

# Analysis Of The Effects Of Social Media Sexting On Adolescents And Youths Sexual Behaviours And Attitudes Towards Sexuality In Nigeria

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*Abstract: This paper analyses the effects of social media sexting on the social behaviours of Nigerian adolescents and youths, and their attitudes towards sexuality. Premised on the tenets of the uses and gratifications and social learning theories, the paper observes that Nigerian adolescents and youths use social media for several needs gratifications and learn from their social media experiences. The paper observes that Nigerian adolescents and youths also engage in sexting, a phenomenon which emerged as a social media trend. Analysis from available literature shows that there are risks associated with social media use, among which sexting is the most pervasive. As the literature on sexting has shown and all internet especially youths and adolescents users are susceptible and vulnerable to becoming sexting victims. The paper shows the various ways through which sexting affects the sexual orientations and behaviours of adolescents and youths, as well as their attitudes towards sexuality, noting desensitization, teasing, taunting, shame, ridicule, humiliation, embarrassment, harassment, divorce, job loss or suicide the key consequences of sexting. Conclusion of the paper is that besides sexually corrupting the budding minds, sexting is altering and forcing the long cherished values of confidentiality and intimacy in relationships, marital fidelity, family bond and morality to speedily wane.*

*Keywords: Social media, Sexuality, Sexting Sexual behaviours and Attitudes.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Several important trends have taken place in Nigeria within the past few years. One of the most important of such trends is the advances in information communication technologies, which have particularly enhanced access to internet connectivity. Although access to the internet is still considerably low in Nigeria, the advent of mobile telephony and increased access to mobile phones with web browsers has enhanced reach and access of Nigerians to the Internet. This development has led to the popularity of social media sites which have created platforms for adolescents and youths engagements in Nigeria. In consequence, the use of social media Web sites is among the most common activity of adolescents and youths in Nigeria today. Nigerian adolescents and youths are actively engaged in the generation and sharing of varying contents on social networking sites such as

Facebook, 2go, Myspace, Twitter Youtube, and independent blogs amongst others. The social media sites offer Nigerian adolescents and youths, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, a portal for entertainment and communication.

Research over the years has shown that the mass media functions both incidentally and by design in the socialization process of adolescents and youths in the society. Inevitably, they transmit the culture of the broader society in terms of beliefs, values, ideology, approved and disapproved behaviour/habitual pattern and modes of behaviour. Through exposure and attention to mass media content, young people learn what goals are valued in the society. The use of social media by adolescents and youths around the world have been proven to be beneficial, implying that Nigerian adolescents and youths are often enmeshed in social media sites as a result of the gratification they derive from such experiences. Notwithstanding their benefits, social media sites as Braun-

Courville and Rojas (2008,p.158) observe portend some risks due to their limited capacity for self-regulation.

Unlike the mass media, social media content is mostly user generated. Thus in contrast to the mass media content which goes through shrewd gate keeping processes that take cognizance of societal values and mores, the values shared over social media sites are based on individual orientations of the users who generate them. This may not necessarily be in tandem which cherished societal values and mores or acceptable tastes and standards as social media content is grounded on individual perceptions and judgment of users based on their orientations and aspirations.

In consequence, pornography, which has been a subject of disdaining public glare and is implicitly censored by the traditional mass media, has found social media as a platform of expression, with sexting, a new concept of pornography becoming increasing a popular social media content. Decrying this development, Writ (2011,P 6) notes that while society generally frowns at pornography, social media have thrust into a world in which it is no longer seen as disgusting. Regrettably too, Melby (2009,p 1) observes that many families over the years who were concerned about media content that their children are exposed to and monitored how they consumed the content, have become unperturbed and welcome social media use as part of the fabric of daily life of their children. Besides, many parents today are technology savvy and also use social media incredibly well. Such parents feel comfortable with the social media and online venues that their children and adolescents are using. All these notwithstanding, there are still concerns regarding potential risks associated with social media use, particularly sexting. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore sexting as a social media trend and analyze its effects on adolescents and youths' sexual behaviours and attitudes towards sexuality.

## II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

It is difficult if not impossible to have concepts whose meaning and applications are universally acceptable. As such, it is often safer in an academic discourse to conceptually define concepts within the framework of the discourse so as to logically guide readers into the author's thoughts or arguments regarding the premise of the discourse. Against this backdrop, the paper conceptually defines the central terms to the discourse social media, sex, sexuality, sexual, orientation, sexual behaviour and sexting, given their subjectivity to varying interpretations and understandings.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Simply put, refers to the 'websites and applications used for social networking'. In turn, social networking refers to 'the use of dedicated websites and applications to communicate with other users or to find people with similar interest to one's own'. Social media have, however, evolved over the past few years to include other tools and practices that were not conceived. Melby (2009,p.3) defines social media to encapsulate digital tools and activities that enable communication and sharing across the net, adding that

"Social media is used prolifically by all areas of society; business, politics, media, advertising, police and emergency services". It has also become a key tool for provoking thought, dialogue and action around particular social issues. This, in other words, implies that social media is user generated content that is shared over the internet via technologies that promote engagement, sharing and collaboration.

### SEX

Sex refers the biological characteristics that defines either the male or female division of a species, especially as differentiated with reference to the reproductive functions. In other words, it implies the sum of the structural and functional differences by which the male and female are distinguished, or the phenomena or behaviour dependent on those differences. According to WHO (2009 p.,1), these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both . However, sex tends to differentiate species as male and female. Michael and Joyner (2009, P.11) state that there are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal genitalia.

### SEXUALITY

Sexuality which is the capacity to have erotic experiences and responses, is a key part of human life. Sexuality encompasses personal and social meanings as well as sexual behaviour and biology and may also involve a person's sexual attraction to another. According to Johnson and Doonan (2006, p.41), all human beings are sexual and have developed their sexuality from a variety of influences including social, cultural, biological, economic, and educational factors .Ryan (200, p.33) observes that sexuality shapes people's identity and relationships and it linked with gender power relations, health, economics, livelihood, and social development. A comprehensive view of sexuality according to Johnson and Doonan (2006, p.43) includes social roles, personality, gender, and sexual identity, biology, sexual behaviour, relationships, thoughts and feelings.

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Also known as the expressions Of sexuality, sexual orientation which dictates people's feelings whether it is to the opposite sex(heterosexuality), to the same sex(homosexuality), having both tendencies(bisexuality), or not being attracted to anyone in a sexual manner(asexuality) is influenced by various factors including, social, ethical, economic, spiritual, cultural and moral concerns. According to Braun-courville and Rojas (2008,p.156) categories of sexual orientation typically, have included attraction to members of the other sex(heterosexuals), attraction to members one's own sex (gay men or lesbian), and attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals). Hamill and Chepko(2005,p.160) observe that sexual orientation dictates peoples feeling or attraction to the

other people, sexual thoughts and feelings and sexual preferences and impacts morals, cultural, political, legal and philosophical aspects of life.

#### SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Sexual behaviour is termed as any activity either solitary, between two persons, or in a group that induces sexual arousal. There are two major determinants of human sexual behaviour: the inherited sexual response patterns that have evolved as a means of insuring production and that are a part of each individual's genetic inheritance, and the degree of restraint or other types of influence exerted on the individual by society in the expression of his/her sexuality. Johnson (1999, p.11) observes that as children grow, they exhibit certain, sexual, behaviours. The common among adolescents and youths are explicit conversation with peers; interest in obscenities and jokes within the cultural norm; sexual innuendo and flirting; solitary masturbation; kissing, hugging, and hold hands; foreplay with mutual informed consent and peer-aged partner and sexual intercourse holding a full range of sexual activity.

#### SEXTING

Sexting, a combination of the words sex and texting, refers to the practice of taking and sending nude or semi-nude photos using cell phones. According to Phipper (2009, p.2) sexting is a term coin by the media and typically refers to sharing of sexually explicit messages as well as images, transmission through a wide range of technologies: cell phones, computers, video cameras, digital cameras and video games. Sexting may also refer to sexually explicit content communicated via smart phones on social networking sites. It has also been defined as the 'exchange of sexual messages and images' (Bialik,2009, p.4) and 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude through mobile phones and /or the internet (Rogers,2011,p.2) According to Brown, Keller and Stern(2009,p.13), sexting relates to a range of practices where sexually explicit materials or circulated, giving rise to widespread public and policy concern over 'risk' and dangers these practices pose to young people.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The premise of this paper is underpinned by the key tenets and assumptions of Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler's Uses and Gratifications Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Generally recognized to be a subtradition of media effects research, uses and gratifications is a psychological communication perspective that examines how individuals use mass media. An audience based framework, the theory recognizes media users as playing an active part in the communication process by selectively choosing and using media. Grounded on the assumption that individuals select media and contents to fulfill sets needs or wants, Ruggiero (2009, p.7) observes that mass media audience are goal-oriented in their media usage and seek out a source to fulfill their needs. These needs are expressed as motives for adapting

particular medium use, and are conneted to the social and psychological makeup of the individual.

Social Learning, on the other hand, according to Mae-Sincero(20011,p.2) acknowledges that the social context within which individuals learn is facilitated through modeling land observational learning , influenced by both the environment and characteristics of the person. This implies that a person's behaviour, environment and personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other. McQuail (2005, p 494) notes that the modeling process involves attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. That is, attention is needed for an individual to learn while retention is necessary for remembering details of the behaviour in order to later reproduce it. The reproduction involves responses in accordance with the modern behaviour, while motivation is the incentive driving the individual's reproduction of the behaviour.

Therefore, since individuals selectively use the media, based on perceived needs, social and psychological characteristics and media attributes, they use the media and experience related gratifications which they learn from the gratifying content and tend to model their behaviours. This is because users often have alternate choices to satisfy their needs but yet they selectively attend, perceive and remember information that is pleasurable or that will in some way help to satisfy their needs.

### III. SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG YOUTHS AND ADOLESCENT IN NIGERIA

Advancements and enhanced access to the mobile phones and internet connectivity over the past decades have made social media to become increasingly important in the lives of adolescents and youths in Nigeria. Nigerian adolescents and youths are heavy users of the newer electronic media platforms. They use them for instant messaging, e-mail and text messaging, as well as communication-oriented Internet sites such as blogs, social networking and site for sharing photo and videos. Adolescents and youths throughout the country regularly use the internet, cell phones and video games to gather information and communicate with each other. This ability to interact with others is the unique feature of *social media* which provides powerful new ways for adolescents and youths to create and navigate their social environments.

The use of social media by Nigerian adolescents and youths occurs simultaneously with their developing identity, emerging sexuality, physical development and moral consciousness. It is clear that adolescents and youths in Nigeria have embraced social interaction and communication in cyberspace. The explosion of internet-based social media and networking sites have gained popularity amongst Nigerian adolescents and youths. Social media sites such as Facebook, Myspace, 2go and Twitter offer multiple daily opportunities for connecting with friends, classmates and people with shared interest. Nigerian adolescents and youths today, like their counterparts in other parts of the globe are the driving force behind social, economic and political discourse in the country through their active virtual presence.

Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr (2010, p.43) notes that while adolescents and youths might communicate primarily with known friends via social media, they are also exposed to a larger world through their interactions. As members share links, ideas and media content, they are connected to a broad array of information. This explains why Sweet (2012, P.61) says it is possible that adolescents and youths' use of social media also helps them feel connected to the broader world beyond their school and home. Such relationships are related to the concept of bridging the social divide. Social media sites integrate and enable blogging, synchronous and asynchronous messaging, the sharing of multi-media content (pictures, videos, music, etc) and of course networking (the ability to connect with friends and others with similar interest) in a very user friendly, unrestricted and self-expensive way (Boyd, 2008, p.119).

At a basic level, social media sites enable individuals to create digital representations of themselves by posting biographical information, personal diary entries, affiliations, likes and dislikes, interests and multi-media artifacts (pictures, videos and audio). Creating an online persona through customized textual, visual aural electronic content allows adolescents and youths to "display the selves that are, the selves they wish become and the selves they wish others to see" (Hinduja and Patching, 2008, p.126). It then allows connectivity between these profiles so that an individual can include another as a 'friend' to view the content of their page, leave public comments, or send private messages. Cumulatively, online social networking sites allow a person to participate in a full time, always on, intimate community in which they can feel emotionally close and collected to others even when they are physically apart from them (Boyd, p.120).

Research has shown that engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that has benefited several adolescents and youths, including even children by enhancing communication, social connection, and even sharing of technical skills (Livingstone, 2008; Hinduja and Patching, 2008). This implies that if used responsibly, participation in social networking website provides a number of potential benefits for adolescents and youths. Lenhart and Madden (2007, p.5) notes that social media sites introduce users to deferring view points and perspectives and therefore encourage adolescents and youth to appreciate and respond to opinions and assertions in a pro-social and harmonious manner.

In addition, Livingstone (2008, p. 394) notes that social media users are at a stage where they are negotiating beliefs, boundaries, roles and goals as they discover, develop and refine their self-identity through online socialization, interaction and presentation. According to Livingstone (2008, p.395), adolescents and youths in the 21<sup>st</sup> century lack a real-world venue in which they can 'hang out' like adolescents and youths of the previous generation did (at the Bowling alley, malt shop, skating rink, neighbourhood basketball court or local shopping mall). They have therefore turned to cyberspace to meet and interact with others in a relatively adult-free environment. The unique opportunities offered by social media have lent them to embrace of even critics, while government agencies and officials in Nigeria have embraced them for official functions. Educational institutions in Nigeria

have also embraced social media even as instruction tools with virtual classrooms become popular.

#### IV. ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTHS SOCIAL MEDIA SEXTING

Although the benefits of social media have variously been acknowledged, there is plethora of hue-and-cry concerning the danger and potential risks that surrounds adolescents and youths in cyberspace. One of the key concerns according to Tynes (2007, p.577) revolves around the sentiments that online sexual predators scour the public profiles of unassuming adolescents and youths in order to identify, befriend, groom and then assault them. Tynes (2007, p.578) notes that rampant cases of sexual violence across the globe have "further exacerbated and reified this year". Sexual predators have advantage of the advancement in cell phone and internet technologies created social media forums to target and lure would be victims into the cyberspace social interaction where people no longer talk but rather text (Stern 2002, p. 269).

Besides the predators, "sexting" which has recently joined the modern day lexicon of digital social behaviour is prevalent and adolescents and youths are predominantly engaged in it. Combining the words "sex" and "texting", sexting represent the convergence between sexual behaviour and text messaging. Generally speaking, sexting refers to the "sending, receiving, forwarding, and/or posting of sexualized images and/or texts through a variety of digital platforms including text messaging, social networking sites, email and blogging" (Sweet, 2012, p. 33). Multimedia messaging service, also known as MMS, allow cell phone users to send texts, pictures and video messages to other users with MMS compatible phones.

Sexting is a burgeoning practice with an overwhelming number of adolescents and youths who use social media and had one time or the other sent, received, or forwarded sexualized text or photos or videos (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones and Wolak 2012, p.14). According Kitt, (2012, p. 8), the number of youths engaging the practice does imply, however, that sexting behaviours are innocuous; "rather, the negative short term and long term consequences of sexting activities range from minor humiliation to bullying, harassment, and, at the extreme end of this spectrum, suicide". Beebe, Asche, Harrison and Quinlan (2004, p.118) argued that the primary reason why sexting has become so prevalent amongst adolescents and youths is because cell phone technology has made it incredibly easy to take and send photographs, videos and audio clips.

The growing phenomenon of sexting, besides raising concerns regarding the safety of users particularly adolescents and youths has resulted to public policy discussions regarding the applicability of pornography laws to social media users engaged in the practice. According to Magid and Collier (2007, p. 52), adolescents and youths in the United States of America have been criminally prosecuted or threatened with prosecution for offenders relating to making, possessing, and distributing pornography; disorderly conduct that offends public taste and values and for nudity related material. Kitt

(2012, p. 10) adds that adolescents and youths are positioned in popular and policy debates regarding social media because of fears regarding the risks and harms associated to technological change. This explains why the social media trend called sexting has not only rattled society but has certainly unsettled parents, teachers and policy makers. Sexting is predominantly considered to be a young people's problem, although it is also an adult practice. Sexting in some times is considered a willful act that should not be criminalized; the serious risk of exploitation associated with sexting has increased global concern for applicable laws.

#### V. EFFECTS OF SEXTING ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS

The exponential growth of internet use among adolescents and youths in Nigeria in the past 10 years is the same with the growing concerns over its effects. In spite of the benefits associated with social media use, including new opportunities for sociability and self-expression, there are also valid concerns about the effects of its use, particularly the new but pervasive trend- sexting. Lenhart (2009, p. 3 ) observes that sexting can be utilized for social ( romance, flirtation, or finding a viable mate) but also antisocial ( blackmail, bullying and harassment) goals. From the social perspective, sexting is something intimate and often private, usually shared between people in a romantic context. Main motivations within the social context are that a partner asked for them, form of flirting or form of feedback on looks.

Within the antisocial context, sexting is an intentional act aimed at denigrating, teasing, taunting, humiliating, emotionally abusing or physically threatening others. According to Tufekei (2008, p. 544), antisocial sexting, commonly known as cyber bullying, often takes place when adolescents and youths seeking revenge over a broken relationship send nude photographs of the "ex" to mutual friends or post them on the internet for others to view. Considering its motivation, the antisocial context of sexting is usually done with the intent to seek revenge, embarrass, denigrate, belittle, malign, threaten, and/or humiliate others. This often leads to depression, apprehension, isolation, hate and suicide of antisocial sexting victim.

Although most adolescents and youths who engage in sexting usually approach it from a social perspective it becomes antisocial as a fall out of a collapsed relationship. Gifford (2009, p. 2) notes that in some cases, one of the partners under the pretext of romance requests for sexting and in turn uses it for predetermined motives. While sexting has far reaching effects that may not be initially conceived, the autonomy that users of phones feel when viewing and sending messages on a cell phone makes it easy for adolescents and youths to overlook the personal, social and society consequences of sexting. But in a technological world where anything can be copied, forwarded or uploaded, it has become virtually impossible to control information sent via text or email. The ease of forwarding suggestive content, children's failure to appreciate the related consequences, and the difficulty of regulating sexting all make the trend especially

dangerous to the well being of today's adolescents and youths in Nigeria

This is because while many of the social media sites have regulations about posting nude pictures, the time between posting an image and its removal allows the image to be saved and stored indefinitely on any cell phone or computer. Therefore, in the wrong hands, a sext can be easily uploaded to any website, including personal or school pages, or social networking sites such as Facebook, Youtube, Myspace, Twitter, and others. Along with the humiliation that comes from others seeing a private sext, the ability to mass-forward or upload any image or text leaves the door open for teasing, taunting, shame, ridicule, humiliation, embarrassment, harassment, divorce, job loss or suicide and other dangers to the victim.

Regardless of the small percentage of sexting scandals in Nigeria, sexting has the capability of cause devastating physical, social, psychological or legal damage. This is because the antisocial context of sexting destroys the healthy relationship skills of confiding, expressing emotions and constructive conflict resolution. Besides vulnerability of marital bond, adolescents and youths can be easily coerced into pornography production; they can be manipulated voluntarily or involuntarily encounter obscene materials they have limited ability to emotionally, cognitively and physiologically process; they can be the victims of sexting scandals; sexting can have their sexual and social development negatively impacted upon through exposure to fraudulent and/or traumatic messages regarding sexuality and the relationships and sexting can make them to develop unrealistic expectations about their future sexual relationship through repeated exposure to fantasy-based templates, Gifford(2009, p. 11 ) observes that internet pornography is altering the social and sexual landscape, noting that sexting can lead to:

- ✓ Disinhibition in sexuality, aggression and race relations (making inappropriate comments about sexual activity or race and engaging in sexually risky or maladaptive behaviours).
- ✓ Engagement in early sexual priming
- ✓ Modeling of negative attitudes towards women and homophobia
- ✓ Breeding of personal and social irresponsibility due to anonymity

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Sexting has saturated social media platforms with pornographic content and all social media users are advertently or inadvertently vulnerable to this growing trend. Using cues from the premise of uses and gratifications and social learning theories; it is apparent that the prevailing dysfunctional sexual behaviours and attitudes of Nigerian adolescents and youths towards sexuality are influenced by sexting. A look at the Nigerian society today undoubtedly shows that advances in technology, particularly mobile telephony and internet connectivity, in spite of the immense opportunities they avails, have also affected negatively the perception, attitudes and behaviours of youth and adolescents in Nigerians. Sexting, besides sexually corrupting the budding

minds, is altering and forcing the long cherished values of confidentiality and intimacy in relationships, marital fidelity, family bond and morality to speedily wane. Adolescents and youths in Nigeria today are increasingly getting “hooked up and dating” rather than engaging in emotional courtships; meaning that they have physical relationships with their partners without growing emotionally close. Society is also gradually accepting the trend as normal with sexting being a daily activity of most adolescents and youths. As a result, compared to past generations, Nigerian adolescents and youths today are reaching puberty earlier, engaging in sexual intercourse earlier and getting married much later.

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