The influence of information and communication technologies on adolescent sexual perceptions and beliefs.

A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Magister Psychology

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CONTENTS

Keywords v
Abstract vi
Declaration viii
Acknowledgements ix

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Rationale 3
1.3.1 Aim 5
1.3.2 Objectives 5
1.3.3 Research questions 5
1.4 Conclusion 6

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Introduction 7
2.2 Adolescent sexuality 8
2.2.1 Television 10
2.2.2 Internet 13
2.2.2.1 Adolescent exposure to sexual activities on the internet 13
2.2.2.2 Online sexual activities 14
2.2.3 Music videos 14
2.2.4 Cell phones 15
2.3 Views on the impact of ICT on adolescents 15
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Research Design

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 Participants

3.3.2 Methods and data collection

3.3.3 Procedure

3.4 Data Analysis

3.5 Reflexivity

3.6 Ethical Consideration

3.7 Conclusion
## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction 35  
4.2 Findings 35  
4.3 Sexual decision making 36  
4.3.1 Physical arousal 37  
4.3.2 Desire to imitate what is being viewed 49  
4.4 Sexual attitudes and perceptions 41  
4.4.1 Attitude towards number of sexual partners 41  
4.4.2 Attitude towards physical image of sexual partner(s) 46  
4.4.3 Attitude towards the use of contraceptives 47  
4.5 Sexual behaviour 50  
4.6 Quality of relationship with the opposite sex 53  
4.7 Summary of findings 56  
4.8 Conclusion 57  

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction 58  
5.2 Limitations and Recommendations 59  
5.3 Conclusion 60  

## REFERENCES 61
KEYWORDS

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South African adolescents are engaging in sexual activities at an early age and with numerous sexual partners. Various factors such as adolescent physiology, identity development, peer influences and parent-child relationship, play a contributory role in this aspect. However, one of the less explored factors is the role of exposure to information and communication technologies containing sexual content, such as television, internet, music videos and cell phones. Adolescents have been shown to be heavy consumers of these devices. The study aimed at exploring the extent with which sexual content from these digital devices influences adolescents’ sexual perceptions and sexual behaviours. Participants comprised of 18 Grade 10 and Grade 11 learners, between ages 14 to 16 years, conveniently selected from one of the high schools in the Cape Peninsula. Two focus groups were conducted with an equal distribution of males and females in each group. Thematic analysis was utilized to describe participants’ experiences as reported in the text. Results indicated that participants regard ICT as influencing sexual attitudes and behaviour. More specifically, they believed ICT contributes greatly to early sexual initiation. Whilst some participants suggested that ICT encourages them to have many sexual partners with a “certain” physical image, some participants regarded this as irrelevant, viewing it as an individual’s choice. It was also found that participants viewed ICT’s unsafe sexual practices as not impacting in their use of contraceptives, hence they would not imitate such behaviour. Moreover, some participants viewed ICT as impacting on the manner in which they express themselves sexually, whilst others regarded this as untrue since they decide which sexual activities to engage in. The study addressed paucity of information regarding ICT and adolescent sexuality. To be more specific, it is recommended that future investigations should focus on a particular technology such as cell phones and the internet. Research should also focus on a specific domain
regarding adolescent sexual attitudes, for example attitudes towards sexual initiation or the use of contraceptives.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, “The influence of information and communication technologies on adolescent sexual perceptions and beliefs” is my own work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Nolubabalo Rapiya                                         March 2009

Signed
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Westheimer (2005) defines sexuality as the sensual pleasure that comes from the stimulation of the body, often with an enjoyable, erotic feeling. Human sexuality is however more than just erotic mental stimulation designed for sexual arousal, or a sexual activity humans engage in, but encompasses all of life’s endeavors (Gackenbach, 1998). It involves the physical, psychosocial and cognitive aspects, all of which interacting together. Bhattacharyya (2002) agrees with this notion, highlighting that understanding one’s sexuality is part of understanding an individual’s place in the world. He maintains a view that sexuality serves as a core in human beings and sexual knowledge illuminates other realms of life. Gackenbach (1998) contends that sex has a symbolic value in the lives of human beings. For the adolescent, sex often signifies becoming an adult, which may partly account for the rush to begin a sexual relationship or sexual activity whilst for those who are older it may signify youth and attempts to reclaim it (Gackenbach, 1998).

There is substantial body of research that has shown how different aspects (Gullotta, Adams & Montemayor 1999) may affect an adolescent's decision on whether or not to engage in sexual activity. It is important to first understand some aspects of adolescent development that can influence their decisions regarding sexuality. One important aspect is their physiology. During adolescence, sexual maturation becomes evident and sex hormones begin to be produced (Hulton, 2000). Physical changes take place and suddenly
the opposite sex seems appealing. Westheimer (2005) noted that adolescents are faced with a decision of what to do with feelings they experience with their bodily changes. Gullotta, Adams and Montemayor (1999) highlighted that, it is important to understand that while there are other factors affecting adolescent's sexual decisions, they are also being influenced by their body functioning. For many adolescents, choosing whether or not to be sexually active may be a difficult decision. However, for adolescents who choose to engage in sexual activity, it may be because this feels like a natural thing to do, since their bodies are sending signals that seem to point in that direction (Hulton, 2000).

Identity development is another aspect of adolescence that can help to better understand their sexual-decision making. During adolescence, one of the important issues adolescents must take a stand on is sexuality and whether or not they will engage in it during this time. An adolescent's sense of identity can be a strong influence on their decision, (Hulton, 2000). If an adolescent does not have a strong sense of identity, they may be more easily swayed to engage in sexual activity. Conversely, if there is a strong identity, they may feel less inclined to have sex, because they do not need to have themselves validated (Burkitt, 1999).

Another aspect that influences adolescents sexual-decision making is the role of significant others such as parents as well as peers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Although the transition to greater independence is the hallmark of this developmental phase, parents clearly have a role and exert significant influence in the choices adolescents make about sex. Research shows that, although adolescents are least likely to seek information from their parents, what their parents have communicated to them and
what their parents might think influences their decisions about sex and relationships (Rideout, Foehr, Roberts & Brodie. 2000).

The peer group is an important factor in adolescent development and has a significant bearing on adolescents’ decisions about sex. Adolescents report that they are most likely to get information about sexual health issues from their peers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000).

In addition to this, another largely unexplored factor that may contribute to sexual activity among adolescents is exposure to sexual content from information and communication technologies (ICT). Lesame (2005) defines ICT as digital electronic devices used for capturing, processing, storing and communicating information. Digital devices such as radio or CD players, televisions, portable video game players, and internet access via cellular phones add to the numerous sources of ICT. Research indicates that adolescents are active consumers of many of these devices. Moreover, it has been observed that adolescents appear to be using these ICT in an isolated manner, such as in their private bedrooms and without adult mediation (Savahl, September, Odendaal & Moos, 2008).

1.2 Rationale

Adolescence is the most critical period of development in a person's life. It is the period in which the biological, cognitive as well as psychological changes take place.

The decisions made in adolescence may have lifelong consequences for the adolescent’s health, career, psychological well-being, and social acceptance (Hulton, 2000).
Many adolescents begin exploring their bodies as well as their sexuality. One of the decisions an adolescent must make is whether or not they will engage in sexual activity during this time.

Research has demonstrated that young people are heavy consumers of sexually-oriented materials such as television, videos, movies, and, more recently, the internet (Brown, Childers & Waszak, 1999). However, scientific evidence has not yet established a causal relationship between exposure to sexual content displayed by ICT and adolescents’ attitudes concerning sexuality and their sexual behaviours (Strasburger & Comstock, 1998). According to Brown et al (1999) it is also not clear whether frequent exposure to ICT devices, with high levels of sexual content and low levels of portrayal of responsible sexual conduct is a causal influence on young people's subsequent sexual behaviour, or, alternatively, whether young people's understanding of the dynamics and risks of sexual intercourse and its consequences are improved via their use of ICT. Hence, more research is needed to explore the extent to which ICT affects young people's attitudes and behaviour with regard to sexuality.

From the studies conducted, it has been shown that, about 80% of all movies shown on television stations contain sexual content (Gruber & Grube 2000). Analyses of media content also show that sexual messages on television are almost universally presented in a positive light, with little discussion of the potential risks of unprotected sexual intercourse and few portrayals of adverse consequences (Gruber & Grube 2000).
In South Africa, there appears to be a limited amount of research with regard to the influence of ICT on adolescent sexuality. This study hopes to make contributions in this regard by exploring the extent of exposure to ICT influences on sexual perception and sexual beliefs and how this in turn influences sexual behaviour.

1.3 Aims

The aim of this study is to explore the influence of ICT on adolescent sexuality. More specifically the study aims to ascertain the influence of ICT on adolescent sexual perceptions and beliefs.

1.3.1 Objectives

- To explore the influence of ICT on adolescent sexual perceptions and beliefs?

- To explore the extent that ICT influence adolescents’ sexual behaviours?

1.3.2 Research questions

The study hopes to address the following questions as the discussion generating questions during the focus group discussions.

- What kind of thoughts and feelings do media promote towards sexual initiation, number and image of sexual partners one needs to have and towards the use of contraceptives?

- What kind of sexual behaviours do ICT promote among adolescents?

- What is your view on how ICT influences the type of sexual relationships formed among adolescents?
1.4. Conclusion

The following chapter commences with a review of relevant literature on the impact of ICT on adolescent sexual perceptions, attitudes and sexual behaviours. A description of theoretical framework guiding this study will be given. Following that, a thorough description of methodology used outlining the research techniques, participant’s involvement, procedure used as well as method of data analysis will be given. Subsequently, the key findings of the focus groups will be discussed, highlighting themes that emerged and the comprehensive discussion of those themes. The last chapter concludes with the presentation of limitations of this study providing recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Adolescence is the most critical period of development in a person's life. In many ways this is the time in which the entire course of a person’s life changes forever, based on the decisions that are made and experiences that are had. Sexuality is an important aspect during this life phase. It is commonly seen as a pivotal issue in negotiating the change from childhood to adulthood (Sharpe, 2003).

The concept of sexuality amongst adolescents for the past years has been associated with many other negative factors such as: teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections including the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Gruber & Grube, 2000). As a result, many programs have been implemented to educate and empower the youth. These informative and empowerment programs have been disseminated mostly through information and communication devices, mostly television and radio. Both children and adults have been reported to believe that ICT devices are the central source of information on sex and sexuality for young people (Gruber & Grube, 2000).

However, the very ICT devices can be a source of disseminating obscene and profane sexual images that in turn have a negative impact on the adolescent (Malamuth & Wartella, 2003). While neither prior research nor the general public appears to dispute
the sexual content of the media, the perceived influence on adolescents and their sexuality appears to warrant further examination. There are few studies that have been conducted to examine whether South African adolescents themselves find the media influential in determining their sexual attitudes, values, and behaviours.

The focus of this chapter is on the research done on issues of adolescent sexuality in general. Sexual content displayed by various ICT devices such as; television, computers (internet), DVDs and cell phones and their impact on adolescent sexual beliefs and behaviours is then explored. Furthermore, the role of parents on adolescent’s sexual making decision is discussed. Lastly, an account of theoretical explanations of the influence of ICT is given. It should be noted that many of the studies commented upon are internationally based. Less research has been conducted within the South African context. This research hopes to add on the limited literature within the South African context.

2.2 Adolescent sexuality

A large number of studies conducted, indicate that about one third of adolescents have had sex by the time they leave compulsory school (aged 15–16) and about two-third have done so around the age of 19 years (Forsberg, 2005). These figures have been relatively stable since the 1980s but however with the rapid growth of ICT, there has been a shift upwards (Forsberg, 2005).

Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Low, Eitel and Thickstun (2005) conducted a study, investigating the types of messages delivered through television, music, and computerized media. Results indicated that adolescents are exposed to both implicit and
explicit sexual content from various ICT devices. Most of them engage in sexual activities by the time they reach secondary school. Brown (2000) found that adolescents attending practically oriented upper secondary school programmes, with increased exposure generally have sex for the first time at a younger age than those who attend more theoretically oriented programmes.

There has been limited research done in South Africa to indicate whether or not adolescents with increased exposure to ICT devices (at school or home) engage in sexual activities much early than those without ICT. A national survey was conducted from March to August 2003 for Love-Life consortium in partnership with the Medical Research Council of South Africa to determine the prevalence of HIV infection among South African youth aged 15 – 24 years. This was one of the largest surveys ever conducted in South Africa with a sample of 17,450 young people from all nine provinces, consisting of a good representation in terms of gender, age, race and geographical type. With regard to sexual behaviour, findings revealed that 67% of young people aged 15-24 years reported having had sexual intercourse. Eight percent reported having sex at age 14 or younger. Amongst those who reported having had sexual intercourse in the past 12 months, 27% indicated that they had more than one sexual partner. The study further found that, males were significantly more likely to report more than one sexual partner than females. Interestingly, regarding the use of contraceptives 52% reported using a condom at last sex and the majority felt that they were able to access condoms when they needed (Pettifor, Rees, Steffenson, Hlongwa-Madikizela, MacPhail, Vermaak, Kleinschmidt, 2004).
Drawing from the findings of the above study, it is evident that South African adolescents engage in sexual activities at a younger age. A recent study published from Daily News in April (2005) reported different results from the above. Dr Harrison (Love-Life CEO) stated that age of first sex among South African youth is now 12 years. Among sexually active 12-17 year olds, 51% had said that their first penetrative sex occurred below the age of 14 years. Moreover, sexually active South African adolescents reported a high number of sexual partners. Despite increased sexual activity, 60% of South African youth reported condom use the last time they had sex.

With the rapid growth of ICT in South Africa, numbers of adolescents engaging in early sexual activities have increased, as more and more adolescents interact with these new advanced digital devices. Drawing from two of the above studies, it has been clearly shown that more and more South African adolescents are becoming sexually active, at a young age. It is not suggested that ICT is the main reason for this change as there are many other contributory factors, nonetheless, several studies indicate that ICT plays a significant role in shaping adolescents sexual perceptions and beliefs. This study hopes to explore the influence of ICT on a much broader perspective mainly focusing on few of the most commonly used ICT namely; television, computer (internet), DVDs/CDs (music videos) and cell phones.

2.2.1 Television

In a national study conducted in an American high school, students reported living in homes with two or more televisions, 97% had video recorders and more than half had a television set in their own rooms (Information and Communication Technology Youth Report, 2005). Furthermore, according to a summary of several studies by Roberts (2000)
adolescents spend more than four hours watching television and listen to music about six hours a day.

A South African study found that television is still the most widely used technology among the adolescents (September & Savahl, 2002). Television's role as a sexual educator in our culture is one of contradictions. On the one hand, its accessibility, frankness, and popular appeal make it an excellent instructor, offering a convenient way to learn about sex without embarrassment. However, on the other hand, the television’s portrayals of sexuality are limited, stereotypical, and potentially harmful (Huston, Wartella & Donnerstein, 1998). Nevertheless, it is a fact that television's sexual messages are abundant and often provide information that the youth are less likely to get elsewhere. Through its dialogue, characterisations, storylines, and themes, it presents adolescents with numerous verbal and visual examples of how dating, intimacy, relationships, and sex are handled (Roberts, 2000).

One concern is that the prevalence of sexual content on TV inadvertently overemphasizes the role of sex in male-female relationships. While doing so, the impression is that television provides a one-dimensional picture of sexual relationships, one in which sex is only for the young, single and beautiful, an ideology that sexual encounters are always spontaneous, romantic, and risk free (Forsberg, 2005). Thus, because of the prevalent yet limited nature of TV's sexual content, researchers and educators have become highly interested in whether regular viewing of these portrayals is associated with distorted expectations, irresponsible sexual decision-making and permissive or stereotypical sexual attitudes (Collins, Elliot, Berry, Kanouse, Kunkel, Hunter, Miu, 2004). Further studies
were conducted to explore how sexual content on television impact on sexual attitudes and behaviour among adolescents. Interesting results were indicated by certain studies.

Firstly, it was revealed that there is a link between exposure to sexual content on television and viewers' attitudes about sex and sexual relationships (Collins et. al. 2004). Furthermore, (Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995) indicated that regular exposure to sexually-oriented material increased the expression of more liberal sexual attitudes, which include acceptance of sexual improprieties (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994), while showing more negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin (Courtright & Baran, 1980).

Secondly, regular viewing of sexual content has also been linked with viewers' expectations about the prevalence of certain sexual practices regularly shown on television (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993). For example, it was found that undergraduates who viewed soap operas regularly, offer high numbers of real people who divorce or have illegitimate children than less frequent viewers (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993). Finally, in a study conducted by Brown & Newcomer (1991) a great amount of evidence indicated that increased exposure to television’s sexual content is associated to viewers' sexual behaviour. Even though the amount of general television viewing typically has not been related to viewers' level of sexual activity, when more sexually-oriented programming is examined, association between exposure and greater sexual experience emerge (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1995). Therefore, these findings provide tentative evidence of a link between the amount of time spent watching sexually-oriented programming and viewers' own sexual attitudes, expectations, and behaviour (Ward, 2002).
Furthermore, following many studies, Greenburg, Brown & Buerkel-Rothfuss (2001) found many connections between watching television and movies with sexual content, and the sexual behaviour of the adolescents watching it. It was found that those who watched programs with sexual content tended to be more preoccupied with sex. They talked and thought about it more. In addition, regular viewers of sexual programs were also found to think that sex happens more frequently, than those who do not watch those programs (Greenburg, Brown & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 2001).

Frequent watchers were also found to believe that they had good knowledge of sex, and therefore would be able to counsel others on this matter. What was concerning is that, the study showed that those who watched these programs believed sex happens most often outside of wedlock, and that in marriage sex can be a rare (Greenburg, Brown & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 2001). Moreover, they were found to think less of contraception and the negative consequences of unsafe sexual practices because these are rarely shown in the programming. Instead, everything is beautiful, with passionate, swelling music to accompany the moment, or so it is portrayed.

2.2.2. Internet

2.2.2.1 Adolescent exposure to sexual activities on the Internet

From a very early age, adolescents have begun teaching themselves how to become active and participate online. As stated by Gunter (2002), the internet is redefining our sense of community and where we find our peers. Adolescents today are developing new ways of thinking as a result of new technologies. They are putting together concepts from fragments they have found scattered throughout the internet.
In a study conducted, Forsberg (2005) found that about 25% of adolescents who used the internet regularly had one or more unwanted exposures to sexual pictures while online in the past year. Seventy-three percent of these exposures occurred while the adolescent was surfing the internet, and 27% while opening e-mail or clicking on links on “Instant Messages”. Most unwanted exposures (67%) occurred while using the internet at home, 15% at school, and 3% in libraries. Most of the imagery was simply of naked persons, but 32% depicted people having sex, and 7% involved violence in addition to the nudity and sex (Forsberg, 2005).

### 2.2.2 Online sexual activities

Any activity that involves sexuality for the purposes of recreation, entertainment, exploration, support, education, and/or seeking out sexual or romantic partners is referred to as online sexual activities (Boies, Cooper, & Osborne, 2004). It is well known that the internet contains great amounts of sexual material. An article in Time magazine reported that 83.5% of internet images were pornographic (Brown, 2000). Other claims have been made that as many as 100,000 pornographic Web sites exist (Boies, et.al. 2004). Recent studies indicate a much drastically increased number as well as increased visits to these sites, particularly by adolescents. Young people are presumed to be extensively interested in pornography.

### 2.2.3 Music videos

In his study, Gruber & Grube (2000) revealed that adolescents spend more than half a day listening and watching music videos (Gruber & Grube, 2000). More than 80% of these music videos portray sexuality or eroticism. They often contain visual images that are
much more sexual than the music itself. In addition, studies showed that the content of most music videos emphasised sexual contact without commitment and physical contact occurred at twice the rate it did on conventional TV. About 81% of videos showed violence as well as sexual imagery and 47% had either visual or lyrical sexual references.

### 2.2.4 Cell phones

Although there has been detailed research on the impact of exposure to sexual content on television and the internet, only recently has much attention been given to mobile phone users. Cell phones are the most widely used ICT device amongst adolescents. Apart from making and receiving calls, there is now a variety of other activities. Over the years, new features have now been introduced allowing the adolescent to do even much more including; accessing mobile internet, taking photos and videos, visiting chat rooms and many more. The newly introduced, most prominent social networking program, “MXit” has created much controversy, particularly among South African adolescents. Parents and the educational system have also been alarmed by the use of MXit among adolescents, specifically how it impacts on general behaviour. Few studies have been conducted on the impact of MXit in adolescent behaviour, there is a need for further research within the South African context.

### 2.3 Views on the impact of ICT on adolescents

Research conducted by Brown, Ladin- L’Engle, Pardun, Guo, Kenneavy & Jackson, (2006) showed that different types of ICT have different effects on the emotional, social, personal identity and sexual lives of young people. In recent years, several researchers have developed innovative ways of determining ways in which ICT affect young people.
For example, Larson (1995) used an experience sampling technique (called the "beeper" method because subjects were given beepers that are used to signal them periodically to record what they were doing and how they were feeling) to analyze the relationship between emotional states and the use of television and other media. He argues that adolescents experience increased emotionality (the "moody adolescent" who has negative feelings and swings in emotions) and that such emotionality may be related to increased use of music. Larson (1995) also believed that music speaks to adolescents' personal struggles and helps them create a separate experiential space at home. Furthermore, music also helps adolescents define their public self outside the family (Larson, 1995).

The Media Practice Model suggests that adolescents select and react to sexual material that speaks to an emerging sense of themselves as sexual beings (Greeson & Williams, 1986). More specifically it has been recognized that media opinions are particularly influential in determining how people construct and define their social reality and identities (Greeson & Williams, 1986). With regard to personal identity, a study conducted by Steele (1999) found that, many adolescents draw heavily from media images as they wrestle with who they are and where they fit in the world. Drawing from sociogenetic theories of development he asserted that media practice could only be understood in context. Furthermore, Steele (1999) reasoned that, adolescents build on and transform the shared socio-cultural knowledge available through media.

There has been a large debate concerning the impact of pornography on adolescent sexuality (Boies, et.al. 2004). Most available research suggests that nonviolent pornography exposure has few clearly demonstrated effects, except to promote more permissive sexual attitudes among those repeatedly exposed (Brown, et.al.2006). On the
other hand, violent pornography is believed to reinforce aggressive behaviour and negative attitudes toward women, particularly among those with some aggressive predisposition (Koop, 1987). Furthermore, in a survey conducted on online sexual activities, it was found that website users had at least one sexual pursuit while on line (Forsberg, 2005). From that sample, 17% showed signs of sexual compulsivity and approximately 8% were in fact sexually compulsive while 13% showed signs of moderate to severe problems of compulsivity and distress (Forsberg, 2005). Nevertheless it is unclear whether individuals develop problematic sexual behaviour as a result of their online activities or if pre-existing psychopathology is triggered by internet sexual experience.

Furthermore, Forsberg (2005) noted that for an adolescent trying to make a choice on whether or not to engage in sexual activity, the media can be a very powerful influence on their decision. Cooper, (1998) further added that when an adolescent only sees sex as being passionate and fun, with no negative consequences, they can easily be swayed to believe that is the way things really are. Moreover, when adolescent views sexual images which tend to persistently preoccupy their thoughts, they are probably more likely to give in to their hormonal urges (Eschobar-Chaves, et.al. 2005).

The above findings have undoubtedly demonstrated that regular exposure to ICT sexual and non- sexual material influences adolescent well being.
2.4. Parent-adolescent relationship and adolescent sexuality

2.4.1 Parent-adolescent Relationship

According to Sieverding, Adler, Witt & Ellen (2005) parent-child relationship plays a vital role in adolescent social, psychological and sexual development. Nonetheless, various factors pose a threat in this relationship. Amongst these factors, Odendaal, Malcom, Savahl & September (2006) pointed out adolescent’s developmental needs and the parents’ struggle to respond appropriately to these needs. Adding to this tension is the influence of other external factors such as peers. Moreover, the use of ICT adds to the complexity of the parent-adolescent relationship (Odendaal et al., 2006). Among these devices, television is one of the most commonly used ICT, readily available early in the lives of children. Its effect has been shown in that it has permanently changed the environment within which parents monitor and control for the development of their children. Casas (1998) further reported that due to massive exposure to all kinds of information particularly information containing sexual content, television has placed parents in the untenable position of battling outside influences that tear at the parent-child relationship rather than assisting to safeguard family values, parental guidelines, and promote normal psychological growth.

2.4.2 Parental role in adolescent sexual decision-making

Rosenthal, Lewis and Cohen (1996) noted that parents contribute greatly to adolescents sexual decision-making. In order to investigate this parental contribution, Rosenthal, Burklow, Lewis, Succop and Biro (1997) conducted a study which revealed that girls whose mothers talked to them about sexual issues were significantly less likely to
become sexually active over time. However, Moore and Rosenthal (1992) found that although parent-child discussions about sex were related to a decreased likelihood of girls becoming sexually active, they were related to an increased likelihood for boys. Casas, (2001) emphasised the mediating effects of ICT on parental values. He argues that, television characters have now become the main source in which children derive models and ways in which they will behave.

2.4.3 Parental role versus ICT influence on adolescent sexual behaviours

Behaviours and values portrayed on television are likely to be in conflict with the values enforced by parents. Some of the values parents deemed as important to children are; responsibility, sensitivity to others, honesty, and good social skills. However research has shown that, most movies on television contain more frequent and explicit portrayals of sexual behaviour an average of 17.5 % per film in one analysis (Greenberg, Siemicki, Dorfman, Heeter, Stanley, Soderman, & Linsangan, 1993). The most frequent sexual activity shown on television is premarital sex. Furthermore, sex is often in the context of profanity, nudity, alcohol and drug use and the negative consequences such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections are rarely addressed (Kunkel, Cope, Farinola & Taberlet, 1999).

2.4.4 Parental involvement and adolescent sexual initiation

Several studies have consistently shown parental monitoring to be significantly associated with less favorable attitudes among adolescents toward initiating sexual intercourse (McNeely, Shew, Beuhring, Sieving, Miller, Blum, 2002). Nonetheless, to attain effective
and successful parental monitoring, adolescent communication was suggested as an essential component during which parents would impart their sexual beliefs and social expectations onto their children (Robin, Dittus & Whitaker, 2004). In addition to its direct effect on sexual intention, successful parental monitoring minimised the effects of attitude on the intention to engage in intercourse. These findings indicate that adolescents who perceive their parents as successful monitors most likely consider the social expectations of their parents when determining their own likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse (McNeely et al. 2002). This reasoning is consistent with other studies associating adolescent perceptions of parental disapproval with a later onset of sexual intercourse (Sieverding, Adler, Witt & Ellen, 2005).
3. Theoretical Framework

Findings from several correlation and longitudinal studies have undoubtedly
demonstrated a link between viewing sexual content on ICT and sexual attitudes and
sexual behaviours of adolescents. In addition, Ward (2002) established that in order to
understand the role of ICT as an agent of sexual socialization, it is crucial to address the
issue of mechanism i.e. how might media content get into the minds of viewers, thereby
shaping their sexual attitudes, assumptions and ultimately their behaviours. Current
theorising acknowledges that viewers interpret sexual content on media differently
(Ward, 2002). They construct meaning based on their existing worldviews, schemas, and
personal experiences (Ward, 2002). Consequently, the information is integrated with
viewer’s existing perspectives and with input from other sources such as peers and family
and is therefore likely to mean different things to different people.

Furthermore, the potential for ICT to influence behaviour has been supported through a
number of different psychosocial theories, hypotheses, and models. Most of these
theories are based on the fundamental notion that greater exposure to sexual material
portrayed on ICT devices such television, leads to the adoption of values, beliefs, and
behaviours shown, particularly when they are unaccompanied by adverse consequences
(Gruber & Grube, 2000). Moreover, Escobar-Chaves et al. (2005) argues that, although
there is considerable variation in theoretical mechanisms by which media might affect
adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviours, most posit that sexually related message
content and behaviour act over time as stimuli to change psychological, physiological and
behavioural function.
It must be noted that, for the current study, two theories namely; Cultivation Theory and Cognitive Social Learning Theory will be used to provide the basis for understanding the dynamics between ICT and the environment.

3.1 Cognitive Social learning theory

This theory emphasizes that children learn behaviour by observing others, that way they get to know which behaviours will be punished and which rewarded (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001). These behaviours are not necessarily imitated immediately, but rather the knowledge is stored as behavioural scripts to be retrieved and applied as the situation arise (Huston et. al. 1998). Additionally, this theory recognizes that humans do not exist in a vacuum, hence it acknowledges the role of cognitive processes as well as influences of environmental forces (Bandura, 1994). Therefore, it suggests that behaviours are learned and that they are influenced by social context.

Brown (2002) suggests that, people’s conceptions of social reality are greatly influenced by observational learning. The introduction of ICT has vastly expanded the range of models to which members of society are exposed to everyday. Hence, symbolic modeling within a society is now rapidly diffusing new ideas and social practices. Thought patterns, values, general attitudes, and behavioural styles towards persons, places and things are increasingly influenced by ICT (Bandura, 1986). It is further suggested that, the more people's images of reality depend upon the media's symbolic environment, the greater is its social impact. Furthermore, Brown (2002) suggests that people who attend to media content that includes depictions of attractive characters that enjoy having sexual
intercourse and rarely suffer any negative consequences will be likely to imitate the behaviour.

3.2 Arousal Theory

This theory focuses primarily on the immediate effects that sexually suggestive material may have on behaviour (Zillman, 1982). It suggests that television content, for example, can produce general emotional and physiological arousal that is likely to further bring about an individual response.

3.3 Cultivation Theory

According to cultivation theory, proposes that heavy exposure to ICT creates and cultivates attitudes that are more consistent with an ICT-directed version of reality than with reality itself (Escobar-Chaves, et.al. 2005). This theory suggest that television’s consistent images and portrayals construct a specific portrait of reality and as viewers consistently watch television more, they progressively cultivate and adopt beliefs about the world that concur with this portrait. In other words cultivation theory predicts that, frequent viewers will be more inclined than sporadic viewers to accept the notions and ideas of ICT depictions. Moreover, Brown (2002) believes that the notion of cultivation hypothesis is that, prolonged exposure to television acts like the pull of gravity towards an imagined centre. This pull results in a shared set of conceptions and expectations about reality among otherwise diverse viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994). For example, exposure to stereotypical images of gender and sexuality in music videos has been found to increase older adolescents' acceptance of non-marital sexual behaviour (Greeson & Williams, 1986).
4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed both the empirical and theoretical literature on ICT’s impact on adolescent’s sexuality. Literature has shown that ICT influences adolescents to engage in sexual activities at an early stage in their lives. Moreover, it has demonstrated that adolescents’ sexual attitudes and perceptions are influenced in various ways. Literature has also indicated that ICT influences sexual behaviour and tends to promote unsafe sexual practices.

However, as indicated earlier most of the research on this area has been conducted in Europe and USA, hence, it must be noted that some of its findings might not be applicable within the South African context.

The following chapter discusses the research design that has been utilized throughout the research process. Furthermore, the methodology used together with the method of collecting and analysing data has been mentioned. Reflections on the researcher’s views and preconceptions about the research project have been highlighted upon. In conclusion, discussions on the steps that have been taken to ensure that this research project met the required standards of ethical research have been delineated.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

It is a known fact that before conducting any research there are several considerations to be taken when deciding on which research methodology to employ. Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999) affirms that before choosing the methodology of a study, it is important to ensure that it is congruent with the research question as well as the aims and objectives of the study. Therefore, for this particular study, a qualitative research design has been adopted as a methodological framework. Following that, the sampling procedure, logistics of data collection and method of data analysis have been explained in detail. Finally, the ethical considerations consistent with the methodological framework have been outlined.

3.2 Research design

In view of the research question which pertains to understanding the extent with which sexual content on ICT influences adolescent sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours, qualitative research method was considered the most appropriate for the study. According to Lichtman (2006), qualitative researchers want to study how something is and get to understand it more. They are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, and how they make sense of their world. Unlike quantitative researchers who think about the world as having an objective reality, qualitative researchers believe that
reality is constructed. Additionally, Merriam (1998) suggested that meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and is mediated through the investigators own perceptions.

Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin (1990) recognized that qualitative method can be used to understand any phenomenon about which little is known as well as gain new perspectives on things already known. It aims for description, understanding and interpretation not examination for cause and effect (Merriam, 1998). Similarly, the current study seeks not to examine adult’s understanding of how exposure to ICT’s sexual content influences adolescent sexuality, but rather, to understand and further explore adolescents’ perception of how their sexual attitudes and behaviours are influenced. In other words, the study is interested in uncovering the meanings that adolescents themselves attach to the influence exposure to sexual material have on their sexuality.

Within this methodology, qualitative researcher acts as “human instrument” for data collection (Baas & Merriam (2002). Furthermore, Lincoln & Guba (1985) in Kruger & Casey (2000) identified characteristics that make humans the “instrument of choice” for qualitative inquiry. He suggests that humans are responsive to the environmental cues and able to interact with the situation, perceive holistically and process data. Moreover, qualitative inquiry accepts the complex and most dynamic quality of the social world. At the same time, it provides insight into the participant’s experiences of the world (Stake, 1978). Therefore, qualitative research method is favoured in this study as it not only investigate the domains of meaning but also explores other broad factors impacting on adolescent sexuality, particularly within the South African context.
3.3 Research method

3.3.1 Participants

Participants were selected from a public school in working class suburb of the Western Cape Metropole region. The rationale for selecting participants from a public school particularly residing in a suburb was that, the study’s major focus is on adolescents assumed to have access and frequent exposure to ICT at school and more especially in their homes. The majority of parents living in this area are employed, making it easier to provide for their children including buying them ICT devices such as advanced cellular phones, personal computers and other. Furthermore, parental mediation is considered limited for adolescents living in this area such that their decision making and behaviour are mostly influenced by external factors such as peers and ICT.

The sample consisted of a total of 18 learners (9 girls and 9 boys) from Grade 10 and Grade 11. All the participants were “coloured” speaking both English and Afrikaans. The approach for this study was to get a homogenous group of participants particularly in terms of age. The researcher’s main interest was on adolescents between the ages 14 and 16 year. The choice of this particular age group has been made based on the literature and studies conducted on the developmental tasks during adolescents. Research shows that the stage of development also influences comprehension and interpretation of sexual content (Gruber & Grube, 2000). Furthermore, a study conducted on sexual content on television, indicated that 12-year-old adolescents were less likely to understand suggestive material than 14- and 17-year-olds. Moreover, more mature adolescents were intrigued and more actively sought out sexual content in the media as a means of
“learning the rules, rituals, and skills” of romance and relationships (Gruber & Grube, 2000).

### 3.3.2 Method of data collection

Kruger & Casey (1994) defines a focus group as a special type of group in terms of purpose, size and composition which is used to gather information and to better understand how people feel or think about a certain issue. In other words, it provides insight to attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the participants. Therefore, since the study aimed at broadly exploring adolescent’ perceptions regarding sexual content on ICT, focus groups was chosen as method of collecting data.

Moreover, the central motivation for the use of focus groups for this study is that, the group environment allows greater anonymity and therefore helps participants to freely and openly disclose more than they would have in individual interviews (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (1990) believed that the open format of a focus group has a distinctive advantage in that it provides an opportunity to obtain large and rich amounts of data in the participants’ own words. In addition to this, it allows the researcher to probe while giving the participants an opportunity to raise issues of concern. This in turn allows the researcher access into much deeper levels of meaning and to make important connections in the expression of that meaning. Moreover, difference in opinion among the group members also helps the researcher to identify how and why individuals embrace or reject particular ideas (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook 1990).
Additionally, Krueger & Casey (2000) noted that focus groups presents a more natural environment because participants are both influencing and influenced by others, just as they are in real life. Therefore, to obtain a clear perspective of how sexual content on ICT influences adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviours, focus groups have been considered the best tool suited for the collection of data. They are consistent with the aims and methodological framework of the current study.

Participants were divided into 2 focus groups of 45 minutes each. Each consisted of 9 participants between the ages 14-16 years, with equal gender distribution in each group. Krueger (1994) suggests a group size of between six and twelve to allow maximum participation from all group members. As a discussion guide, a semi-structured interview schedule was used with 5 core questions and several probing questions. According to Lofland & Lofland (1994), a semi-structured interview allows flexibility, while time interaction is focused during the discussion. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to probe within the relevant areas of the research question.

### 3.3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted once a written permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department. Following that, telephonic request were made and formal letters faxed to the identified school to request participation in the study. Subsequently, a personal visit to the school was made, to explain in detail the purpose of the study including the logistical issues surrounding the study. During the visit, letters of consent for both learners and their parents were handed to the contact teacher to distribute respectively.
Focus groups took place on the school premises during the times set by the principal. Each focus group discussion began by reminding participants about their right to remain anonymous and assuring them of their confidentiality. Furthermore, participants were reminded that the letter of consent ensured that participation was voluntary and that they were allowed (although not encouraged) to withdraw at any point during the research process.

3.4 Data Analysis

Straus and Corbin (1998) described data analysis as the interplay between the researcher and data. It is a process of thoroughly working with data: organizing it, searching for patterns and looking for what is important which will eventually be communicated to others (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). In addition, Kruger and Casey (2000) suggested that data analysis begins by going back to the very intention of the study.

Unlike quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis takes place concurrently with data collection by facilitating discussion and generating rich data (Kruger & Casey, 2000). Nonetheless, Strauss & Corbin (1998) noted that it is important to acknowledge that regardless of the type of research, an extent of subjectivity exists. Hence it is suggested that in order to minimize any preconceived notion, analysis should be systematic, sequential and verifiable (Kruger & Casey, 2000). Even so, it has been noted that data analysis is the most complex phase of qualitative research (Thorne, 2000) mainly because it involves translating pieces of raw data into meaningful information that is eventually interpreted and understood by the reader (Kruger & Casey, 2000). Often, researchers are most likely to be overwhelmed by the vast accumulation of data (Kruger & Casey, 2000).
and a great deal of creativity is essential. However, more importantly, Kruger & Casey (2000) stated that there are several ways of interpreting data and there is no “right” or “wrong” way. Rather, analysis should be verifiable, which means that, there must be sufficient data to constitute evidence to what the researcher is communicating.

Qualitative data analysis begins by transcription of focus group interviews (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 1990). For this study, audiotapes were transcribed in verbatim. It must be noted that even though the transcript serves as basis for further analysis, it does not reflect the whole character of the discussion. More importantly, participant’s non-verbal communication, gestures and emotions are excluded. Therefore, in view of the above, notes taken by the researcher during the focus group discussions were added to the transcript. Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (1990) believed that observational data is crucial as it is utilized as supporting material within an interpretative analysis.

Following transcription, dominant themes emerging from the raw data were identified, in a process known as thematic analysis. Auerbach & Silverstein (1990) defined a theme as an implicit topic that organises a group of repeating ideas. After careful consideration of the research question, Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub (1996)’s thematic analysis was seen in synchronization with the aims of the study and the most appropriate method to use.

The first step is “identifying the big ideas” and it commences immediately the focus group discussion start. During this stage, the researcher takes note of the manner in which participants express themselves, that is, the words they use, intensity of the responses and most importantly, the non-verbal communication. This leads to the second step, referred to as “unitising the data”. The researcher’s task during this phase is to think carefully about the bits of information that emerged, which are then coded and later serve
as the basis for defining categories. Following which is “categorizing the units”, which is step three, involving sorting out the identified units of information into themes.

The fourth step is considered the most challenging process of data analysis referred to as “negotiating categories”. The final step, involves re-examination of the “big ideas” generated in the first step. It is referred to as “identification of themes and the use of theory” mainly because the researcher identifies themes that emerged, providing adequate evidence to support these themes. Theory is brought in to assist in the interpretation of findings. According to Strauss & Corbin (1990) it is important that the final findings are provided in such a manner that makes sense to the reader.

The above steps have been described in a sequential order. However, Mayring (2000) highlighted that, it is important to note that the actual analysis may occur in parallel and repetitively, depending on the research question, the researcher’s approach as well as the setting of the study.

3.5 Reflexivity

It has been noticed that a qualitative researcher brings his/her own perceptions, values and objectives into the research, which in turn have an influence on the research project Ratner (1990). Hence, Miller (1991) emphasises that reflexivity should start with the identification and acknowledgment of preconceptions the researcher may have brought into the project. Therefore, in order to ensure that objectivity is thoroughly maintained during the course of this study, consideration to the researcher’s preconceived ideas has been given. More precisely, the author’s prejudices that could have been influenced by literature reviewed as well as the author’s own experiences formulated prior to the study.
have been acknowledged. This is deemed necessary because these ideas could have influenced the reading and interpretation of the participant’s responses.

Sufficient accounts of these influences have been highlighted upon in the last section of this study, which constitutes the discussion, limitations and strengths of the study. As a way of substantiating for reflexivity, transcription of data in the form of verbatim was provided therefore allowing those who were not involved in the study to view the data.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

It has been noted that sexuality can be a sensitive topic which might raise numerous ethical issues. It was therefore deemed necessary to ensure that all the required ethical standards were met. As such, the standard ethical procedure for conducting research was strictly adhered to. Furthermore, permission to conduct the study was received from the Western Cape Education Department. Following that, written letters of informed consent were given to all learners and their respective parents. Afterwards, participants were thoroughly informed about the nature and motivation of the study and what was expected of them. This was done in order to allow participants to voluntarily make the choice to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity was thoroughly assured to all participants. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any given time should some form of discomfort emerge. Lastly, participants were notified that if at any point there was a need for professional intervention of any sort that it would be arranged at no cost.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, a methodical account of the entire methodological procedure employed in this study was thoroughly given. Firstly, the selection of a qualitative method as a research design for the current study was motivated. Secondly, how the participants were chosen was explained in detail. Qualitative data collection as a method used for this study, to uncover the participant’s views of the research question was delineated upon. Finally, the process of qualitative data analysis which involves making sense of the material obtained from focus group interviews, describing the perceptions of adolescents with regard to exposure to sexual content on ICT, has been explained. The following chapter gives a detailed account of analysis of findings and discussion of the focus group interviews.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides an exposition of the key findings of the focus group discussion. Thematic analysis has been used as a method of analysing data, by identifying themes surrounding adolescent’s sexual perceptions, beliefs and sexual behaviours as influenced by ICT. Themes have been extracted from the participants’ responses then compared to current literature on the impact of ICT on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviours. A summary of the overall findings has been given in the last section of this chapter.

4.2 Findings

From the collected data, four main themes have been identified and thoroughly discussed. They are as follows:

i. Sexual decision making

ii. Sexual attitudes and perceptions

iii. Sexual behaviours

iv. Quality of relationship with the opposite sex
4.3 Sexual decision making

The first theme to emerge from the focus group data concerned the adolescent’s perceptions on the influence exposure to sexual content on ICT has on decision-making regarding sexual initiation. Attention was drawn to participant’s experiences more specifically their thoughts and feelings. One of the participants reported the following:

*FR:* When you get to know what’s going on and you learn, it’s like ok you watching it and then something hits your mind and tells you, do I want to do it someday or shouldn’t I do it.

*(Focus group 1)*

In the above, the participant suggests that viewing sexual content generates sexual thoughts, specifically, thoughts around exploring one’s own sexuality. According to LeVay & Valente (2003) this is typical since adolescence is a key period of sexual exploration and development. Individuals begin to consider which sexual behaviours are enjoyable, moral, and appropriate for their age group. In addition, drawing from the participant’s follow up statement; “…you think should I do it someday or shouldn’t I do it and that’s what always goes through my mind and so that’s why I just cut it off completely so I don’t have to think about it” it can be noted that, for the participant, exposure to sexual material not only elicits persistent sexual thoughts, sexual images also surface.

Looking at the above extract, a fair amount of anxiety and tension is noticeable. Moreover, as the participant told the above, she shook her head vigorously, with her
hands on her ears almost as if at that very moment she was unconsciously pushing the sexual thoughts away. In substantiating this observation, Hulton (2001) reasons that, an enormous amount of pressure and anxiety is exerted from adolescents regarding decision on sexual initiation. Furthermore, there is awareness that decisions made during this life phase may have lifelong consequences for the adolescent’s health, career, psychological well-being, and social acceptance (Hulton, 2001). It is therefore likely that some adolescents will find making a decision to engage in sexual activities for the first time anxiety provoking.

Within this group (Focus Group 1), the rest of the participants had less verbal comments regarding the above excerpt, nonetheless, they strongly nodded their heads in agreement of what was shared. Seemingly, it was an overall feeling for all participants in the group. They agreed that watching sexual content on ICT brings about questions of whether or not one would engage in sexual intercourse at earlier or later stage in their lives. Apart from sexual thoughts, participants reported a variety of other experiences following watching sex-containing programs. These are briefly discussed.

4.3.1 Physical arousal

It is a known fact that watching various programs, for example scary movies or movies containing violence on television elicits responses from the viewer. At times, it may generate feelings of fear, anger, for example towards the “bad guy” often depicted in the violent movie. For some viewers it may even produce a physiological response for example sweating profusely. Similarly, participants reported that viewing sex-containing material not only cultivates sexual thoughts, additionally it generates a physiological
response within their bodies. Further describing their encounters, participants affirmed the following:

\[ MR: \text{ You watch, and then you feel…. you get a lekker (nice) feeling } \]

\[ FR: \text{ Something happens to the body indeed. } \]

\[ MR: \text{ You just get horny and kla (finish). } \]

*(Focus Group 1)*

Reading from the above, it is obvious that not only are participants confronted with sexual thoughts following viewing sexual content, additionally, they become sexually aroused. Moreover, they strongly believed that everyone viewing sexual material is bound to experience sexual arousal, otherwise “that person is not normal” *(FR, Focus Group 1)*. The arousal theory confirms this view. According to this theory, television content for example can produce general emotional and physiological arousal that is likely to elicit some type of individual and behavioural response *(Zillman, 1982)*. Affirming this finding, Gunter *(2002)* stated that, as adolescents reach puberty and experience physical and hormonal changes, sexual drives naturally emerge. Hence, viewing sexual scenes could serve as a stimulus, adding directly to these natural urges.

### 4.3.2 Desire to imitate what is being viewed

Participants reported not only experiencing sexual thoughts and sexual arousal, additionally, they confessed that watching sex-containing program brings about desires to imitate the viewed sexual activity. The following excerpts illustrate:
MR: So yes, you actually have that feeling to like do or exactly have those moments of what you see and ya stuff like that.

FR: Watching sexual intimacy on TV makes you want to experience it.

(Focus group 1)

FR: On TV it looks like they enjoy themselves now it’s almost like we also wanna do that, to see, to feel ...you know, now that’s why it is influencing us.

(Focus group 2)

It is evident from the above that participants classify ICT’s sexual portrayals as appealing, creating an impression of “fun” and “pleasure” attached to engaging in sexual activities. They emphasise a desire to “feel” how it is like to have a sexual encounter. Furthermore, one of the participants highlighted; “You see when you watch pornographic stuff then you get this sexual feeling man and you just want to relieve yourself, just want to do the thing and get finished with it and then after that you are tired and then you just want to relax”. Another participant deemed this as true, saying; “It’s like you see things on TV and now you also want to like try it, it’s not only the males that want to try it, it’s also the girls”. Drawing from this finding, it is clear that both male and female participants experience fun, excitement and sexual pleasure from viewing sexual content and eventually desire to engage in sexual activity.
In substantiating the above finding, Gunter (2002) stated that, viewing sexual scenes in programs could provide a channel through which sexual urges could be vicariously expunged, thus attributing a cathartic effect to TV. Therefore, it has been demonstrated that exposure to ICT’s sexual material elicit cognitive, affective and physiological responses from the viewer. The adolescent watching sexual content will certainly experience sexual thoughts, sexual arousal and eventually desires to engage in some form of sexual activity. It is, however, interesting to know what is likely to follow, meaning, how the adolescent will respond.

In an attempt to respond to this question, Cooper (1998) highlighted that, when an adolescent only sees sex as being passionate and fun, accompanied by the absence of negative consequences, they can easily be convinced that is the way things really are. As a result, they are more likely to give in to their hormonal urges (Eshobar-Chaves et al. 2005). To ascertain these findings, participants were asked the following:

F: Having said all that you have just said, I want to know in terms of sexual decision would you say that now being obviously young, lets say you have been told by your parents that sex is meant for older people or maybe you told yourself that you would like to do it at a later stage when you are a bit matured, a bit sure this is what you want to do, now comes TV, comes your body, and all these things you mentioned, would you say that TV would have an influence on you taking a decision to go out there and have sex earlier.
Both male and female participants uttered a vigorous: “Yes” (Focus Group 1). In accordance to the present findings, research conducted by Collins et.al. (2005) clearly revealed that watching sex on TV predicts and may hasten adolescent sexual initiation. Furthermore, social learning theory predicts that, observation of either sexual talk or sexual behaviour will influence adolescents to have sex (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, it can tentatively be concluded that, regular viewing of sexual content from ICT influences adolescents to engage in sexual activities much earlier.

4.4 Sexual attitudes and perceptions

The second theme to emerge from the data concerned thoughts and feelings participants experience while and/ after viewing sexual material. According to participants, sexual material has tremendous effect on general attitudes about sex and sexual relationships. The comments that follow constitute participants’ perceptions of how ICT influences sexual attitudes.

4.4.1. Attitude towards number of sexual partners

Studies of sex-role portrayals on television have indicated that, often times male characters tend to outnumber female characters (Gunter, 2002). Additionally, male characters are more likely shown with numerous sexual partners. Gunter (2002) further stated that television depicts a world of rampant promiscuity characterised by frequent casual sex between partners who hardly know each other. It is of interest to know how these portrayals are perceived by the growing adolescent and to what extent they influence their sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour. From the focus group discussion, significant gender differences regarding participants’ perceptions of how sex-containing
programs influence their attitudes towards the number of sexual partners emerged. Male participants reported the following:

F: *The question is, once you have seen the sex scenes from a movie, maybe on TV wherever it may be, does it influence the number of girlfriends or boyfriends?*

MR: *I think it will, it will a lot. I think it is great to have many partners coz then you experience it (sex) differently*

MR: *In the same day you have three or four girls, it doesn’t bother me, you experience it from different cultures.*

(Focus Group 1)

Judging from the above responses, having numerous sexual partners for male participants is considered “great”, bringing a great deal of “fun” and sexual pleasure because the individual has a variety of sexual encounters. Participants reported the above with such confidence and pride, almost implying that it is “good” for a male to have many sexual partners. On the other hand, female participants stated:

FR: *I think that if you look at it this way, like if you have the mindset that you want to spend your life with one person then you not gonna think like that porn guy or that porn woman, because I mean at the end of the day like I said before, its reality that has to make you think and as a human*
being you should know that there are so many things out there that can endanger you. So I wouldn’t as young as I am, make a stupid decision of sleeping with Tom, Dick and Harry.

(Focus Group 1)

Contrary to male participants, the concept of realism was emphasised by female participants. They acknowledged reality as a crucial factor governing their decision making regarding how one should conduct oneself in sexual relations. Looking at the words “stupid decision” it is clear that, having numerous sexual partners is seen as foolish and imprudent. In addition, female participants firmly and boldly affirm that ICT would certainly “not” influence their decision to have numerous partners. One participant stated; “If me as a female, I see something like that then I always think, it warns me to see that’s actually the kind of guys that you find out there. Those cruel, heartless guys that will just play around with your feelings sleep with many females and just leave you like that, so it actually warns us”. Even more radically another participant remarked, “It shows me that it doesn’t matter what they look like, men are all the same”.

The former comment provoked different reactions among male participants. They claimed, “I’m different” others emphasised “All males are not the same”, rather it is an individual’s choice to have numerous sexual partners. Further substantiating they stated; “coz why if you think ne (right) if you go from one girl to another who maybe slept with someone else and that one has a virus or something, now you must think, because you can loop jou vas (get yourself into trouble)”. From this quotation, one can draw that reality is not only acknowledged among female participants as important, a significant
number of males also believe that it is important to consider one’s living conditions. They acknowledge that there are consequences for all behaviours, hence it is necessary for an individual to think carefully before doing. Nonetheless, despite this objection, the majority of male participants still maintained the view that, ICT “definitely” has an influence on the decision to have many sexual partners. Bringing the concept of physiology, they argued:

MR:  *Ok, so the female and the male, its kinda different, male hormones are not really the same as the females, coz female hormones is like more matured.*

MR: *Females are more matured than males, so you can’t actually blame the males, sometimes you can be hungrier than others.*

F: *Are you talking about being sexually hungry?*

MR:  *Yes, sexually hungry.*

MR:  *Most males are more sexually hungry than others and that’s why you won’t really see females that are the ones that is always being unfaithful and stuff like that.*

*(Focus Group1)*

According to some male participants, having many sexual partners is a natural phenomenon for the males but “not” for females. On the account of different
physiological processes, they perceived polygamous, premarital affairs as acceptable for a male, while for a female that is utterly disgraceful. Biological influences are emphasised so greatly, seemingly implying that “biology”, not the individual should take the responsibility for the male’s actions of having many sexual partners.

In view of the above, Gunter (2002) illustrated that television can influence viewer’s conception of reality by displaying certain patterns of behaviour especially when these portrayals are credible and relevant to the life of the viewer. Furthermore, one of the studies conducted found that, frequent viewing of music videos with sexual content has been linked with both greater number of sexual partners and with more sexual experience (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993).

With regard to the concept of physiological differences raised, different views among male participants emerged. Some highlighted; “ok you get males that’s gonna go with this kind only, but you get others that are more sexually hungry”. They recognize that, in as much as they may attribute increased desire for sexual activity among males as a result of hormonal influences, not all males are influenced by sexual content on ICT into having many sexual partners. Therefore, overall findings suggest that both males and females have different perceptions regarding the influence of ICT on the number of sexual partners.

4.4.2. Attitudes towards physical image of sexual partner(s)

Once again, there were clear differences by gender concerning participants’ views with regard to ICT’s influences on the choice of physical image of sexual partner. Female
participants believed that “personality is more important” than physical appearance. On the contrary, male participants reported the following:

\[ F: \ldots \text{but now what type of girl are you looking for?} \]

\[ MR: \text{That model that is on TV.} \]

\[ F: \text{(asking another participant) Ok so do you also want that model that is on TV or you want your own?} \]

\[ MR: \text{She must have trash in the can (nice body figure/slim/ sexy body)} \]

(Focus Group1)

The above extracts indicates that male participants view physical appearance of sexual partner as important. From the words “she must have”, it is as though physical image is used as a standard to measure the attractiveness of a woman which would then qualify whether she would make a suitable sexual partner or not. Even though male participants did not state the reason for their preference of “slim, sexy body”, it appears as though their choice is based on the ideas of having great fun and sexual pleasure as portrayed on ICT.

In support of the above, Gunter (2002) found that the adolescent’s choice of sexual model depends primarily on the basis of the individual’s motives and intentions. In addition, Gerbner and Greenburg (1990) reported that men and women exhibit different motives
for sexual interests. Men’s motives often include pleasure, fun and physical gratification, whereas for women notions of love and commitment are considered crucial.

4.4.3. Attitude towards the use of contraceptives

Interesting views emerged during the focus group discussion when participants were asked the first thing that comes to mind when watching people engaging in unprotected sex on various media. They reported; “Pregnancy, AIDS, that’s the first thing that comes to mind” (MR, Focus Group 1). Contrary to their diverse views regarding the influence of ICT on the number and image of sexual partners, concerning the use of contraceptives, all participants, both male and female had similar opinions. They commented:

FR: From my point of view and experience, I think that if you watch and you have feelings and thoughts, the first thing that comes on my mind is that we are living in reality and what we see on TV might just be some computerized thing so then I have to live in reality and maybe the choice of that protection could help me in my future.

MR: Sometimes following through what you see on TV ne (right) is not always what you gonna do, obviously you gonna go around the safe way. It does not mean you gonna see it on TV they doing it without protection, you not gonna do the same thing coz you yourself know the consequences and you should know better.

(Focus Group 1)
Once again the notion of reality has been emphasised on the above responses. The participants communicated their views concerning the use of contraception with such vigor and confidence. In one accord, they firmly asserted that, the appealing ICT’s portrayals of unsafe sexual practices will definitely not entice them into adopting similar conduct. Moreover, entirely acknowledging their worldviews, participants further advocated “what you see on TV might not be real, but some computerised thing”.

According to social learning theory which examines the influence of observational learning on the adoption of specific behaviours, adolescents exposed to consistent portrayals of casual sex without negative consequences will be more likely to adopt the behaviours portrayed (Bandura, 1994). In other words, this predicts that the adolescent would be influenced into engaging in unprotected sex.

However, contrary to what literature predicts, participants assert themselves as “knowing better”, implying that they are cognisant and fully aware of the dangers and consequences of unsafe sexual practices. Therefore, they do not regard ICT’s portrayals of unsafe sexual practices as appealing and charming enough persuading them to imitate such behaviour.

Several studies conducted in South Africa showed that the majority of adolescents engage in unprotected sex. However, it has been noted that there has been a significant decrease in numbers of young people engaging in unsafe sexual practices. Affirming this, a survey conducted in 2003 on youth in all the nine South African provinces, revealed that, 52 % of South African youth (15-24 years) reported using contraceptives, among which 33 %
reported “always” using condoms, while a lesser number, 31 % never used condoms with their most recent partner. Moreover, 87 % reported easy access to condoms whenever they needed (Pettifor, Rees, Steffenson, Hlongwa-Madikizela, MacPhail, Vermaak, Kleinschmidt, 2004). Even more, a Daily News article (2005) revealed that even though there is an increase in sexual activity among young people in South Africa, a significant number of adolescents (60 %) reported high condom use during the last time they had sex. In view of this finding, it is evident that, there has been a shift on adolescent sexual behaviours as far as the use of contraceptives is concerned.

Various mediatory factors are presumed to have played a role towards this considerable change. Subsequent to 1994, there has been remarkable improvement regarding the dissemination of information in South Africa. More educational information has been made available through various communication mediums. Among these, the Education Department has incorporated sexual education as one of the subjects (Life Orientation) in schools, to inform and empower children about sexuality issues at a young age. Furthermore, educational programs such as “Take 5”, “Chatroom” and many other focusing on addressing challenges confronting South African youth, are regularly broadcasted on national television. Additionally, various youth organisations such as Love Life, TAC run awareness campaigns on sexuality matters including HIV/ AIDS. These are some of the mediatory factors that have presumably impacted positively on promoting responsible sexual behaviour such as the use of contraceptives among South Africa young people.
4.5 Sexual behaviour

Generalising about sexual behaviours in adolescence is a challenging procedure, given a wide range of behaviour included under this rubric (Gunter, 2002). As already discussed, adolescents sexual behaviours are affected by a range of variables among which is ICT. Therefore, the third theme to be addressed is the participant’s perceptions regarding the influences of ICT on sexual behaviour. This section takes a closer look at what adolescents are likely to do sexually.

At the beginning of focus group discussion, participants’ exposure to sex-containing programs on ICT was explored. Some participants said: “Actually I don’t watch that. My mommy always taught me when I was small, when stuff like that comes on TV, you change the channel and close your eyes”; “It’s dirty”, “It’s nasty” (Focus Group 2). However, the majority reported; “We did watch it, we all watched it. Everyone watched it.” (Focus Group 1). What was noticed is that, as the participants reported their exposure to sexual material, a sense of hesitancy and embarrassment was observed. They further reported:

FR: You still get that feeling that says no it’s wrong you shouldn’t be watching it.

MR: Like my mother used to say, close your eyes.

MR: At first I didn’t close it, so afterwards, I still didn’t close it.

(Focus Group 1)

Looking at the above, it is evident that participants experience guilt feelings concurrently with pleasurable sexual feelings from viewing sexual material. Nonetheless, despite
feelings of guilt and a degree of embarrassment linked to watching sex-containing programs, there is a natural curiosity towards sexual matters. According to Gunter (2002), this is probable since adolescence is a time of sexual experimentation with different forms of sexual behaviour, hence the persistent inquisitiveness.

Research has demonstrated that adolescents are heavy consumers of ICT and deliberately seek sexually-oriented material (Eschobar-Chaves, et.al. 2005). They spend hours and hours on these devices hence, it is anticipated that they will be fully acquainted with numerous sexual behaviours. Their description of sexual scenes was given in graphic detail. They suggested that there is lasting impact of such sexual scenes specifically on sexual conduct. The following excerpts illustrate:

*FR:* They are also telling us that it's fine to have more than one sexual partner...to sleep around.

*FR:* And it makes you feel like that because you are watching this movie, seeing this man sexually active...it's almost like he can't live without sex...now he is influencing other children also in having sex and being sexually active and...it does influence.

In the above, participants suggest that, sex-containing programs condone promiscuous behaviour. They argue that ICT portrays convincing, stereotypical messages suggesting that it is essential to have sex and that “it is ok” to have numerous sexual partners. With a strong emphasis, one of the participants claimed: Sometimes these movies make a person
a “player” because like they think this guy is having sex with so many girls, you can also have sex, it actually makes you a player and it sometimes makes you sexually active also because you want...you must have sex, you must (FR, Focus Group 2). In other words, the participants allude that ICT is another factor that plays a role in the increase of sexual activity among adolescents.

To account for current findings, cultivation theory has been used as a model of reference in examining ICT’s influences on viewer’s sexual attitudes. According to this theory, television’s consistent portrayals construct a specific portrait of reality. Therefore regular viewing gradually cultivates beliefs about the world that correspond with what is most depicted. Hence, it is predicted that frequent viewers will be more likely to endorse television’s perspective of sexuality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1994). In addition, Ward (2002) argues that, potential impact of regular exposure to sexual content on sexual behaviour is mostly indirect, working through viewer’s attitudes, schemas and belief system. Moreover, a study conducted by Brown & Newcomer (1991) found that, male and female adolescents whose TV diets included higher proportions of sexual content were more likely to have become sexually active over the course of the study in comparison to adolescents with limited exposure to sexual material.

Participants further suggested that ICT’s sexual portrayals influence the manner in which they express themselves sexually, that is, forms of sexual behaviours they engage into. The following illustrates:
MR: There are different ways in which the male and female have sexual intercourse, so you maybe wanna try that."

(Focus Group 1)

FR: They wanna sex you in the...you know, in the bum now. Yes they want to sex you in your anus now.

(Focus Group 2)

Popular studies indicate that there is a strong relationship between having seen sex-containing programs and having tried out certain sexual acts (Gunter, 2002). Hence, tentative evidence shows that, greater television exposure is linked to viewers’ sexual behaviour (Collins et.al. 2005).

4.6 Quality of relationship with the opposite sex

There are many forms of romantic sexual relationships among adolescents. Some relationships exist entirely on the basis of fulfilling each other’s sexual needs, whereas others consider intimacy as an important component in a relationship. Intimacy as used in this text is described as involving more than just sexual intercourse between partners, but rather encompasses emotional attachment, caring and mutual commitment (Gunter, 2002). The last theme to be addressed concerns the extent with which the quality of relationship with the opposite sex among participants is impacted upon. Diverse perceptions emerged. Male participants believe:
MR: “I think ICT does influence us big time and mostly when you like go meet a girl. You meet a girl and sometimes you just wanna fulfill a man’s needs”.

(Focus Group 1)

The above quotation suggests that the relationship is based on entirely fulfilling the man’s sexual desires. It is void of intimacy; rather the physical element of sex is seen as of primary importance. More specifically, the relationship is viewed as purely a physical game in which self-centred, self gratification is more important than the relational aspects.

A study conducted to investigate the relationship between exposure of adolescents to sexually explicit material on the internet and their recreational attitudes towards sex, revealed that sexually explicit material presents sex as a merely physical, self-indulgent activity between casual, uncommitted partners that ignores the social and relational aspects of sexuality (Brosius, Weaver & Staab, 1993). Furthermore, it was found that sexually explicit material on videos, DVDs, magazines, on the internet often treats women as sexual playthings whose bodies and genitals are the centre of attention. Looking at the above excerpt, the female is viewed as a sexual object made to satisfy the man’s “sexual hunger”.

Regarding this view, female participants commented, “It’s always about what the males want, they don’t see what the females want, it’s just what pleases them”. They seem to agree with the idea that men often see women as sex objects, to fulfill “their” needs. Commenting on this finding, Ward (2002) argued that sexual content on television
focused more on women’s bodies than on men. To concur, Zillmann & Bryant (2003) further stated that media often portrays men as looking for “sex without commitment”, sexually insatiable and domineering within the relationship. Hence, it is not surprising that this is the most prevalent belief women hold towards men.

Contrary to male participants, female affirmed:

*FR:* I think if you look at TV programs, ok I know a lot of males are not big fans of dramas and whatever, but we as females if we see dramas and we see the relationship they have on TV like this love and all that stuff and then obviously we would want something like that. Now whereas males would see a hot chick (girl) and the way she is, it’s like they want someone like that. They don’t look personality wise, they look body wise. *(Focus Group 1)*

In the above citation, emotional connection with sexual partner is viewed as important by the female participant. Seemingly, ideas of love, romance and intimacy are rated as crucial components of a relationship. Overall, the participants suggested that adolescents respond to different material on ICT. Hence, it can be said that, not only does sexual oriented material impact on male perceptions, rather, it also has an effect on female perceptions regarding male sexuality, however this occurs in different ways.
4.7 Summary of findings

As a method of interpreting data in order to make sense of participants’ accounts, thematic analysis suggested by Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub (1996) was used. These interpretations were then presented as four themes, namely; sexual decision making, sexual attitudes and perceptions, sexual behaviours and quality of relationship with the opposite sex. It is clear that many of the participants have been exposed to a wide variety of sexual content. In one voice, they reported that sexual material has an influence on sexual attitudes.

All participants undoubtedly agreed that viewing sex-containing programs leads to sexual arousal and eventually a desire for sexual activity. Therefore, evidence was provided that ICT influences early sexual initiation.

With regard to the influence on the number of sexual partners, participants’ views differed. Male participants believed that ICT influences both their decision to have numerous sexual partners and preference of physical appearance. Although few female participants acknowledged that ICT acclaims having many sexual partners, the majority of the female participants believed that ICT will certainly not influence them to act likewise because they understand the consequences of such behaviour. They viewed inner attributes of a person as much more important than the external appearance.

As far as the use of contraceptives is concerned, both male and female participants showed complete detestation towards unsafe sexual practices. They strongly argued that
ICT’s regular portrayals of unprotected sex do not seem attractive and fascinating enough to tempt them into imitating such conduct.

Finally, they agreed that even though they do not imitate some sexual behaviours portrayed through ICT, however it has an influence on the manner in which they express themselves sexually.

All participants were from the same ethnicity and background. Based on this, there were no significant cultural differences in terms of their perceptions and beliefs towards issues of sexuality, particularly as influenced by ICT. Their views and opinions rather differed based on gender. Even though they agreed on many themes, males’ perceptions and beliefs towards the impact of ICT on sexuality seemed to differ from that of females.

4.8 Conclusion

With regard to the research question as well as the aims and objectives of the study, findings have been thoroughly explained and presented as four themes. These themes have been selected by looking at the participant’s exposure to sexual content and how they perceive its influences on their sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours. These themes were compared to previous research on the impact of information and communication technologies on adolescent sexuality. With few exceptions, the majority of the research was confirmed. We conclude this chapter by noting that adolescents tend to construct their sexual worlds in different ways, possible because of their biological differences and socialisation practices. Due to the fact that all participants were from the same ethnicity and culture, the study cannot provide any evidence of influences of culture on sexual
beliefs and behaviours amongst adolescents. The following chapter presents limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter concludes by providing an account of the limitations of the study and hence provides suggestions for future investigation. This study has explored adolescent’s perceptions of the influence of information and communication technologies on their sexual attitudes, sexual beliefs and subsequently, sexual behaviour. Through the stipulation of the limitations of this study, we hope to provide a guide for future research more specifically within the South African context.

Findings have clearly illustrated that sexual content on ICT influences adolescent sexual perceptions and sexual behaviours in various ways, including encouraging early sexual initiation, cultivating liberal attitudes towards having numerous sexual partners with a “certain” physical appearance as often depicted on ICT and promoting relationships that are based on fulfilling sexual needs without commitment. However, the study had several limitations.

5.2 Limitations and recommendations

The following limitations discussed have emerged during the course of data analysis and are in relation to the scope of the current study. First and foremost, the apparent limitation was that, the scope of the study was too general. Overall findings would have been more meaningful and rich if the study had adopted a more narrow focus such as
looking at investigating a specific domain of adolescent’s sexuality for example, look at the influences of ICT on early sexual initiation or towards the use of contraceptives or on sexual behaviour. Additionally, focus could be placed on the impact of specific ICT devices, for example, the influences of television or the internet or cell phone.

Secondly, most of the supporting literature was drawn from studies conducted internationally, that might not have been inclusive of the contextual factors facing South African adolescents. According to Foney (2001), people develop within an environmental context governed by specific factors which in turn influence how they perceive and react towards certain stimuli. Furthermore, being fully aware and knowledgeable of young people’s context is necessary in understanding their experiences and interpretation of sexual content from ICT. However, this does not suggest that the literature used in this study was inappropriate and irrelevant, most studies were applicable. The study’s limitation was lack of contextual information concerning the impact of ICT on adolescent sexuality. Nevertheless, the findings of this study paves way for an in-depth understanding of the effects of sexual content portrayed by ICT on adolescent’s sexual attitudes and behaviours.

Different opinions based on gender differences have significantly emerged with regard to participants perceptions of the influences of ICT. At times this made it difficult to ascertain interpretations that would be regarded as overall findings. Therefore, the third limitation was inclusiveness of both genders within a group. Future research should limit the focus on one gender per study to get a better and more objective understanding on ICT’s influences among adolescents.
Moreover, this study did not control for ethnicity since it was conducted on only one ethnic group. South Africa constitutes a wide range of adolescents from different ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, therefore, findings of the present study cannot be generalised due to its limited scope. A larger, more inclusive sample in terms of age, gender, race and geographical area must be ensured for future research.

5.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study hopes to add on the literature of previous studies by voicing out adolescents’ sexual perceptions as impacted by sexual content on ICT. A basic foundation for future research is hence provided. With the increase of sexual activity, HIV/ AIDS, increased pregnancy rate, among South African adolescents it is important to be fully cognisant and well informed of other less obvious factors impacting on adolescent sexuality. More specifically, it is crucial to understand how sexual portrayals on ICT impacts the younger generation. Therefore, this study hopes to significantly contribute to the large body of research within the South African context.
References


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