Social Sites Accessibility and the Rise of Sexual Harassment among Teenagers in Kenya

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Abstract: **With technological advancement social media use has risen amongst teenagers with a wide range of site choices that include: facebook, whatsaap, instagram, twitter and lots of others. This subjects them to encounters with peers and adults posting sexual graphics and texts that are offensive and which to a great extent compromise their morals. Sexual harassment has become so commonplace that many accept it as something everyone puts up with. However, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment, creating a negative school environment, and leading to more violent behaviors such as harassment and threats online, including public posting of malicious personal information about teenagers following disagreements with online friends. In this study Cultivation theory was used as the theoretical framework to explain how long exposures to social media sites propagate sexual moral decadence leading to incidences of heavy users sexually harassing their peers either online or offline. Descriptive case study design was used and simple random sampling of 13 secondary schools of various clusters: single gender, mixed gender, day and boarding. The findings of the study pointed to recommendations to the Ministry of Education, teachers and parents to take part in controlling and regulating the social media content by being aware of what the teenagers are exposed to in order to take necessary measures to curb sexual harassment and consequently poor grades in schools threatening appropriate quality of a country's education.**

Keywords: **Social media sites, Cyber bullying, sexual harassment, parental guidance, sexually offensive.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the study:

Young people are far more adept at multi-tasking than their parents, and as they grow up, they become immersed in technology, making the lines between their virtual and "real" or physical lives increasingly blurred. Preliminary research discloses that in Canada, 99% of teens use the Internet regularly; 74% of girls aged 12-18 spend more time on chat rooms or instant messaging than doing homework; one in every seventeen children is threatened on the Internet; and one in four youth aged 11 -19 is threatened via computer or cell phone (Leishman, 2002; Mitchell, 2004). These social media sites have caused some potential harm to society as students become their victims more often than anyone else. This is because of the reason that when they are studying or searching their course material online, they get attracted to these sites to kill the boredom in their study time, diverting their attention from their work, (Kowalski, 2011).

Previous research (Gaser et al, 2010) indicates that cyber bullying is rarely pre-meditated, in many cases it is done impulsively and not planned out like in traditional bullying where the bully pre-meditates the next attack. Unlike traditional bullying it doesn't involve face to face interaction. Teens can become desensitized to a computer screen, and say or do things they wouldn't do to a person's face as they can't see the person's reaction to what they post or text they may not know if they've gone too far. Therefore, we may conclude that cyber bullying has the potential for far more harm than traditional, in-person bullying (Gasser et al, 2010).This study sought to establish how the use of social media by teenagers propagates sexual harassment and consequently moral decadence and poor school grades in the long run.

Statement of the problem:

Previous study by (Cradle 2010) found out the impact of sexual harassment in school as to include increased absenteeism by students to avoid harassment, increased student turnover as students leave to escape harassment; conflict amongst students when harassment is present; decreased productivity and performance, and/or decreased participation in school activities. The same loss of trust in the ethical standards of a company can also occur at school, leading students, staff, parents, and the general public to lose respect for, and trust in the institution if nothing is done to improve the situation.

Students spending a lot of study time in social media sites or experiencing sexual harassment offline or online cannot concentrate in their studies both in class or personal study time and sometimes such precious time is swallowed in the sites so they don't study outside class and have no time for homework. In such a trend the country's education is affected for this pushes poor grades to the university and professionals produced are not up to standard in all the fields. The effect is low quality human resources pushing the country's production down. The study sought therefore to establish how teenagers in Kandara Sub County were exposed to social media and how it led to the rise of sexual harassment and consequently affecting academic performance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sexual harassment on the Internet can occur in a number of ways. A common form occurs when a harasser sends unwanted, abusive, threatening, or obscene messages to a victim via e-mail, blogs, discussion boards, or instant messaging. Online sexual solicitation as a form of sexual harassment includes exposure to pornography; being asked to discuss sex online and/or do something sexual; or requests to disclose personal information (Livingstone, 2011).

The cultivation theory, developed by Gerbner et al (1994) proposed that media portrayals of sexual behavior are more extensive and powerful than the limited life experience of young people, cultivating attitudes and expectations in young people that are more consistent with virtual reality than with reality itself. Young people who seek out sexual content on the Internet experience unconditioned erotic stimulation when exposed to the images. If that experience is positive, they seek out more erotic stimulation through the Internet; if negative, they avoid such stimuli (Gerbner et al, 1994).

The effects of sexual harassment (Cradle, 2010) vary from person to person, and are contingent on the severity, and duration, of the harassment. However, sexual harassment is a type of sexual assault, and victims of severe or chronic sexual harassment can suffer the same psychological effects as rape victims. Aggravating factors can exist, such as their becoming the target of retaliation, backlash, or victim blaming after their complaining, or filing a formal grievance. Depending on the situation, a sexual harassment victim can experience anything from mild annoyance to extreme psychological damage, while the impact on a victim's career and life may be minimal, or leave them in ruins.

Conceptual framework:

Digital and social divide:

It is important for teachers, parents, and students to gain an understanding of what sexual harassment actually is, how to respond to it, and how to prevent it (Gasser et al, 2010). Their survey disclosed that 56% of parents are not concerned about their children being bullied electronically and many are in denial as to the impact of such behavior. 19% believed such incidents are rare. Evidence from both developing and developed countries points to a generational 'digital divide' which limits the effectiveness of parental supervision. A survey of 300 parents of Web-using children in Thailand found that 40 per cent do not closely monitor their children's online activities, including 26 per cent who affirmed that they do not know how to do so (Michelet 2003), while in Kenya nearly 80 per cent of children reported that their parents do not control their internet use (Cradle 2010). On the other hand, there is evidence that the more parents know, the more they engage in supervision. Once they gain familiarity with a new technology they are likely to supervise its use and those who regularly use the internet themselves are more inclined to monitor their children's online activity (Hasebrink et al 2008). A

recent Canadian study of 13-17 year olds concluded that parental supervision reduces but does not eliminate risky behavior in social networking, and cannot adequately protect children who have integrated the Web into their social lives (Steeves and Webster 2008). Where children are more computer-savvy than their parents and at home with the online environment, parents feel ill-equipped to provide guidance and tend to underestimate cyber-safety risks. Young people for their part may be reluctant to disclose negative experiences for fear of losing internet access. Moreover, children in the developing world typically access the Web outside the home in cyber-cafes or via mobile phones, further limiting the scope of parental control (Gasser et al 2010).

Many children ignore or evade parental restrictions: in Europe, around half of 9-16 year olds know how to change their privacy settings and delete their personal browsing history, and just over a quarter can change their filter preferences. The same study found that fewer than half report that parental mediation limits their online activities; more than a third ignore parental guidance when it is provided (Livingstone et al 2011).

An Australian study found that around half of early teenagers do not discuss their use of social networking sites with their parents, and almost three quarters do not talk with their teachers about social media use (de Zwart et al 2011). Similar findings are reported in developing countries. Sonya Thompson in a study concluded that parents need to improve dialogue with their children and their own awareness level. They need to be the ones setting the boundaries in the house (Thompson, 2007). This lack of supervision could also be explained by the busy schedules parents have, leaving caretaking hopefully to teachers and house helps but in the end the child has had no follow up and the same technology meant to help them destroys them.

Prevalence of sexual harassment:

There is some evidence suggesting that children in developing countries are more likely to engage in risky information disclosure and offline encounters with contacts met online. While it has not been conclusively established, it is reasonable to infer that in much of the developing world, online risks are amplified by limited public awareness of cyber-safety issues and lack of access to the social and legislative protections found in most developed countries thereby exacerbating the risk to children in those countries (ITU 2009b).

Research also suggests that victims are reluctant to report cyber bullying for fear that their own computer and cell-phone privileges will be removed (Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later, 2006). Lost computer privileges would ostracize them to an even greater extent from their peer groups whose virtual relationships have become an integral aspect of their social relationships. In some cases, the isolation and ridicule becomes too much, resulting in suicide (Shariff, 2004; 2005).

Critique of the existing literature:

Researchers should consider the risks involved in using media that can "go viral." The ability of new-media messages to be rapidly redistributed through the social networks of those they initially reach may result in unintended effects. For example, materials that might have been developed for older teens may unfortunately reach younger adolescents. If this possibility is considered early on and accounted for in message development, there may be no adverse effects, but if it is not, and youth misunderstand a message, it could increase risk for some groups by undermining knowledge or shifting normative perceptions in a direction that promotes riskier sex. This implies that the sexual texts or graphics may not necessarily be offensive if shared by the ideal age peers or if interpreted appropriately with the help of parents. Most researchers have not taken this into consideration but have categorized all sexual messages as offensive without considering any available social media regulation.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed the descriptive survey design to investigate the impact of social media on the rise of Sexual Harassment among Teenagers. Borg and Gall (1989) note that descriptive survey research is intended to produce statistical information about aspects of education that interest policy makers and educators. In each school, the stratified random sampling technique was used to select the students based on the school population. This sampling implied that the researcher was assured that certain sub groups in the population will be represented in the sample in proportion to their numbers in the population (Borg and Gall, 1983).The proportional allocation was calculated from the number of the

students (per each gender) in a school over the population of the whole gender population from the sampled schools multiplied by the sample size (320) with 160 per gender to ensure fair representation.

The main tool of data collection for this study was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was appropriate as Kiess and Bloomquist (1985) observes it often considered advantages in the administration; it presents an even stimulus potentially to a large number of people simultaneously and provides investigation with an easy accumulation of data.

The questionnaires were then distributed to the sampled respondents. The respondents were assured that strict confidentiality would be maintained in dealing with their responses. The researcher was available to make clarifications in case of any queries. The researcher collected the filled-in questionnaires on the same day. After all the data was collected, data cleaning was done in order to determine inaccurate, incomplete, or unreasonable data and then improve the quality through correction of detected errors and omissions. After data cleaning, the data was coded and entered in the computer for analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data was analyzed by frequency tables and percentages. Frequency tables represented the most commonly used method in presenting data in descriptive research (Kathuri and Pals, 1993:117).

Ethical considerations were pertinent to this study because of the nature of the problem, the methods of data collection and the kind of persons serving as research participants i.e. students possibly involved in sexual harassment. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and allowed to choose whether to participate or not. There is wide consensus among social scientists that research involving human participants should be performed with the informed consent of the participants (Nachmias, 1996:81)

4. PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Respondents' Access to Social Media Sites:

Regarding the students' access to social media sites, the figure 3 below indicates that the most popular social site amongst the students is the Face book at 56% followed by Twitter at 15%, while Email and Whatsapp falls at 10% each. Skype, My space and others only take 9%. This easy access of the social media amongst all the students even those residing permanently in the rural area increases the chances of sexual harassment through the sites since sexual texts could even be sent without their consent.
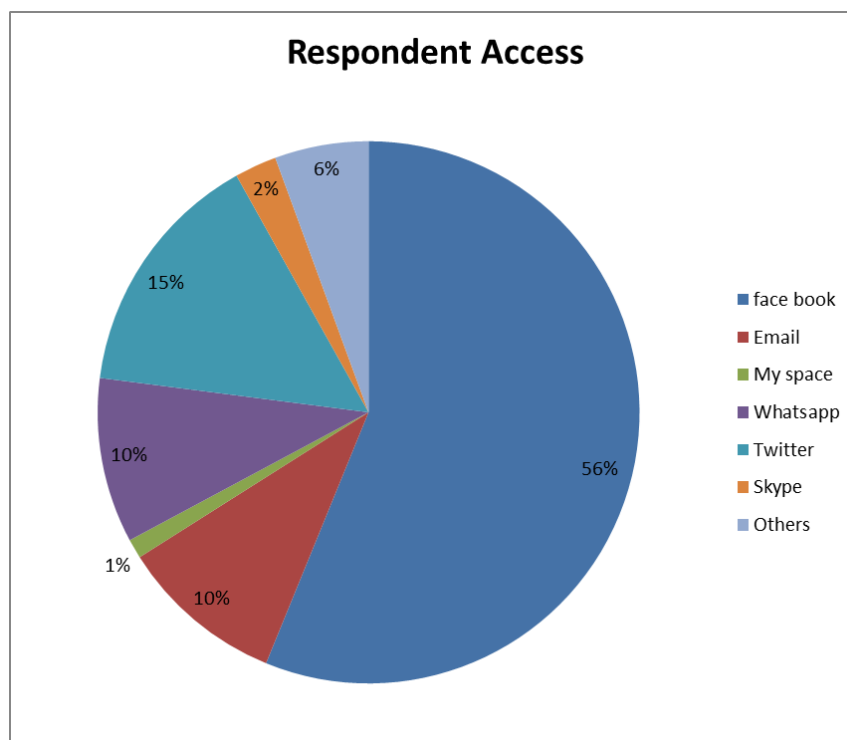

Figure 3: Respondents' Access to Social Media Sites

Forms of Sex Text Messages:

Table 4 below indicates that 68% of the sex messages shared in the social sites are texts and 32% are graphics. This implies that due to the element of solicitation where one uses words to lure or entice the other party to give in to sex, texts are therefore preferred. Such texts could even be sent to tell more of a picture already sent. The prevalence of graphics can be explained by the fact that images appeal to the eye and thus to the mind of an adolescent the sex hormones are easily activated and they will easily fall into sexual enticement.

Table 1: Forms of Sex Text Messages

Types of Sex Messages	Frequency	%
Text	218	68
Graphics	102	32

Negative Effects associated with Sexual Harassment to the Life of a Student:

Figure 4 below shows that 34% of the respondents lacked concentration is their studies due to sexual harassment, 14% failed to do assignments, 13% missed classes while 10% experienced conflicts with teachers. These effects were bound to have a negative impact in performance as there would be limited time for adequate studying which translates to poor academic performance. Not concentrating in class work leads to poor understanding of the content and this lowers the performance. When students do not do assignments or miss classes they cannot grasp fully the concepts and will thus perform poorly. Conflicts with teachers translate to a negative attitude towards the subject matter and this means the students cannot perform well in the subject.
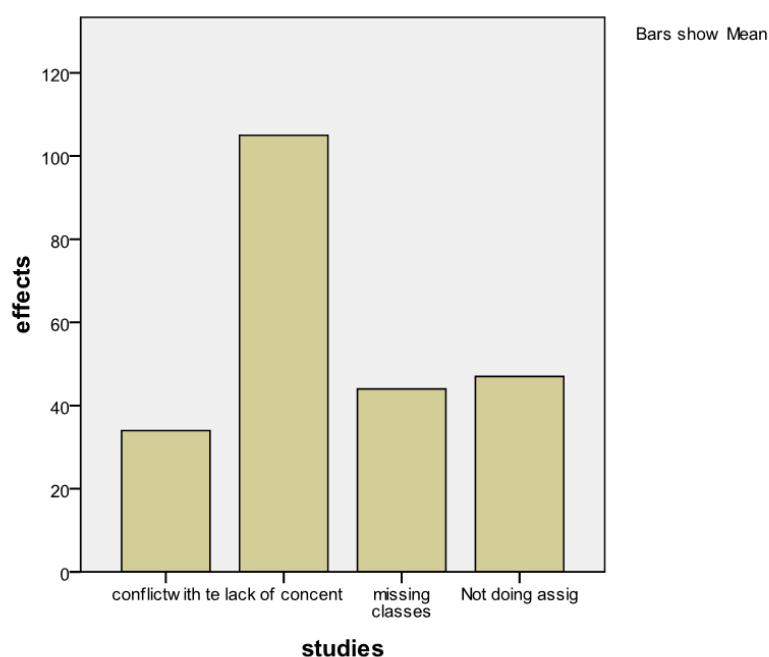
Figure 4: Negative effects associated with sexual harassment to the life of a student

Key: Where conflict with te= conflict with teachers

  Lack of concent= lack of concentration

  Not doing assign= not doing assignments

Negative Behaviors Resulting from Sexual Harassment Exposure:

The figure 5 below indicates addiction to ponography taking the highest toll as a negative behavior practised by the respondent after being exposed to sexual harassment. Drugs abuse takes the second toll while homosexuality and

lesbianism would be rated third. School drop out and abortion rarely occur. Sexual harassment has thus yielded these vices further distracting these students from their studies and this is reflected finally in their performance.
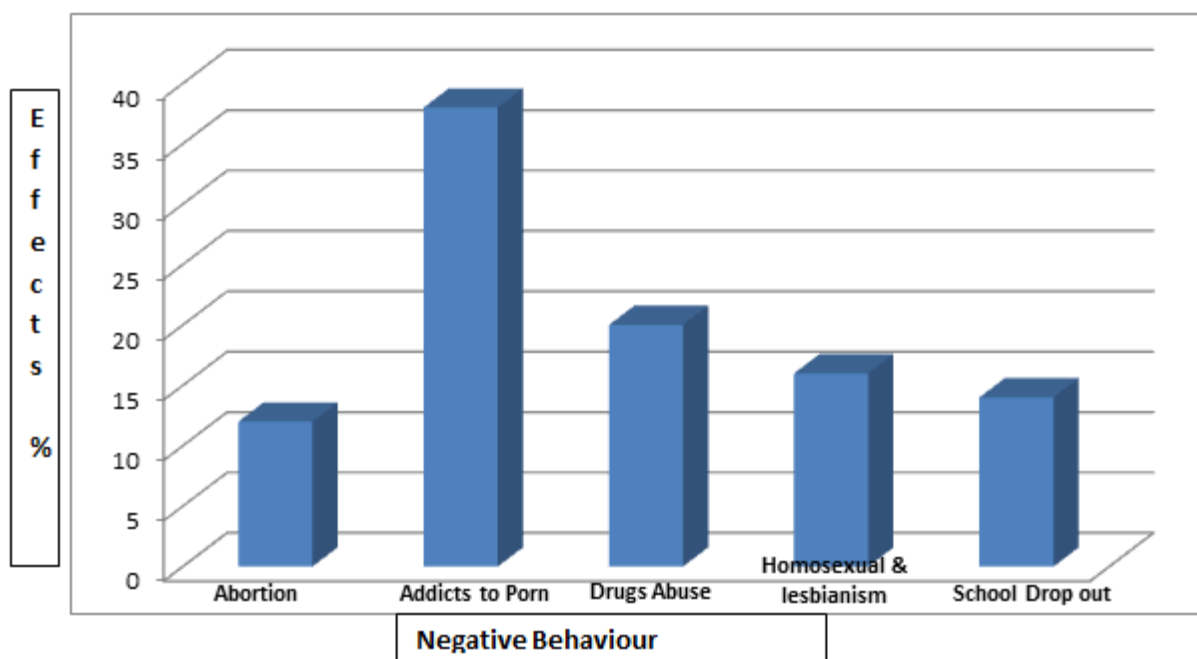

Figure 5: Negative Behaviors Resulting from Sexual Harassment Exposure

Measures that the Ministry of Education and Teachers ought to Adapt to Curb Social Media Sexual Harassment:

The fourth objective was to find out the measures that ought to be adapted by the Ministry of Education to curb social media harassment.

Existing Measures in Schools to Curb Sexual Harassment:

The study also investigated on the existing measures in schools to curb sexual harassment. Table 7 shows that 37% of known or reported sexual harassers are expelled from school, 21% are punished heavily 24% are counseled. This means schools' administrations are already taking measures to deal with sexual harassers. The 14% who are never found out and 4% whom schools do nothing to indicates that schools need to be more aggressive in netting the offenders and discipline them to avoid more indulgence.

Table 8: Existing Measures in Schools to Curb Sexual Harassment

Alternatives/Responses	Strongly Agree & Agree	Percentages	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Percentages
They are punished heavily	43	21	10	16
They are expelled from school	73	37	2	3
They are never found out	28	14	19	30
They are counseled	48	24	10	16
Nothing is done to them	7	4	22	35

Issues to be addressed to curb Pornographic Materials Sharing Among Teenagers through Social Media:

Table 8 shows that 36% of the respondents have easy access to social sites making them prone to sexual harassment which is sent without their consent to their accounts. 16% share pornographic texts as a sense of belonging; to identify with others. 26% lack guidance on the dangers of pornographic texts; they are simply not aware they are harmful. 22% blame parents and teachers for not being aware of the sexual materials access on social sites and this can be attributed to digital and social divide.

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Table 9: Issues to be addressed to curb Pornographic Materials Sharing Among Teenagers through Social Media

Alternatives/Responses	Strongly Agree & Agree	Percentages	Strongly Disagree & Disagree	Percentages
Ease access to the site	85	36	28	29
A sense of belonging	38	16	26	27
Lack of guidance on the dangerous materials	63	26	23	24
Parents and teachers ignorance	53	22	19	20

**Frequency of Students' Reporting to Teachers and Parents of Sexual Harassment Encounter**

Table 9 shows that 30% of the respondents disagree of reporting sexual harassment to parents and teachers as 37.5% strongly disagree to it. This implies most students chose to fall silent and they suffer secretly.19.06% strongly agree that they report as 8.75% agree. Only 4.69% don't agree or disagree. It is therefore difficult to punish sexual harassment perpetrators since they are not normally reported so measures to curb the vice should focus on parental control and risk awareness of sexual harassment on a student's life as well as their future.

Table 10: Frequency of Students' Reporting to Teachers and Parents of Sexual Harassment Encounter

Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly agree	61	19.06
Agree	28	8.75
Neither Agree or Disagree	15	4.69
Disagree	95	30
Strongly Disagree	120	37.5

Stakeholders who can Help Students' Experiencing Sexual Harassment

Figure 7 shows that the school counselor can help victims of sexual harassment at 33%, at 25% is the principal, 15% friends, and 10%, parents while the class teacher would help up to 9% and the deputy principal 8%. This shows that students value school counselors to an extent of trusting they can help solve their problem. Schools should empower guidance and counseling to curb the menace. On the discipline part the principals have a high stake in dealing with the perpetrators of sexual harassment in schools as a lesson to potential offenders. All other stakeholders have their fair share in helping the students who suffer from sexual harassment so that they are able to cope socially and academically in school.
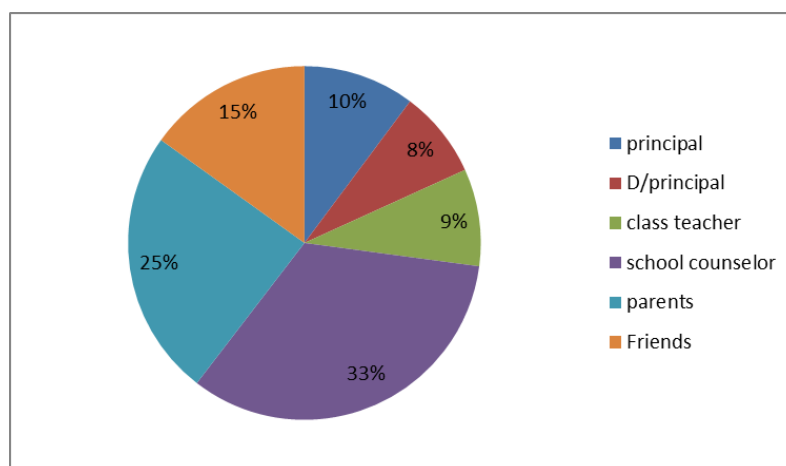
Figure 7: Stakeholders who can Help Students' Experiencing Sexual Harassment

5. SUMMARY

The findings of the study indicate that sexual harassment is prevalent amongst teenagers. This adolescent stage is characterized by developmental changes and the role confusion versus identity stage according to Gerald (2005) making them prone to curiosity of accessing and receiving sexual texts. With the rampant exposure to social media for indeed all the respondents in the study had access to social sites online sexual harassment is spreading fast.

Forms of sexual harassment through social media:

The findings indicate that online sexual harassment is not slowly but fast overtaking face to face harassment in schools and that most online or cyber bullying occurs in the form of sexual texting and sexual solicitation at 68% as the respondents reacted to the question of the nature of the sex message sent. Whereas schools might be doing well to fight physical bullying through tough discipline measures on such perpetrators, online bullying is becoming a harder to deal with crime. The study shows that most students (67.5%) don't report online sexual harassment. This could be explained by the anonymity one may simply not know who sent a sex text if it is circulating in Face book or one may fear more damage of character on the social site as a revenge by the one reported.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that majority of secondary school students even in the rural areas are accessing social media easily and the social sites have become popular to them. All the respondents indicated they had at one time or another been sexually harassed. Most students own phones or use other internet providing channels. Face book is a favorite social site to most teenagers. Students are spending a lot of their time in the social sites and limiting their study time. Poor performance has followed since the students don't complete homework, skip classes while most of them lack concentration in the class. Some even drop out of school altogether. These findings show that social media has a lot of influence on the prevalence of sexual harassment amongst teenagers and this confirms the rationale of the study. The researcher sought to study the main perpetrators of sexual harassment as teenagers (amongst themselves) which these findings have confirmed at 70% agreeing with Cradle (2010) who states that most of the sexual harassers in his study were the children's peers..

Negative effects associated with sexual harassment to a student's life:

The findings indicate that sexual harassment has far too destructive effects on a student. 34% of the respondents lacked concentration in their studies, 14% failed to do assignments, 13% missed classes as 10% experienced conflicts with teachers. The conversion of study time to socialization time pushing the student away from academics translates to poor performance. According to the study this bears conflicts with their teachers due to engagement in behaviors against the school regulations.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE:

Based on the discussion of the findings, the researcher made various recommendations to address the impact of social media on the rise of sexual harassment amongst teenagers. The researcher recommends that the stakeholders should come up with social media regulation this by parents, teachers and the media law which should be vigilant in netting online sexual offenders and teenage guidance on dangers of sex texts sharing and consequent sexual harassment. The truth is that most students have their personal phones and guiding them on how to use them positively is more realistic than assuming they could be denied ownership; they are affordable and they can still own them secretly. This would arouse parental concern to guide their children and teach them morals and the consequences of such exposure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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