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INTERNET RISKS AND TEENAGE CHILDREN'S AGENCY: A CASE OF POST-PRIMARY STUDENTS AT A SCHOOL IN CHIREDZI, ZIMBABWE

DZORO, Joylene., CHERENI, A. and GWENZI, Getrude. D.

ABSTRACT

The global penetration of the internet and related information and communication technologies (ICS) is intensifying. Increasingly, both adults and children are using the internet to meet some of their educational and entertainment needs. However, the internet contains information that may have adverse impacts on the psychosocial and sexual development of children. Furthermore, children may not be sufficiently equipped to navigate cyber-related risks. And yet some explanations of children's internet use posit that children are not entirely unaware of the many risks connected with internet use. Consequently, the goal of this article was to examine the idea that children have agency – a concept used in the article to describe children's capacity to act independently to pursue their own goals, preferences and choices online − and can meaningfully manage the risks associated with internet use. To do this, the article analyses the narratives of ten (10) purposively selected learners at a secondary (post-primary) school in Chiredzi, aged between 14 and 17 years old, who were learners. The article finds that the children included in the study enjoy a strong online presence with parents facilitating it. Children had access to inappropriate content, although parents were less likely to find out. Interestingly, children were very much aware of both the potential dangers associated with internet use and the mitigation measures. In order to make children's online presence safer, the article recommends active and informed involvement of parents as well as deliberate state-supported, stakeholder-driven programmes that recognize the agency of children even as they educate children on cyber ethics and relevant legal protections.

KEY TERMS: *agency, children, internet, risks; teenagers, parental involvement, Chiredzi, Zimbabwe*

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Author/s details: Dzoro J., Independent social work onsultant
Admire Chereni, PhD, School of Social Work, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe. Email: admirechereni@gmail.com
Gwenzi, GD, Lingnan University

INTRODUCTION

This article is about children's presence online, their perceptions of potential risks as well as their agency – a term we employ to describe how children acted independently to anticipate, avoid and mitigate adversities associated with internet use. The goal of the article was to explore children's perceptions of online risks and how they dealt with them. The rationale for the article emanates from the fact that, while the internet contains multitudes of educational resources to support children's learning, it is also home to information that may have adverse impacts on the psychosocial and sexual development of children (Longe and Chiemeke et al., 2007).

Among other things, the increasing number and capabilities of the web-based applications attract users to the internet. Search engines for example, Google and Bing, are growing reservoirs of collectively-created knowledge. They have become indispensable sources of learning and entertainment resources, ranging from bedtime stories and children's games to electronic scientific journal articles, book chapters and books. Moreover, there are many web-based learning applications which enable customized learning. There is a growing corpus of educational resources on the internet and the Worldwide Web, which children can use to boost their learning outcomes. Children can access electronic books, web-based learning content and other learning resources such as quizzes and crossword puzzles, which contribute to their core-curricula.

Equally attractive are social media platforms which enable more affordable and instant communication as well as sharing of personal information such as one's location, photos, videos and so on. Some of the most popular social media platforms include WeChat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Web-based social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enable children to share messages and different media (photos, videos) faster and cheaper. Additionally, children can also access movies, songs, videos and online gaming.

As in other regions, child-serving and child protection professionals in Africa accept that the internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs) do facilitate children's access to information that potentially catalyse learning. But they also think that these technologies equally enable children's access to inappropriate content such as sexual and violent content may expose them to varying degrees of risk (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009; De Barros and Lazarek, 2018; Kritzinger, 2017; Longe, Chiemeke et al., 2007). Many child protection and child serving professionals in Africa fear that children may lack the problem-solving tools to stay safe on the internet (Save the Children; Longe, Chiemeke et al., 2007). This is particularly true for children for younger children who may lack the linguistic devices to describe what they encountered on line if and when they seek help from adult significant others. Therefore, there are inevitable downsides of children's internet use, which potentially compromise their holistic development.

This article argues that, whereas a growing corpus of literature on children's vulnerability online exists (see Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud, 2018; Zebron, Singauke et al. 2013), little research sheds light on children's knowledge of and own efforts at, addressing risks associated with their internet use. Yet some explanations of children's internet use suggest that children are not entirely unaware of the many risks connected with internet use and they are not always ill-equipped to manage cyber risks (Livingstone, Kirwil et al., 2014). Consequently, this article is underpinned by the sociology of childhood paradigm, which treats children as individual actors in their own right and not just disciples of adult socialization. Children actively shape their own social contexts (Freeman, 1998). The sociology of childhood tradition directs attention of the researcher to children's agency, that is, the "ways in which children construct their own autonomous social worlds" (Freeman, 1998: 436). This social construction of childhood informed the methodology adopted in this Bachelor of Social Work Honours Degree project accomplished by one of the authors. The qualitative approach employed gave room to children's own voices and experiences through explorative, semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007).

The article draws on a purposive sample of 10 children that were between 14 and 17 years old. These adolescent participants were students at a secondary (post-primary) school in Chiredzi, a town located approximately 430 km south of Harare (Zimbabwe's capital city). Qualitative thematic content analysis guided data analysis and the process included generating codes, applying codes to chunks of interviews leading to categories and themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This article is organized as follows: after this in introduction, the article presents a brief literature review which explores the internet risks that children face online, followed by a description of methodology. After the methodology, findings are presented. The article ends with a section on discussion and conclusions.

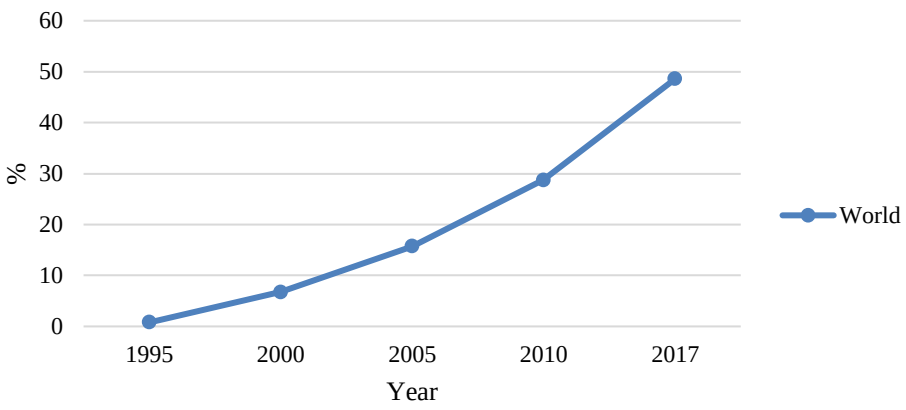
LITERATURE REVIEW

Growing internet capabilities and children's online risks

The global penetration of the internet is growing. For example, according to the World Bank, the number of people who have used the internet in the last three months as a proportion of the world population has increased from just above 1% in 1995 to approximately 50% in 2017 (World Bank). Figure 1 graphically present this increase. Web-

based applications that attract users to the internet are expanding both in quantity and capability. Search engines such as Google, are growing reservoirs of collectively created knowledge and are becoming rather indispensable sources of learning and entertainment resources, ranging from bedtime stories and children's games to electronic scientific journal articles, book chapters and books. Moreover, there are many web-based learning applications which enable customized learning. Equally attractive are social media platforms which enable more affordable and instant communication as well as sharing of personal information such as one's location, photos, videos and so on. Some of the most popular social media platforms include WeChat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Figure 1 presents World Bank statistics on internet use.

Figure 1: Individuals using the Internet (% of population), world figures, 1993-2017



Child-serving and child protection professionals accept that the internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs) do facilitate children's access to information that potentially catalyse learning. But they also think that these technologies equally enable children's access inappropriate content that may expose them to varying degrees of risk (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009; Save the Children; Longe, Chiemeke et al., 2007). Children encounter many risks online. Such risks include content and contact risks connected to the nature of internet technology, e-commerce-related risks and risks associated with privacy of personal and security of information. Five main categories of children's online risks can be identified in literature: content, contact, conduct and commercial and children's privacy risks. Content risks include children's potential access to age-restricted material online such as sex and security of information risks (Livingstone, Kirwil et al., 2014).

Content risks seem to have received a lot more attention of researchers, parents and child protection specialists than others (Livingstone, Kirwil et al., 2014; Stamoulis and Farley, 2010; Chawki, 2009). Growing internet capabilities enable children and young persons to receive sexual or violent materials on their handheld devices. Alternatively, children can access such content on the internet on their devices. However, as Livingstone, Kirwil et al. (2014) demonstrate, there are risks from the conduct of others especially children. For example, some children may share their own or other people's nude photos or send sexually explicit messages. Contact risks entail the child making contact online and subsequently, offline, with a stranger with the potential of sexually inappropriate or violent interactions. These risks are equally dangerous. Being exposed to unwanted commercial material carries its own risks for children. Children may involuntarily follow pop-ups that display age-restricted goods. Risks to the child's privacy are equally harmful. This is because child and adult perpetrators potentially use private information to hurt the child psychologically.

Ideas rooted in the tradition of social psychology view media as a potential source of harmful impacts for children's psychological wellbeing and overall development. Even prior to the spread of the internet, scary, sexual and violent television programmes and computer games were shown to be harmful to children's psychological wellbeing. In the context of the internet, which is becoming more and more affordable, online media is said to compromise children's development (Stamoulis and Farley, 2010). Child-serving professionals and child protection practitioners in Africa view children as rather vulnerable internet users who require cyber-safety interventions such as safety guides and protocols for content developers (De Barros and Lazarek, 2018; Kritzinger, 2017). Internationally, there is a growing corpus of literature on children's vulnerability online (see Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud, 2018; Zebron, Singauke et al. 2013). However, research that sheds light on children's knowledge of and own efforts at, addressing risks associated with their internet use is nascent.

Voluntary and involuntary exposure to online risks

The concepts of exposure and consumption help to reveal the nature of children's susceptibility to internet risks through use. According to Berns (2010), the prevalence of exposure refers to the extent to which a child has been exposed to risks associated with the way children consume or use the internet. Children's consumption of the internet potentially exposes them to risks such as aggressive material and sexually explicit material. Children are exposed to these risks either voluntarily or involuntarily. Also known as unwanted exposure, involuntary exposure comes from such things as emails, mistyping of URLs into a web browser, pop-ups, and keyword searches that produce unexpected results (Chawki, 2009). To illustrate, consider the following: a girl child uses specific search terms to search for a school uniform or female trainers, and suddenly a link just pops up, with a title "date online" or "sexy hot chicks". She may instinctively follow the link out of eagerness to see what "sexy hot chicks" actually look like. This is involuntary exposure to risk because the link to explicit material merely appeared without the child searching for it. Other materials that can surface on the page include aggressive online games and advertisements. In many cases, advertisements are already built into those applications – installed on handheld devices including smart phones and tablets – that enable online gaming and communication. Since children generally prefer to use applications on handheld devices, one is more inclined to think that the number of children that experience involuntary exposure to risk to internet risks is larger than we think (Stamoulis and Farley, 2010). Furthermore, the more children use the internet (frequency), the greater the likelihood that they have encountered or will encounter online risks (Stamoulis and Farley, 2010).

Although children do stumble upon undesirable content involuntarily, they are internet users in their own right. What started as involuntary exposure may, over time, become wilful exposure. It is unsurprising that children may deliberately search for harmful materials on the internet. Voluntary and involuntary sexually explicit material and messaging (or texting) sexually explicit material (known as sexting) is also a major threat on the internet (Berns, 2010). Sexually explicit material includes images, videos or text that portrays sexual material such as nude pictures of a woman or a man or include suggestive expletives.

Children learn through imitation. From the perspective of Ubuntu, children achieve full personhood in interaction with other members of the community (Metz, 2016, Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). This means that children learn from adults and those around them. The idea that children learn through imitation, as similarly propounded by many learning theorists (for example, Albert Bandura) indicates that children may end up experimenting with what they see on the internet. Furthermore, children that have no exposure to negative material on the internet may face similar risks if they interact with peers who were exposed in the past. Another adverse outcome is that children who experience violence may end up abusing other children.

Children's increased use of the internet may lead to further risks and more exposure. Getting in contact with a stranger can lead to increased frequency of communication between the child and the perpetrator. Sexual content can be shared through video calling and instant messaging, such as WhatsApp, Skype and many others. This sharing sexual content (messages, pictures, videos and so on) is known as sexting. Sexting may take place through short text messaging (for example, short message service) sent using mobile phones and wireless handheld devices. The main aim of sexting is to arouse sexual feelings in self and others and possibly induce or manipulate the other party into engaging in a sexual act. Sexting may occur between children or may involve an adult. Berns (2010) defines arousal as the physiological change in the body and subsequent emotions that occur when one is viewing sexually explicit material or aggressive material. Perpetrators can use sexting to groom a child to become sexually active. Grooming entails the use of premeditated behaviour intended to secure a child's trust and cooperation prior to engaging in sexual (mis)conduct. The solicitor of a child's nude photos grooms him or her to become aware of the sexual materials and will take it as an acceptable behaviour assuring the child that that there is nothing wrong with sending nude pictures online. When a child meets the individual – be it another child or an adult – with whom he or she had exchanged sexting messages, there is a likelihood that these two may have sex, which is harmful to children.

Children's online vulnerabilities may increase with their exposure to online risks. When the solicitor possesses the nude pictures of the child, they may use these pictures to bargain for sexual favours by threatening to share the child's nude photos, a phenomenon known as pornographic revenge. In most instances, pornographic revenge occurs when a disgruntled person whose advances the child previously turned down decides to use sensitive pictures to spite, shame or hurt the other. The child faces at least three dilemmas: whether to succumb to the perverted sexual requests of the perpetrator or risk being the subject of blackmail or to succumb and be vulnerable to future blackmail. Too often, these dilemmas lead to child sexual exploitation.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Study design and data collection

The study adopted a case study research approach, which used qualitative methods, in particular semi-structured interviews, including a scenario vignette (Hughes and Huby, 2002) with adolescents at a secondary (post-primary)

school in Zimbabwe's Chiredzi District known as Low Veld High School (pseudonyms used throughout). The use of the vignette was also a strategy to reduce potential harm by avoiding questions that put children on the spot. The vignette presents a hypothetical situation followed by questions based on the characters in the vignette. The ethical principle of confidentiality was achieved in practice by anonymizing the names of children and places mentioned in the interviews and de-linking the child's identity and the interview script. Participants were informed about the study objectives, methods and the anticipated outputs. They were made aware that they could withdraw at any time during the interview, without an implication for them.

At Lowveld High School, students had access to the internet while on campus. For these reasons, the school was selected as a case study within which questions about both children's consumption of the internet and their awareness of risks as well as their own agency were explored. According to Dumez (2015), a case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a 'bounded' system that can be a setting or a context. The data were collected between December 2015 and March 2016. This research is a cross-sectional study in the sense that data were collected on a once-off basis rather than over multiple stints at determined intervals, as in longitudinal studies (Corbetta, 2011). The school was the starting point for recruiting participants, although the semi-structured interviews explored children's lived experiences beyond the school perimeter, for instance at home. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted about 30-45 mins?

Purposive and snowball sampling (a term that refers to the process of accessing and selecting participants by which each located subject suggests other subjects (Corbetta, 2011) – informed the selection of students who used internet at school and at home. One participant suggested one or more participants. In the end, the selected participants represented different socio-economic backgrounds and children who come from different family types such as single-parent families and dual income families

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis – that is, a method employed to analyse data focusing on themes that are identified by means of coding (Gubrium and Holstein, 2011) – was used to make sense of the interviews. When using this type of analysis, themes emerge from a process which starts with developing codes, applying codes to chunks of participants' narratives generating categories and building themes from categories (Gubrium and Holstein, 2011). Audio data were initially transcribed and entered into a word processor. By reading each interview transcript several times, a coding list was generated. Chunks of text from each interview, which fit the descriptive category of a given code were grouped together into categories (sub-themes) and main themes using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings organized according to the themes that emerged as follows:

i. Children's online presence and associated vulnerabilities
ii. Children's response to online risks

Theme 1: Children's online presence and associated vulnerabilities

The study participants were five females and five males aged between 14 years and 17 years old. They each used sophisticated handheld devices including smartphones and tablets made by leading world brand companies such as Apple, Samsung and Huawei to access the internet. In order to access social media platforms for communication, information and entertainment purposes. These devices used mobile data purchased by way of a pre-paid data plan from local network providers. The social media platforms which children used were not different from those that adults ordinarily use: WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Gmail and Facebook. Interestingly, parents bought children's handheld devices and foot the cost of data with which children access the internet. It would appear that parents facilitate children's access to the internet.

The qualitative sample comprised both girls and boys between 14 and 17 years old, suggesting that the use of the internet and other ICTs by children may not be a gendered phenomenon. Perhaps what could be gendered are the sites adolescents visit and the uses of the internet (Nishida, Tamura and Sakakibara, 2019). The mere online presence was not gendered; both boys and girls used the internet for communication and entertainment purposes. When asked to describe her online presence, Jennifer a 17-year old teenage girl retorted with a hint of pride: '*I have access to Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp almost all the time and I want to open an Instagram account'*. When online, Jenifer engages more in entertainment than educational tasks: *'I do less of school stuff … I download music videos."* Similarly, Mukudzei, a 16-year old male student, spends much of his time online to "*download music videos and play games"*.

Regardless of age and gender, the children in the qualitative sample used FaceBook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Youtube, among other social medial sites, largely for entertainment and communication. Other studies (e.g., Phyfer, Burton, and Leoschut) have similarly established that adolescents predominantly use internet sites for entertainment and communication purposes. From the interviews with the participants, it is evident that their parents were actively involved in facilitating the children's access to the internet. Parents bought advanced handheld devices and pre-paid data plans for their children. Chenai's father bought her an "*I-phone and a computer at home. My father buys the X and G data bundles*.'

Data bundles are pre-paid data plans by which one access the internet and social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. X is a state-owned telecommunications provider of fixed (landline) telephones and internet while G is the leading cell phone network provider. Data bundles are prepaid data services which enable access to the internet. Vince, a 17-year old boy has "*a Samsung galaxy cell phone. My mother and father buy the X and G bundles that I use at home and at school*". Vince's parents, too, shoulder the costs of often-expensive data bundles with which children access the internet and social media platforms using their handheld devices. While it would be interesting to know why parents are spent money on their children's access to the internet, this was outside the scope of the study. Children access the internet in social contexts that are shaped by parents and is an aspect of parenting (Livingstone, Kirwil et al., 2014).

Interestingly, the internet is a source of entertainment rather than education for the participants. It plays very little, if at all, educational functions in the lives of the children interviewed. One is more inclined to think that children's exposure to content and contact risks given that they go online primarily to interact with media especially videos and games. In fact, children's own accounts of their online experiences suggest that, while staying "connected" is becoming fashionable for young persons it comes with multiple downsides. Johan a 16-aged boy, confessed that he "*uses bus fare to buy internet bundles, I just have to…"* Johan would rather walk the distance between home and school than stay disconnected. This confession may well suggest that Johan is becoming addicted to the internet – a type of risk which is becoming common among children (Livingstone, Kirwil et al., 2014). While Johan's strategies of staying connected are rather extreme, none of the participants reported that they voluntarily disconnected from the internet to focus exclusively on other tasks such as studying. The accounts of the participants suggest that younger and older children, girls and boys alike, are at risk of getting addicted to the internet, thereby leaving very little room for other age-appropriate tasks at home and at school. The fact that children stay connected on the internet as much as possible indicate a very high exposure to content and other online risks. Consider what Mukudzei a 16-year old boy said when asked to describe some of the things he usually does when online: "*I download music videos and games. I have downloaded one porn video long back… I also watch them [online]*. Rukudzo confessed that '*I download music videos, porn and games"* and added, *"I am in a WhatsApp porn group*."

Children not only accessed sexually explicit content such as videos and pictures. They also shared these within social media networks that excluded adult significant others. Instant messaging mobile applications Tonderai, a 17-year old boy similarly revealed that, apart from online games, he accessed sexually inappropriate content. Not unlike Mukudzei and Rukudzo, he belongs to a WhatsApp group within which members share age-restricted content. He disclosed that, "*I download porn, games and music on the internet. I am [a member of] two WhatsApp porn groups"*.

It is interesting yet alarming that children casually watch pornographic pictures and videos although such material is not only age-inappropriate but also unlawful in Zimbabwe. Astounding as these confessions might seem, existing surveys have shown that a sizeable number of adolescent report intentional exposure to pornographic material. For example, a study conducted by Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig and Ólafsson (2011) on internet risks and safety on the internet, 23% of children have seen sexual or pornographic content.

Participants' accounts also shed light on children's unintentional access to inappropriate content including sexually explicit and violent material. The remarks shared by Jenifer and Rukudzo illustrate how pop-up links direct internet users to unsolicited inappropriate material. Jennifer (17) revealed that she once "*unknowingly opened a link and it directed me to a site which had porn images*…' Similarly, to the question whether or not she had unintentionally accessed inappropriate content online. Rukudzo (17) retorted, "*Yes, and it led me to a site where there were pictures of nude women...*"

These findings corroborate the study done by Phyfer, Burton and Leoschutt (2016) that established that 46% of the children aged nine to 16 years who had seen sexual images online came across them as images that pop up accidentally. This goes to show that children can be exposed to internet risks involuntarily. Furthermore, the risk of involuntary exposure could be very high given that spam emails, mistyping of URLs into a web browser, and key word searches generally direct users to unexpected and unwanted results (Chawki, 2009).

Children's accounts analysed in this section speak to findings of larger surveys, for example, Lauri, Borg and Farrugia (2015) and Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig and Ólafsson that accentuate the idea that children are going online at a younger age. They amplify parents' and child serving professionals' concerns with age-restricted content that is easily accessible by children online. And yet children's accounts suggest that other risks such as internet addiction may become important as the internet becomes more affordable.

Exploring children's own agency, including their self-directed strategies of staying safe online was the primary objective of the article. The following section explores children's agency online.

Theme 2: Children's response to online risks

How do children respond to situations that present potential internet risks? What informs their responses? To address these questions, participants were asked to respond to a vignette (Hughes and Huby, 2002), which presented a hypothetical situation – the story of Jane:

> *Jane is 16 years old. She is doing form four and is at a new school. She has made new friends at the new school both from her class and from the other classes. She is now connected with her friends on all the social media sites she uses. One day, John, a boy at the same school, asked her to send a picture of hers with her upper body not dressed.*

Participants made the following remarks in response to the question, "How do you think Jane should respond to Johan?"

> Vince (male) aged 17 responded as follows*: 'It depends on her character. She can send the picture if she wants to. It is a bad idea though. She must say, 'I cannot send you my picture.' The picture may be forwarded to many other social media sites and social groups.'*
>
> And Nyasha, a 17-young girl argued that, "*It depends on her personality. She can send if she likes the idea. Sending her picture is a bad idea though. She should say, 'No' and then asks why he needs her picture.'*
>
> On the other hand, Chenai aged 16, said, *'Jane must never send the picture to Johan, sending the picture is really a bad idea. Jane should quickly block the person. The next thing John is going to do is to ask Jane to go out with her and if she rejects the idea John could simply post the picture to the public as revenge or just to fix her.'*

Participants' responses to the above show that adolescents are aware of the diverse content, contact, conduct as well as privacy risks associated online internet. The participants did not appear shocked to know about the request for nude pictures. What is more, they knew how to respond to it. Chenai's response suggests that sending a nude picture is something that must never be considered because it can lead to many risks. She must have been referring to the conduct and contact risks connected with revenge porn and other blackmail tactics that sexual perpetrators use. Jane may well become a victim of revenge porn if John shared sexually explicit pictures of Jane without her consent. Revenge porn has huge effects on victims; it can cause psychological trauma and stigma and can compound mental health (Frith, 2017; Nishida, Tamura and Sakakibara, 2019). Chenai, Vince and Nyasha appear to be less prescriptive when asked to describe how Jane should respond to the request to send her nude pictures to John. They both seem to suggest that Jane's response to John's request, that is, whether to send the explicit picture to John or not, is a decision that Jane has to make on her own initiative.

Vince and Nyasha's reference to the idea that Jane's response depends on her character or personality speaks to an aspect of the concept of children's agency, i.e., a sense of self and identity. Both Vince and Nyasha assume that Jane has an identifiable sense of self and identity, which influences her self-determination (Montreuil and Carnevale, 2016). Participants' response to the vignette support the claims that children are social actors who possess agency, that is, the capability to autonomously shape their social worlds and "direct future possibility…through decision-making" (Montreuil and Carnevale, 2016: 506). Indeed, children are active agents who varyingly possess the capability to shape their own lives and that of others in the cyber sphere and the broader social context. For example, Nyasha and Vince's shared the view is that Jane's decision not to send her nude photo will be based on her own appraisal of risks associated with sharing the nude picture to Johan rather than what adult significant others may deem right or wrong.

When asked if Jane should tell the significant others about John's request, participants revealed that there is pressure on children to act independently to address the personal risks in the cyber sphere. For example, Johan said that, "*It may not be wise to tell her friends because there are some bad friends who will influence you to send the picture. If one tells their parents or teachers, they might take the phone away. It's better to just block the person, that's it.'* The reasons for choosing to address potential risks associated obliging with John's request without involving significant others further strengthens the view that children actively reflect on and shape their life worlds.

Chenai's recommendation that Jane must quickly block Johan before he gained access to her personal media files e.g., including photos and videos, draws on her own appraisal of risks to the Jane's privacy online and the

conduct risks whereby John shares her sexual pictures and videos as revenge porn. Chenai's recommendation is not based on what her parents think is right or wrong in such circumstances. Indeed, participants' proposed strategies of dealing with online risks that excluded parents and significant others. This strongly indicates that children make own choices to act independently online. The idea that, when prompted to respond to the vignette, children chose interventions that suggest they were more inclined to autonomously influence their life worlds underscores yet another dimension of agency, i.e., self-care. Montreuil and Carnevale's (2016) review of the concept of agency suggests that one's ability to engage in self-care in order to enhance wellness is an important dimension of agency. Children proposed strategies to stay safe online even as they excluded parents from their cyber spaces.

Interestingly, sharing information about illicit requests on social media comes with its own risks. In the case of sharing with friends, the risk is peer pressure. Jane's friends may put her under pressure to share her nude pictures. Jane might regret this decision in the foreseeable. In the case of adult significant others, the risk is that these might seize Jane's phone on the pre-text of protecting and promoting her best interests. Rukudzo's view that "*sometimes telling friends (rather than parents) may help to get ideas … this is one's private life…"* suggests that children may hold the view what they do in the cyber sphere is their private life and parents are not part of it. Again, Rukudzo's view illustrates further the idea of children's agency in the sense that she wants to act independently of her parents in addressing the online risks. However, unlike Johan, Rukudzo was of the idea that peers may be the sources of good ideas and not bad influence. It is interesting that participants considered the pros and cons of involving peers and adults in their strategies of staying safe online.

Jenifer held a more balanced view about whether or not Jane should tell significant others about John's request. Although Jenifer thought that Jane "*should tell her parents because this may well be a legal issue,"* she reckons that there are, however*, "some things that children can handle alone without telling parents."* In the event that cyber risks become real threats that potentially constitute an offense punishable by law, children require parental intervention. While demonstrating children's agency, participants' views accentuate children's vulnerability online. Keeping threats associated with one's online presence under the wraps may inevitably isolate children from social networks of care, support and protection, which include adult significant others such as parents, social workers and police.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The qualitative, cross-sectional study on which this article draws explored children's internet use and their agency in dealing with potential online risks. From the accounts of participants, who were aged 14 to 17 years, the findings suggest that teenage children do have a strong online presence but they do not use their time on the internet to accomplish educational tasks. Instead, they use the internet to stay connected to friends on the social media sites and to meet their entertainment needs. Parents and guardians bought these gadgets for children and covered the costs of data, suggesting that adults facilitated children's access to the internet. Therefore, children's access to the internet occurs in social contexts that are shaped by adults and can be viewed as an aspect of parenting. However, children did not seem too keen to involve parents in their cyber-presence. While parents facilitated children's access to the internet, they were less likely to possess knowledge of children's internet use patterns and the sort of risks children confront online. While parents have the responsibility to mediate and monitor the usage of the internet, the evidence considered in this article has shown that there may be minimal supervision and internet restriction by parents. This rather uninvolved parenting style with regards to children's internet use potentially increases the children's vulnerability online.

In line with existing literature Stamoulis and Farley, 2010; Chawki (2009), children's own accounts of their experiences online and their responses to the vignette suggest that children were aware of the content, contact and conduct risks associated with their online presence. Exposure to age-inappropriate content was a more realistic risk to participants but they also demonstrated an acute awareness of conduct risks emanating from establishing and sharing personal information with a contact online. They were more concerned about the conduct of others who could potentially share their nude photos and other sexual content – a risk they understood as revenge porn. What must be concerning to child-serving professionals is that children not only confessed to voluntary exposure to and sharing of, age-restricted content in social media groups that exclude parents and significant others. The article found evidence of children's involuntary exposure to sexually content especially pictures and videos, suggesting that children were vulnerable to content risks as long as they were connected.

The article makes a modest contribution to our understanding of children's agency online. First, the stories of participants suggest that children are internet users in their own right and they make decisions based on deliberate evaluation of risk. The idea that children included in this study were more inclined to exclude parents from knowing about their activities online and made decisions based on their own strategies suggests that they possessed a strong belief in self-efficacy. Their strategies of identifying and squashing the precursors of potential online danger (e.g., requests that may lead to revenge porn) signifies that children had a strong belief in self as a

good person and were more likely to engage in self-care practices online. Children do possess varying degrees of the ability to make future decisions that enhance a safer presence online.

The teenage children who participated in the study treated what they do on the internet as their private life that fell outside the domain of parenting. In other words, even when faced with potential risk of blackmail, participants discouraged parental involvement in what they do online. Interestingly, participants also discouraged seeking advice from peers. When responding to the vignette, the participants observed that Jane (character in the vignette) could get good advice from peers. Nonetheless, in the same vein, observed that peers may well be the source of bad influence. This finding further strengthens the view that children are actors in their own right and have the capability to autonomously shape their own life worlds (Freeman, 1998). Nonetheless, it appears that, there was a view – although not shared by all participants – that in some instances, such as when legal action is required, it would be wise to bring in the parents.

The idea that the teenage children interviewed in the study believed that they could, for the greater part, navigate the cyberspace and address potential risks on their own without the involvement of their parents should be disconcerting to child protection experts and parents. It seems that, based on children's notions of privacy, children deliberately exclude themselves from adult significant others and relevant networks of care and support, when online. This multiplies their vulnerabilities online. Male participants confessed to deliberately downloading and sharing age-inappropriate and unlawful sexually explicit content. The negative impacts of such risk-taking and risk-making (Sharland, 2006) behaviours are not difficult to imagine. Previous studies suggest that children can develop addiction to the internet especially sexually explicit and aggressive content (Ac-Nicolic, Zaric and Surkovic, 2015). Acting out what children see on the internet is another potential risk, which can generate reproductive health risks such as teen pregnancies and other associated complications (Carroll and Kirkpatrick, 2011).

There are several policy and practice implications of the findings. However, we highlight some of them here:

(a) First, child-serving agencies in government and civil society should design and implement educational programmes to improve parents' and adult carers' knowledge about safe online presence for children. Topics may include internet risks for children, children's risk-taking and risk making as well netiquette and cyber ethics. Such educational interventions should aspire to make parental and adult involvement in children's internet use a part of non-authoritarian parenting approaches that recognizes children as internet users in their own right.

(b) Second, educational programmes for different age-sex cohorts among children from early childhood education to post-primary education, could be rolled out as part of the curriculum. In addition to addressing known and potential risks associated with internet use, the foci of such programmes is to make children knowledge-able, i.e., empowering them to be able to seek information about how to stay safe online. A key assumption of educational programmes for children's internet use us that children are agentic internet users in their own right and have varying abilities to maintain self-care online. This can be done at schools as well, involving the teachers to teach safe usage of the internet or community organisations working with adolescents.

(c) Lastly, government and legislature need to use country-level legislation and regulatory bodies as effective mechanisms for ensuring that internet providers such as networks companies develop relevant tools that parents and children can use to maintain safety online. Research like this one contributes to the knowledge base that the government can draw from when thinking about such policies. Such tools include applications programmed in local languages.

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