of unwanted sex or pursuance of sexual relations.

The findings of a study by Fansher (2017) to investigate risky dating behaviours in technological age among undergraduate students in Southern University concluded that sexting was popular with college-age students. Students engaged in sexting to entice their counterparts into participating in sexual activities or in forming sexual relationships. The researcher continued to affirm that the social media platforms mostly used were the Facebook and the twitter. Moreover, who were involved in problematic internet usage had a possibility of receiving sexual harassment in addition to assault from even strangers due to the anonymity involved. The harassment could sometimes lead to even rape. This is an indication that online sexual violence occurs among university students and could cause serious physiological, social and emotional difficulties. A great number of researches done were in the western countries, which have a different cultural, social and economic background with Kenya. Therefore, to ascertain whether the same happens in a Kenyan perspective, there was need to investigate the role of problematic internet usage in the risk of addiction to online sexual violence.

Due to availability of internet technologies and ease of access of the internet, undergraduate students in the universities in Kenya could be able to access materials that could lead to the risk of addiction to online sexual violence (Srensson et al., 2018). The researchers further indicated that online sexual violence could be confined to the internet with networked technologies or through mobile phones. Moreover, the researchers acknowledged that some pornographic scenes contained aggressive acts, which were directed towards the women. This could be an

indication that if the undergraduate students continuously became exposed to these scenes, they may develop violent attitudes towards members of the opposite sex.

A study carried out to investigate bystander perception of sexual violence among adolescents in Canada by Zhang (2018) concluded that men became more aggressive and had diminished empathy after watching violent pornography. The study reported that after viewing violent pornographic scenes, men lost interest in normal sex and begun to engage in unwanted sexual acts by coercing partners. Further, smartphones were the most common technology used to access the violent content on the internet. Srensson et al. (2018) highlighted that one of the factors associated with sexual violence was advertisement on the internet. Advertisement facilitated access to the violence sexual materials. Furthermore, due to the anonymity involved when using the internet, there could be deception. The potential victims could not be able to judge whether the messages on the internet were true and suitable due to omission of important information.

The findings of a study done by Cripps and Stermac (2018) to investigate cyber sexual violence and negative emotional states among women in a Canadian University, found out that women experienced cyber-sexual violence in form of non-consensual sexually explicit material, sexual exploitation and harassment, sexual assault and cyber stalking. The researchers highlighted that the women who were involved in cyber-sexual violence did not feel comfortable to disclose the incidents. Failure to disclose and to deal with the behaviour led to negative effects such as social anxiety, depression, distress, stress and negative emotions. The study showed that individuals engaged in cyber- sexual violence while using the internet, which called for an investigation whether undergraduate students in Kenyan universities engage in online sexual violence due to problematic internet usage.

In agreement to Cripps and Stermack (2018), Holladay, (2016) also affirmed that more females than males became

victims of online sexual violence. The researchers indicated that availability and accessibility of internet usage and growth of social media sites increased cases of online sexual violence. Although online sexual violence has negative effects on an individual, some people become involved in it because they enjoy the behaviours portrayed on the internet (Klettke, et al., 2018). The researchers did a study to investigate sexting and mental health among young adults in Indiana and Australia and found out that sexting exposes individuals to risky activities mainly; unsafe sex, usage of alcohol as well as other substances and negative mental and emotional feelings. According to Henry and Powell (2015), there was intertwining between online sexual violence and internet platforms and technologies. People especially the youth shared sexually explicit information through sexting. Some of the shared information was non-consensual while on the other side, an individual had given consent for the information to be shared.

The current study argued that problematic internet usage could be user problem and could have a likelihood of leading to risk of addiction to online sexual violence. These assertions required an investigation, hence, the current research tried to establish the role of problematic internet usage in the risk of addiction to online sexual violence. Zhang (2018) indicated that the physical acts of internet violence included suicide, murder and sexual assault while the psychological acts include anti-social behaviour, depression and anxiety. The researcher affirmed that engaging in online sexual violence could lead to aggressive and negative attitudes towards females by males. Further, there was an increase in acceptance of sexual violence by both genders. However, males believed that females enjoyed violent sex after watching the same behaviours being portrayed on the internet. The researcher continued to assert that long periods of exposure to online sexual violence increased the likelihood of supporting rape. This suggested that engagement in problematic internet usage could predispose an individual to the risk of addiction to online sexual violence.

The current study tried to cover this gap in ascertaining whether problematic internet usage could lead to the risk of addiction to online sexual violence. The results of research to explore the effect of media among teen sexual behaviour and attitudes, Longo et al. (2002) acknowledged that internet had an impact on sexual behaviour and aggression. The study findings concluded that as the youth engaged in online activities more, they started to engage in behaviours portrayed on the internet by the media personalities who became the role models on how they behave sexually. This was in agreement with Bandura (1977) in social learning theory that individuals imitate behaviours that they see being rewarded. According to Zhang (2018), the groups that were at a greater risk of developing addiction to sexual violence are the youth and adolescents because they used the internet more often than other groups of people.

The findings of a study done by Njuguna (2017) to investigate perceptions of violent behaviour on females on the social media platforms in Kenya established that internet provided anonymity which lead to aggression. The anonymity made it difficult to trace the offenders of social

media crimes and hence, predisposed the users to harm. The researcher further observed that when individuals were exposed to aggressive sexual behaviours they could perceive rape as being right.

Aggressive sexual behaviours depicted on the internet portrayed women enjoying humiliation even though it could be violent and degrading (Wamaitha et al., 2014). The researcher continued to affirm that there could be a possibility of developing addiction to sexual violence as a way of practicing the behaviours learnt through the internet. The researchers' assertions could be affirmed by investigating the role of problematic internet usage in risk of addiction to online sexual violence among undergraduate students in universities in the counties of Nairobi and Meru, Kenya.

DISCUSSIONS

The five items on risk of addiction to online sexual violence were measured using a Likert scale of 1-5 in which, 1 inferred the least and 5 highest. Thus, a mean of 2.5 to 5.0 signified high extent involvement while a mean less than 2.5 inferred involvement to a low extent. The findings are displayed in table 1:

The Role of Problematic Internet Usage in the Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence

Table 1 Risk of addiction to Online Sexual Violence							
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Low Scores		High Scores	
				F	%	F	%
I feel restless because of trying to stop sexual violence	317	2.81	1.38	188	59.3	129	40.7
I sometimes engage in unwanted sexual behaviors	317	2.77	1.18	228	71.9	89	28.1
I have been in a relationship with someone who uses sexual violence	317	2.64	1.17	241	76	76	24

I often have failed to do academic work or to engage in face to face relationships because of engaging in sexual violence	317	2.50	1.19	255	80.4	62	19.6
I usually confront others who make inappropriate sexual gestures	317	2.39	1.48	242	76.3	75	23.7

Table 1 indicated that the risk of addiction to online sexual violence which was measured using five items namely, I feel restless because of trying to stop sexual violence, I sometimes engage in unwanted sexual behaviours, I have been in a relationship with someone who uses sexual violence, I often have failed to do academic work or to engage in face to face relationships because of engaging in sexual violence and I usually confront others whom make inappropriate sexual gestures. Four of the five items enumerated scores ranging from 2.51 to 2.81 while one item posted a mean of 2.39. This implies that in respect to four of the five items on risk of addiction to online sexual violence, the respondents had a considerable risk of addiction to online sexual violence since each scored a mean greater than 2.5. Item one - I feel restless because of trying to stop sexual violence scored a mean of 2.81 (1.38), item two - I sometimes engage in unwanted sexual behaviors posted a mean of 2.77 (SD = 1.18) and item three - I have been in a relationship with someone who uses sexual violence registered a mean of 2.64 (SD = 1.17) while item four - I often have failed to do academic work or to engage in face to face relationships because of engaging in sexual violence enumerated a mean of 2.51 (SD = 1.19). On the other hand, item five - I usually confront others whom make inappropriate sexual gestures posted a mean of 2.39 (SD = 1.48). This suggested that to a large extent the respondents felt restless because of trying to stop sexual violence, sometimes engaged in unwanted sexual behaviors, had been in a relationship with someone who used sexual violence and often had failed to do academic work or to engage in face to face relationships because of engaging in sexual violence. Hence, the respondents had a high risk of addiction to sexual violence.

The respondents were further categorized into two in respect to the responses availed on the item - risk of addiction to sexual violence. In this respect, scores of either 4 or 5 were classified as high scores while scores of 1, 2 or 3 were classified as low scores. It was established that 40.7% of the respondents felt restless because of trying to stop sexual violence, 28.1% sometimes engaged in unwanted sexual behaviours, 24.0% had been in a relationship with someone who uses sexual violence, and 23.7% usually confronted others whom make inappropriate sexual gestures, while 19.6% often failed to do academic work or to engage in face to face relationships because of engaging in sexual violence. The results suggested that the respondents had a high risk of addiction to sexual violence since more than a quarter of the respondents posted high scores for three of the five items.

The findings of the current study agreed with Srensson et al. (2018) that, problematic internet usage facilitates crime and violence. The undergraduate students who developed problematic internet usage were involved in unwanted sexual behaviours. A number of the students reported having been coerced and blackmailed to engage in indecent sexual behaviours with friends and strangers. A number of the students reported being involved in aggressive sexual acts which they had learnt online. This research also concurred with Zhang (2018) that problematic internet usage could lead to the risk of an addiction to sexual violence. Students reported having practiced the aggressive behaviours learnt online with peers, which strained interpersonal relationships. The students were also violent towards members of the opposite sex.

Through the in-depth interview schedule, the students' counsellors affirmed that some undergraduate students were involved in online sexual violence due to lack of self-acceptance and self-confidence due to upbringing. A majority of the students who went for counselling indicated having been abused as they were growing up of having experienced or witnessed some kind of violence in the family. Applying humiliation on the member of opposite sex served as booster to feel important after dominating others. Some students engaged in online sexual violence because of being blackmailed or coaxed by friends and strangers while a small number engaged in online sexual violence due to reasons such as pleasure in sexual sadism, revenge, anger, psychological or mental problems and family orientation. One student counsellor said that;

'Problematic internet usage is greatly influencing sexual violence which implies all forms of sexual abuse including sexual exploitation, harassment, rape, manipulation and sexual coercion. It is a form of sexual and gender based violence and can affect either of the genders, although the majority of the affected are females. Many undergraduate students

learn these behaviours from the internet and practice them.'

From focus group discussion, peer counsellors were asked to highlight the nature of problematic internet usage in relation to online sexual violence. The findings indicated that undergraduate students engaged in online sexual violence as a result of learning such behaviours on the internet. This was an indication that easy access of violent sexual materials and the anonymity involved encouraged the students to visit such sites. The findings of the study concurred with Holladay (2016) that an increase in social media and internet usage could lead to online sexual violence. This suggested that through the internet, the undergraduate students were able to imitate the behaviours portrayed online and practice with peers, friends and even strangers. Focus group discussion acknowledged that sexual exploitation and harassment was common among the students. Further, sexual based violence was also common although majority victims were females. The results implied that undergraduate students could learn and practice online sexual violence on the internet therefore; there was a relationship between problematic internet usage and risk of addiction to online sexual violence.

Table 2
Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence Cross Tabulation

		Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence		Total
		Low Risk	High Risk	
Non Problematic Internet Use	F	106	31	137
	%	49.5%	30.1%	43.2%
Problematic Internet Use	F	108	72	180
	%	50.5%	69.9%	56.8%
Total	F	214	103	317
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The study sought to determine the role of problematic internet usage in risk of addiction to online sexual violence among undergraduate students in universities in the counties of Meru and Nairobi, Kenya. Results displayed in Table 2 illustrated that 69.9% of the respondents displaying high risk of addiction to online sexual violence had problematic internet usage while 50.5% of respondents

with low risk of addiction to online sexual violence had problematic internet usage. Hence, the proportion of the respondents displaying high risk of addiction to online sexual violence that had problematic internet usage was higher than the proportion of the respondents exhibiting low risk of addiction to online sexual violence that had problematic internet usage.

Table 3
Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	P - Value
Pearson Chi-Square	10.703 ^a	1	.001
Likelihood Ratio	10.949	1	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.669	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	317		

Table 3 displays a chi square test, which was performed to examine the relationship between problematic internet usage and risk of addiction to online sexual violence. The relationship between problematic internet usage and risk

of addiction to online sexual violence was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 317) = 10.703, p < .001$. Hence, the null hypothesis - problematic internet usage is not statistically significant in risk of addiction to online sexual violence was rejected.

Table 4
Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence Comparison Analysis

Internet Usage	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Non Problematic Internet Use	137	12.1	3.9	0.34
Problematic Internet Use	180	13.9	4.2	0.31

Results shown in table 4 indicated an independent-samples t-test scores for risk of addiction to online sexual violence were significantly higher for respondents displaying problematic internet usage ($M = 13.9, SD = 4.2$) than for their counterparts with non-problematic internet

usage ($M = 12.1, SD = 3.9$), $t(315) = 3.984, p < .001$. Hence, the study established a significant relationship between problematic internet usage and risk of addiction to online sexual violence.

Table 5
Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Sexual Violence Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	P - Value	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.510	.476	-3.984	315	.000	-1.847	0.464
Equal variances not assumed			-4.023	302.5	.000	-1.847	0.459

In **Table 5**, an independent-samples t-test indicated that the scores for risk of addiction to online sexual violence were significantly higher for respondents displaying problematic internet usage ($M = 13.9$, $SD = 4.2$) than for their counterparts with non-problematic internet usage ($M = 12.1$, $SD = 3.9$), $t(315) = 3.984$, $p < .001$. Hence, the study established a significant relationship between problematic internet usage and risk of addiction to online sexual violence. The null hypothesis - problematic internet usage is not statistically significant in risk of addiction to online sexual violence was rejected.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The researcher found out that a few undergraduate students were involved in online sexual violence. The findings established that 69.9% (72) respondents were at a risk of developing addiction to online sexual violence. The highest mean score for the items measured was 2.81 meaning that problematic internet usage could lead to addiction to online sexual violence. The qualitative data from in-depth interview schedule and focus group

discussion established that problematic internet usage predisposed the students to the risk of addiction to online sexual violence because the more they engaged on online sexual matters, the more they learnt the behaviors portrayed online and hence, could result to trying out the behaviors. The results indicated that a number of students were engaged in intimate relationships, which were formed through the internet. A number of students who frequented the internet became victims to sexual predators at times unknowingly. Furthermore, the students reported having been coaxed or blackmailed to participate in adult chat rooms. This indicated that problematic internet usage was a significance factor in the risk of addiction to online sexual violence. The research indicated that there was a relationship between problematic internet usage and risk of addiction to online sexual violence. The study recommended that university management and students' counsellors provide information on sexuality to the students to prevent over-reliance on the information from the internet, which could be misleading.

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