



Cyberbullying and Sexting Behaviours among Adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Integrative Literature Review

Tosin E. Akinduyo



Department of Guidance and Counselling, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author's email: tosin.akinduyo@aaua.edu.ng

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4687-3213>

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media use has increased adolescents' exposure to online risks, including cyberbullying and sexting. Although these behaviours have become significant public health and social concerns globally, evidence from sub-Saharan Africa remains fragmented despite the region's growing youth population and digital connectivity. This integrative literature review examined the prevalence, forms, intersectionality, determinants, and consequences of cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. An integrative literature review approach was employed to synthesize empirical and theoretical evidence on cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. Relevant literature was retrieved from electronic databases, including Google Scholar, PsycINFO, ProQuest, ResearchGate, and Taylor and Francis Online. The selected studies were critically reviewed to identify patterns and emerging issues. The review revealed that cyberbullying and sexting are prevalent among adolescents across sub-Saharan Africa and are facilitated by increasing access to smartphones, internet services, and social media platforms. Cyberbullying commonly manifests as online harassment, threats, intimidation, public humiliation, exclusion, cyberstalking, and image-based abuse, while sexting occurs in forms such as consensual sexting, non-consensual image sharing, sextortion, and coercive sexual communication. The findings further indicate a strong interrelationship between cyberbullying and sexting, whereby intimate digital content is frequently used for victimization, blackmail, coercion, and public shaming. Cyberbullying and sexting constitute interconnected digital threats with far-reaching implications for the mental health, psychosocial well-being, and educational development of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated and culturally responsive interventions involving families, schools, communities, policymakers, technology providers, and governments. Strengthening digital literacy, online safety education, mental health support services, and protective policy frameworks is essential for promoting safer digital environments and safeguarding adolescent well-being in the evolving digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies, internet connectivity, and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed communication patterns among adolescents worldwide. While these technological advancements have enhanced access to information, education, and social interaction, they have also created new opportunities for harmful online behaviours, including cyberbullying and sexting. Despite religious, cultural, social, and legal disapproval of such behaviours in many sub-Saharan African societies, cyberbullying and sexting continue to pose significant challenges to adolescent health, safety, and well-being. Recognizing these concerns, international organizations, including the World Health Organization, have intensified efforts to address behaviours that threaten the physical, psychological, and social well-being of young people (González et al., 2025). Cyberbullying and sexting have emerged as two prominent forms of digital risk behaviour among adolescents. Sexting has been described as the transmission of sexually explicit messages through mobile phones and other digital devices (West et al., 2014), as well as the sending, receiving, or sharing of sexual depictions, representations, images, graphics, and videos through electronic communication platforms (Madigan et al., 2018). Cyberbullying, on the other hand, refers to the use of electronic technologies to threaten, harass, intimidate, humiliate, or defame individuals (Esquivel et al., 2023). Contemporary social media platforms have facilitated various forms of cyberbullying, including online victimization (Kowalski et al., 2022), dissemination of false or hostile messages (Gohal et al., 2023), intentional aggression toward vulnerable individuals (Gary et al., 2022), and anonymous online attacks in which perpetrators conceal their identities (Krešić-Čorić & Kaštelan, 2020). Evidence suggests that both cyberbullying and sexting are increasingly prevalent within sub-Saharan Africa. Makori and Agufana (2020) reported that among students in higher education institutions, 30% experienced disrespectful online interactions, 29.9% reported aspersion or character attacks, 21.4% experienced persistent threats, and 18.8% reported other forms of cyber victimization. Similarly, studies conducted in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, and Nigeria have documented high rates of bullying and victimization among adolescents and young adults (Aboagye et al., 2021; Acquah et al., 2014; Akanni et al., 2020; Kubwalo et al., 2013). Sexting has also become increasingly common in digital environments. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2015) reported that approximately 66% of adults had engaged in some form of sexting, including the exchange of sexually explicit messages, photographs, images, and videos. Such behaviours appear particularly prevalent among sexually active youth populations (Choi et al., 2019). Although sexting has frequently been studied among adults (Mori et al., 2020), adolescents increasingly

use sexting as a means of exploring sexuality, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships (Ojeda et al., 2020).

The increasing availability and accessibility of smartphones and internet-enabled devices have contributed significantly to the growth of online interactions where cyberbullying and sexting occur. Ojewola and Akinduyo (2019) observed a growing dependence on mobile phones among Nigerian undergraduate students, despite concerns regarding academic distraction. Likewise, Singh and Samah (2018) reported that smartphones have become indispensable tools for accomplishing daily activities among young people. However, excessive smartphone use and internet networking addiction have been associated with mental fatigue, reduced physical and technical performance, and broader psychosocial challenges (Ramjan et al., 2021; Greco et al., 2017). George and Odgers (2015) further linked persistent digital engagement to increased vulnerability to biological, psychological, and social health risks. Consequently, digital platforms may provide opportunities for adolescents to engage in cyberbullying and sexting as forms of social interaction, sexual expression, peer validation, and identity exploration. Nevertheless, these behaviours may expose individuals to substantial risks, including violations of privacy, compromised sexual well-being, and adverse mental health outcomes (Thomas, 2018).

The growing body of literature has highlighted the multidimensional nature of cyberbullying and sexting. For instance, Machimbarrena et al. (2018) examined a range of internet-related risks, including cyberbullying, cyber dating abuse, sexting, online grooming, problematic internet use, and online victimization. Their findings demonstrated that cyberbullying affects both male and female adolescents and frequently co-occurs with other forms of digital victimization. Similarly, Huțul and Karner-Huțuleac (2022) investigated sexting, revenge pornography, and sexual cyberbullying, emphasizing that technological advances, while beneficial to society, have simultaneously created avenues for harmful online behaviours. Their study suggested that sexting may contribute to subsequent cyberbullying experiences, particularly when intimate content is shared without consent.

Research further indicates that victims of cyberbullying and sexting experience a broad range of adverse outcomes. Disturbingly, many young people fail to seek professional support, including counselling services, despite experiencing harmful consequences associated with these behaviours (Thomas, 2018). This reluctance to seek help may exacerbate emotional and psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, emotional instability, distorted sexual perceptions, and impaired decision-making. Kumari and Srivastava (2017) found that female victims of sexting reported lower levels of self-

esteem than their male counterparts, although no significant differences were observed regarding body image perceptions.

Despite growing awareness and intervention efforts, cyberbullying and sexting continue to proliferate in adolescent populations, largely driven by technological innovations and increased digital connectivity. Madigan et al. (2018) noted that the widespread adoption of smartphones has contributed significantly to the increasing prevalence of sexting among adolescents. Existing evidence links cyberbullying and sexting to victimization (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019), involvement with the criminal justice system (Korenis & Billick, 2014), risky sexual behaviour (Hu et al., 2023), suicidal ideation, depression, emotional stress, anxiety, bullying, and rule-breaking behaviours (Ayasrah et al., 2024). Other documented consequences include hostility (Barlett and Coyne, 2014); reputational damage (Ringrose et al., 2013), cyber dating abuse and problematic internet use (Machimbarrena et al., 2018), harassment and antisocial behaviour (Ahmad et al., 2023), and broader mental health challenges (Mussap et al., 2023).

An emerging concern within this discourse is cyberstalking, a form of digital aggression characterized by persistent and intrusive monitoring, harassment, or surveillance of individuals through technological means. Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2021) noted that cyberstalking facilitates aggressive intrusions into victims' private lives without consent, while Soto et al. (2024) linked such behaviours to problematic beliefs surrounding romantic relationships. Cyberstalking is often forceful, repetitive, and difficult to control (Machimbarrena et al., 2018), with perpetrators frequently operating anonymously and maintaining continuous access to their victims through digital technologies (Tokunaga, 2010).

Although a growing body of research has examined cyberbullying and sexting independently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding their intersection, prevalence, determinants, and consequences within the unique socio-cultural context of sub-Saharan Africa. Given the region's rapidly expanding youth population and increasing digital engagement, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence to inform policy, practice, and future research. Therefore, this study employed an integrative literature review to examine the prevalence, dimensions, determinants, intersectionality, and consequences of cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, with the ultimate goal of identifying evidence-based strategies for mitigating their adverse effects on adolescent well-being.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

This study is anchored in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), developed by Blumler and Katz (1974). The theory posits that media audiences are active participants

in the communication process who consciously select and use media channels to satisfy specific psychological, social, and personal needs. Unlike traditional media theories that view audiences as passive recipients of media content, the Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes individual agency, suggesting that users actively choose media platforms and content based on their motivations, preferences, and expected gratifications.

According to Blumler and Katz (1974), media consumers utilize communication technologies to fulfill a variety of needs, including information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, personal identity formation, companionship, relaxation, and emotional satisfaction. The emergence of digital technologies, smartphones, social networking sites, and internet-based communication platforms has further expanded opportunities for individuals to satisfy these needs through online interactions. In contemporary digital environments, users are no longer limited to consuming information, but are also able to create, share, and exchange content with others in real time.

The assumptions of the Uses and Gratifications Theory have been extended to explain adolescents' engagement with social media and digital communication technologies. Sichach (2023) argued that users of smartphones, internet services, and social media platforms voluntarily engage in various online activities to satisfy specific personal and social needs. These needs may include establishing and maintaining social relationships, making new friends, seeking peer acceptance, communicating with others, entertainment, relaxation, self-expression, identity exploration, sexual curiosity, and sexual gratification. The theory further assumes that users exercise a considerable degree of control over their media choices and actively select digital platforms that best meet their desired outcomes (Sichach, 2023).

Within the context of this study, the Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a useful framework for understanding adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying and sexting behaviours. Adolescents are among the most active users of digital technologies and social media platforms, which they utilize for communication, socialization, identity development, and relationship formation. While many of these uses are positive, the same platforms may also facilitate risky online behaviours. From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, engagement in sexting may be motivated by adolescents' desires for intimacy, peer approval, relationship maintenance, sexual exploration, or emotional connection. Similarly, cyberbullying may occur within online environments where adolescents seek social dominance, peer recognition, entertainment, retaliation, or a sense of power over others.

The theory is particularly relevant to the intersection of cyberbullying and sexting because both behaviours occur within digital spaces that adolescents actively choose to access and use. The gratifications sought through social media engagement may inadvertently expose adolescents to online risks or encourage behaviours that have harmful consequences for themselves and others. Consequently, the Uses and Gratifications Theory helps explain how adolescents' motivations for using digital technologies may influence their participation in cyberbullying and sexting activities.

While the application of UGT to this study may be considered a conceptual stretch, it is not theoretically inappropriate. The flexibility of the theory has enabled its successful adaptation to numerous emerging communication technologies beyond the traditional mass media environment in which it originated. Consequently, extending UGT to the present context is justified by its enduring focus on users' motivations, intentional media choices, and the gratifications they derive from engaging with communication platforms. Rather than representing a departure from the theory's core assumptions, this application reflects its continued relevance in explaining user behavior across evolving media environments..

Therefore, the Uses and Gratifications Theory provides an appropriate theoretical lens for examining the motivations, behaviours, and online experiences associated with cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. It offers insight into why adolescents engage with digital platforms and how the pursuit of social, emotional, and psychological gratifications may contribute to both positive and negative online behaviours.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an integrative literature review approach to synthesize and critically examine existing evidence on cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. An integrative literature review was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to systematically collect, evaluate, integrate, and synthesize findings from diverse empirical and theoretical studies, thereby generating a comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon (Toronto, 2020). The approach also facilitates the identification of knowledge gaps, emerging themes, and implications for research, policy, and practice. This study was conducted retrospectively and involved a rigorous process of literature identification, critical appraisal, analysis, and synthesis of findings across studies (Beyea & Nicoll, 1998; Toronto, 2020). Consequently, this method was deemed suitable for exploring the patterns, determinants, intersectionality, and consequences of cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in the sub-Saharan African context.

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using multiple electronic databases to identify relevant studies. The databases searched included Google Scholar, PsycINFO, ProQuest, ResearchGate, and Taylor & Francis Online. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of multidisciplinary research in psychology, education, public health, sociology, and digital behaviour.

The search process involved the use of relevant keywords and combinations of search terms, including cyberbullying, online harassment, digital bullying, sexting, adolescents, young people, youth, sub-Saharan Africa, and Africa. Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" were used to broaden or refine the search results where appropriate. In addition to database searches, reference lists of relevant articles were manually reviewed to identify additional studies that met the objectives of the review. This snowballing technique enhanced the comprehensiveness of the search and reduced the likelihood of omitting important publications.

Study Selection and Data Extraction

Studies identified through the search process were screened for relevance based on their focus on cyberbullying, sexting, or both behaviours among adolescents and young people in sub-Saharan Africa.. Journal articles, academic books, theses/dissertations and academic online publications were reviewed for this study. Inclusion criteria includes publications reporting empirical studies and cyberbullying. Relevant publications were reviewed and analyzed to extract information relating to prevalence, forms, determinants, intersectionality, and consequences of cyberbullying and sexting in sub-Saharan Africa. Studies not conducted in English Language not reporting sexting and cyberbullying comprehensively and conducted outside sub-Saharan Africa were excluded. A simple manual count resulted 80 identified publications after removing 10 duplicates; 80 records were screened and 34 records were excluded following the established criteria. The remaining 46 records were assessed for eligibility and 25 publications were removed; while only 21 articles were synthesized for meeting the set eligibility criteria. For this study. Data from the selected studies were organised according to recurring themes and patterns to facilitate synthesis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

Findings from the selected studies were critically examined, compared, and synthesized to identify common contextual factors associated with cyberbullying and sexting among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. Through this process, the review generated an integrated understanding of the existing body of knowledge and highlighted areas requiring further empirical investigation.

Data were extracted, coded, grouped into categories or themes, and synthesized across studies. Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2006) guided the process, following six phase framework such as 1) familiarising myself with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) generating initial themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes 6) writing of report.

Ethical Considerations

As this study relied exclusively on published literature and secondary sources of data, ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, all sources consulted were appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with established academic standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa

The rapid expansion of digital technologies across sub-Saharan Africa has transformed communication, education, commerce, and social interactions. While these technological advancements have created opportunities for socio-economic development, concerns have also emerged regarding their unintended consequences. The World Bank (2016) observed that several sub-Saharan African countries, particularly in West Africa, continue to face challenges in maximizing the developmental benefits of digital technologies due to persistent social, economic, and governance constraints. As digital connectivity expands, online spaces have increasingly become platforms for harmful behaviours, including cyberbullying, dissemination of misinformation, hacking, online impersonation, and other forms of cyber misconduct (Daudu et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most significant digital risks affecting adolescents and young adults in the region. Broadly, cyberbullying refers to the intentional and repeated use of digital technologies, social media platforms, messaging applications, and other electronic communication channels to harass, threaten, intimidate, humiliate, or harm another individual. In the digital era, cyberbullying has been associated with various forms of youth misconduct and online aggression, resulting in serious psychological, social, and educational consequences (Ndibalema, 2024). The phenomenon is particularly concerning among vulnerable populations, including individuals with disabilities, who often experience heightened levels of harassment, victimization, and associated negative outcomes (Fehintola, 2025).

Available evidence suggests that cyberbullying is increasingly prevalent among students and young people in sub-Saharan Africa. Though as a limited to note explicitly, Cilliers (2021) reported that approximately one in three students had experienced cyberbullying victimization. Similarly, Ndebele and Msiza (2014) found

that 64.5% of victims reported experiencing significant embarrassment, while 34.5% indicated difficulties concentrating on their studies and often remained silent about their experiences. The persistence and severity of these outcomes may be influenced by the availability of protective factors, as adolescents who lack resilience and effective coping mechanisms appear more vulnerable to the harmful effects of cyberbullying (Aboagye et al., 2021). Research conducted within higher education institutions further highlights the growing concern surrounding cyberbullying in the region. Makori and Agufana (2020), in their investigation of cyberbullying among learners in higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, identified cyberbullying as a harmful by-product of technological advancement that adversely affects students' psychological well-being, undermines institutional safety, and contributes to severe outcomes, including suicidal ideation. Likewise, Kibe et al. (2022) examined cyberbullying experiences among undergraduate students in Kenyan universities and documented the unique characteristics that distinguish cyberbullying from traditional forms of bullying. These characteristics include anonymity, a potentially limitless audience, rapid dissemination of harmful content, and the ability of perpetrators to target victims across multiple digital platforms.

The literature identifies several forms of cyberbullying commonly experienced by adolescents and young adults. These include harassment, impersonation and disguising, deliberate posting of unauthorized content, and the exposure of personal or gender-related information (Notar et al., 2013). Other manifestations include character defamation, offensive online comments, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and threats to distribute private content to coerce victims into complying with specific demands (Kwanya, 2021; Jun, 2020). Additional forms include cyber-threats, online abuse, deception, and cyberstalking (Aune, 2009), as well as insults, privacy violations, password theft, and identity-related attacks (Walker et al., 2011). Peled (2019) further identified masquerading and deliberate exclusion from online social groups as common forms of cyberbullying. Regardless of the form it takes, cyberbullying is generally characterized by harmful intent and an attempt to dominate, control, or intimidate the victim (Chudal et al., 2021; Young & Govender, 2018).

The consequences of cyberbullying are extensive and often severe. Payne (2015) observed that cyberbullying frequently results in emotional reactions such as anger, anxiety, and unhappiness. More recently, Malesa and Sekgobela (2025) described cyberbullying as a devastating form of large-scale digital violence that threatens the well-being of adolescents both within Africa and globally. Their findings suggest that cyberbullying negatively affects students' educational experiences by contributing to

absenteeism, poor academic performance, reduced self-confidence, stress-related trauma, and aggressive behaviours. Nkwanyana (2025) similarly argued that cyberbullying undermines victims' social lives and weakens their ability to establish and maintain meaningful social relationships. Victims often experience humiliation, emotional distress, and social isolation, resulting in feelings of loneliness and diminished social connectedness (Campbell et al., 2020).

A distinguishing feature of cyberbullying is its ability to transcend physical boundaries and persist across multiple digital platforms. Samanta (2025) noted that cyberbullying is often characterized by anonymity, multi-platform aggression, and the targeting of specific age groups, particularly adolescents and young adults. These characteristics make cyberbullying difficult to detect and prevent, thereby increasing its potential impact on victims. Gender differences in cyberbullying have also received considerable attention in the literature. Some studies suggest that males are more likely to engage in cyberbullying perpetration, whereas females are more frequently victimized within sub-Saharan African contexts. Supporting this view, Wang et al. (2019) reported that women experienced cyberbullying at higher rates than men, while Motswi and Mashegoane (2017) found that approximately 11% of women reported being victims of cyberbullying compared with 4% of men. However, the evidence remains inconclusive. Sharma et al. (2017) argued that both males and females can be perpetrators as well as victims of cyberbullying, indicating that cyberbullying is not exclusively gender-specific but rather affects individuals across demographic groups.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that cyberbullying has become a significant public health, educational, and social concern in sub-Saharan Africa. Its diverse manifestations, widespread prevalence, and far-reaching consequences underscore the need for comprehensive prevention strategies, digital literacy programmes, psychosocial support services, and policy interventions aimed at fostering safer online environments for adolescents and young adults. As digital technology continues to expand across the region, addressing cyberbullying will remain critical for protecting the mental health, educational attainment, and social well-being of young people.

Conceptualizing Sexting in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sexuality-related issues within many African societies are often approached with considerable cultural sensitivity and are shaped by social norms, moral values, and communal expectations regarding appropriate sexual behaviour. Traditional African cultures generally emphasize respect for human dignity, modesty, and responsible sexual conduct, particularly among adolescents. However, the rapid expansion of digital

technologies and social media platforms has transformed the ways young people communicate, interact, and express their sexuality, giving rise to emerging behaviours such as sexting.

Sexting has been conceptualized as a contemporary form of digital communication involving the creation, sending, receiving, or sharing of sexually explicit or sexually suggestive messages, photographs, videos, audio recordings, and other forms of intimate content through electronic devices and online platforms (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Barrense-Dias et al., 2019). Although sexting is often discussed within the context of romantic and sexual relationships, the behaviour occurs for diverse reasons and under varying circumstances.

The literature suggests that adolescents engage in sexting for multiple motivations. These include communication between casual or one-time sexual partners (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020), revenge-related motives following relationship conflicts (Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and attempts to gain attention, exert pressure, issue threats, or enhance intimacy within existing relationships (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020). Other reported motivations include entertainment, exploration of sexuality, satisfaction of sexual curiosity, and the maintenance of emotional intimacy in long-distance relationships. These findings highlight the complexity of sexting behaviour and suggest that it cannot be understood solely as a risky sexual activity, but also as a multifaceted form of digital interaction among adolescents.

Available evidence indicates that sexting is increasingly prevalent among young people in sub-Saharan Africa. Commey et al. (2024) reported prevalence rates ranging from 9.9% to 74.4% among adolescents across different African settings. The substantial variation in prevalence estimates may reflect differences in study populations, cultural contexts, definitions of sexting, and measurement approaches. Nevertheless, considering that sub-Saharan Africa has one of the largest youth populations globally, the absolute number of adolescents involved in sexting is likely to be considerable. Furthermore, demographic and socio-cultural factors such as age, gender, educational level, access to digital technology, and social attitudes have been identified as important determinants influencing adolescents' perceptions of and engagement in sexting behaviours (Commey et al., 2024).

The literature also demonstrates that sexting occurs in multiple forms. Van Ouytsel (2019) identified sexting within coercive or forceful romantic relationships, where individuals may be pressured to create or share intimate content. Molla-Esparza et al. (2023) categorized sexting into audio, visual, participatory, and non-participatory forms, reflecting the diverse ways in which sexually explicit content is exchanged through digital media. Otanga (2024) further described impulsive sexting as a form of spontaneous and unplanned engagement in sexually

explicit digital communication. Other forms reported among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa include flirting-oriented sexting, romantic fantasy-based exchanges, and sextortion, where intimate content is used as a means of coercion, manipulation, or exploitation.

Taken together, sexting is a multifaceted digital behaviour shaped by individual, relational, technological, and socio-cultural factors. While sexting may serve communicative and relational purposes for some adolescents, its occurrence within contexts of coercion, exploitation, and digital vulnerability raises significant concerns for adolescent health, safety, and well-being. Consequently, understanding the diverse forms, motivations, and prevalence of sexting in African contexts is essential for developing culturally responsive interventions, digital literacy programmes, and policies aimed at promoting safe online engagement among adolescents.

Intersection of Cyberbullying and Sexting

Cyberbullying and sexting are increasingly recognized as interconnected forms of online behaviour that often occur within the same digital environments and social interactions. Although conceptually distinct, the two behaviours share common risk factors, communication channels, and social dynamics, making their co-occurrence a growing concern among adolescents. The intersection between cyberbullying and sexting is particularly evident when consensual or non-consensual sexual content is used to harass, threaten, intimidate, shame, or exploit individuals through digital platforms. In such situations, sexting may evolve into cyberbullying, while cyberbullying may involve the misuse or dissemination of intimate content, creating a cycle of online victimization.

Empirical evidence supports the existence of a strong relationship between cyberbullying and sexting behaviours. Hu et al. (2023) reported a significant association between non-consensual sexting and cyberbullying, noting that both behaviours expose young people to substantial psychological and social risks. Similarly, Van Ouytsel et al. (2019) found that involvement in sexting increases the likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating cyberbullying, suggesting that engagement in one online risk behaviour may heighten vulnerability to the other. This overlap underscores the need to examine cyberbullying and sexting not as isolated phenomena, but as interrelated aspects of adolescents' digital experiences.

Several individual, social, and technological factors have been identified as contributing to the intersection of cyberbullying and sexting. Peer influence remains one of the most significant drivers of these behaviours. Excessive

pressure from peers has been shown to encourage adolescents' participation in both cyberbullying and sexting activities (David et al., 2018). Furthermore, adolescents may perceive involvement in these online behaviours as a means of gaining peer approval, social recognition, or enhanced social status within their social networks (Vanden et al., 2014). Such perceptions may reinforce engagement in risky online practices despite awareness of their potential consequences.

Research has also highlighted the role of interpersonal and psychosocial factors in facilitating the co-occurrence of cyberbullying and sexting. Adolescents' willingness to participate in online interactions, involvement in cyber-gossip, and levels of social competence have been associated with increased engagement in both behaviours (Casas et al., 2019). Likewise, social media addiction, expectations regarding online relationships and interactions, and gender differences have been identified as significant predictors of cyberbullying and sexting behaviours among young people (Ragona et al., 2023). These findings suggest that adolescents' online experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of personal motivations, social influences, and digital environments.

Within the sub-Saharan African context, additional contextual factors appear to increase adolescents' susceptibility to both cyberbullying and sexting. Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that weak parental monitoring, unrestricted access to digital devices and internet services, inadequate digital literacy, sexual curiosity, and limited access to safe online education contribute to the occurrence of these behaviours. The rapid expansion of smartphone ownership and social media use among adolescents has further amplified opportunities for online interactions that may facilitate both sexting and cyberbullying. Consequently, adolescents who engage in one of these behaviours may become increasingly vulnerable to the other, particularly in environments where protective mechanisms and digital safeguards are limited.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that cyberbullying and sexting are closely intertwined digital behaviours that share common antecedents and frequently overlap in practice. Their intersection creates compounded risks for adolescents, including psychological distress, social harm, reputational damage, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. Understanding the interconnected nature of cyberbullying and sexting is therefore essential for developing integrated prevention strategies, strengthening digital citizenship education, promoting responsible online behaviour, and enhancing protective interventions for adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

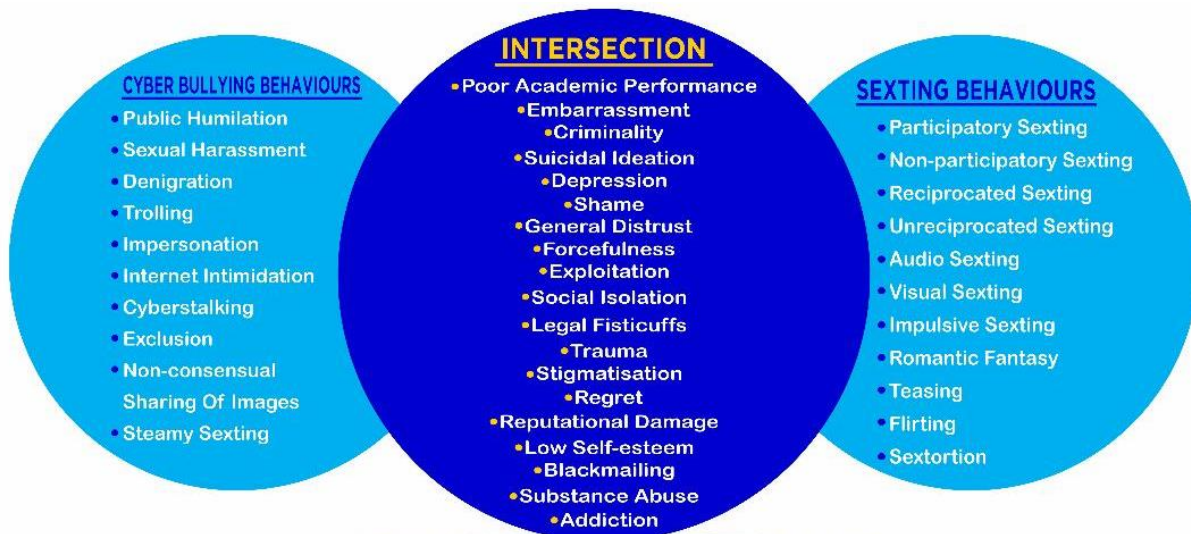


Figure 1: Diagram showing Intersection of Cyberbullying and Sexting

Consequences of Cyberbullying and Sexting

The evidence reviewed indicates that cyberbullying and sexting are associated with a wide range of adverse psychological, social, behavioural, academic, and legal consequences among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa. These outcomes suggest that engagement in, or victimization through, cyberbullying and sexting poses significant threats to adolescent mental health and overall well-being.

Psychological and emotional consequences are among the most frequently reported outcomes. Studies have linked cyberbullying and sexting to psychosocial difficulties, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and emotional instability (Gassó et al., 2019). Victims have also been found to experience psychological distress, engagement in risky behaviours, and violent tendencies (Morelli et al., 2016). Furthermore, cyberbullying victimization has been associated with suicidal ideation and self-harm tendencies among adolescents (Frankel et al., 2018). In cases involving the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, victims often experience severe emotional and mental health challenges, including suicide attempts, prolonged grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder (McGlynn et al., 2017; Patel & Roesch, 2022). Such incidents remain a growing concern, as Sparks et al. (2023) and Mori et al. (2020) reported that approximately 8% of adults had experienced non-consensual dissemination of intimate images to third parties without their consent.

Beyond psychological effects, cyberbullying and sexting have profound social consequences. Victims frequently report feelings of humiliation, shame, reduced self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Alsawalqa, 2021). Social isolation and diminished peer relationships have also been identified as common outcomes (Ademiluyi et al., 2022). In many instances, the public exposure of private information or intimate images results in reputational damage,

embarrassment, and stigmatization, which may persist long after the initial incident (Rodríguez et al., 2025).

Behavioural consequences have also been documented. These include increased alcohol consumption, use of illicit substances, aggressive behaviour, and coercive or forceful conduct (Pichel et al., 2022; Cornelius et al., 2020). Additionally, victims of sexting-related exploitation may experience fear, intimidation, blackmail, and harassment, further exacerbating their vulnerability and psychological distress (Hamamra et al., 2025).

The educational implications of cyberbullying and sexting are equally concerning. Exposure to these behaviours has been associated with poor academic performance, reduced concentration, school absenteeism, and impaired educational development (Sinthumule & Ngonyama, 2022). These challenges may negatively affect adolescents' long-term educational attainment and future opportunities.

Furthermore, cyberbullying and sexting may have significant legal and criminal implications. Liakopoulos (2020) highlighted the criminal dimensions of these behaviours, particularly when they involve harassment, coercion, exploitation, image-based abuse, or violations of privacy rights. Victims may also become entangled in legal disputes arising from the unauthorised creation, possession, or distribution of intimate content. Consequently, trauma, exploitation, legal challenges, and persistent emotional suffering remain substantial threats to the well-being of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that cyberbullying and sexting are interconnected digital behaviours with far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the individual to affect families, schools, and communities. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive prevention strategies, digital literacy education, mental health support services, and stronger legal frameworks to

protect adolescents from online victimization and its associated harms.

CONCLUSION

This integrative literature review synthesizes existing evidence by various researchers on cyberbullying and sexting behaviours among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting their patterns, influences, intersectionality and outcomes. The findings from this review indicated that both cyberbullying and sexting are prevalent among adolescents in the sub-Saharan Africa, due to peer influence, access to internet services, affordability of mobile phones and easy entrance in to various social medial groups and applications. This review revealed that cyberbullying and sexting are behaviours that are highly interconnected, which implies that the engagement in one could trigger the occurrence of the other behaviour. When cyberbullying and sexting occur, negative outcomes affecting the mental health of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa bedeviled their well-being, with different societies suffering from the negative outcomes.

Moreover, the review identified substantial adverse outcomes associated with both behaviours, particularly in relation to adolescents' mental health and psychosocial well-being. Experiences of cyberbullying and sexting were linked to psychological distress, emotional problems, social challenges, and other negative health outcomes that affect individuals, families, schools, and communities across sub-Saharan Africa.

Given the growing digital engagement of adolescents in the sub-Saharan Africa, there is an urgent need for comprehensive policies, digital literacy programmes, school-based interventions, parental guidance initiatives, and culturally appropriate mental health support services. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to further explore the evolving dynamics of cyberbullying and sexting and to inform evidence-based strategies for safeguarding adolescent well-being in the digital age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this review, the following recommendations were made:

1. Youth friendly mental health support services should be provided across schools and communities in sub-Saharan Africa
2. Policymakers, education consultants, relevant agencies and tiers of government improve on their digital education and proficiency for adolescents.
3. Proper parental monitoring with sufficient legal framework for safe online behaviours
4. Partnership with internet providers and smartphones companies in enlightening, monitoring, moderating and provision of adolescent safety apps/features on

different devices and social media platforms in sub-Saharan Africa.

5. Adequate awareness by agencies and professional counsellors should be done, to equip adolescents with information needed as they carry out their daily activities using smart phones and internet access.

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- Moses Sichach 15-1605 Uses and Gratifications theory - Background, History and Limitations This mid semester assignment has been submitted in fulfillment to the partial requirements for the course Graduate Research Writing (GRW 613X) Submitted to Dr. Daniel Omondi Department of Strategic and Organisational Communication 17th November 2023
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