

Steering through the Digital Storm: School Social Workers at the Helm of Managing Adolescent Sexting

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Abstract

The rise of sexting, that is, the exchange of sexual content via social media platforms, among adolescents highlights the critical role of school social workers in addressing this issue in educational settings. As frontline practitioners, they support affected students; respond to incidents; and contribute to implementing prevention strategies. This study aimed to explore school social workers' experiences, prevention and intervention strategies, and collaborative roles in the school context in Gauteng, South Africa, thereby offering insights to inform professional development, policy and school-based interventions. A qualitative approach was adopted utilising the phenomenological research design supported with elements of explorative, descriptive and contextual designs. Non-probability sampling techniques, including purposive and snowball sampling, were utilised to select 36 participants, representing diverse perspectives in the school social work profession. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews, guided by a structured interview guide. Data analysis followed the methodological process outlined by Renata Tesch, including eight steps to systematically analyse interview transcripts. The study recommended a comprehensive approach to addressing adolescent sexting, emphasising structured educational programmes; enhanced parental involvement; and specialised training for social workers. Additionally, it highlighted the need for stronger policy enforcement, confidential support mechanisms, stakeholder collaboration and the use of digital safeguards to foster safer online environments for adolescents.

Keywords: sexting; managing; social work; school social worker; views; strategies; collaborative roles; adolescent(s)



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Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of 21st-century life, transforming how people connect, communicate and share information with one another. For adolescents, social media or digital platforms are central spaces for social interaction, self-expression and identity formation (Ezung and Baksh 2023), including widely used applications, such as Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, TikTok and gaming sites. With the advent of smartphones and social networking sites, the internet has become a primary arena where young people explore and express their sexuality, and sexting, that is, the exchange of sexual content via social media platforms, has consequently emerged as a key feature of adolescent online behaviour (Murphy and Spencer 2021). While sexting occurs across diverse social contexts, it has been associated with a range of psychosocial, educational and legal risks, particularly when images are shared without the owners' consent or circulated beyond their intended audience.

Schools have increasingly become key sites where students' sexting-related concerns are identified and managed, placing school social workers at the forefront of prevention, intervention and support efforts. As part of multidisciplinary school teams, social workers are expected to respond to the behavioural, relational and technological dimensions of sexting; support learners and their families; and navigate complex ethical and legal considerations. However, the existing research has largely focused on adolescent behaviour or school policy responses, with limited attention given to the perspectives and experiences of school social workers responsible for managing sexting-related challenges, particularly within the South African context.

This study addressed the challenges school social workers face in managing adolescent sexting in the school context in Gauteng, South Africa. Grounded in an integration of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, the study examined school social workers' perceptions and knowledge, specifically in relation to adolescent sexting and its management, thereby offering insights and practical recommendations to strengthen practice and equip professionals to manage these challenges in school settings.

Problem Statement

In South Africa, legal frameworks, such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (RSA 1996a), the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA 2005) and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996b), emphasise children's protection and rights. Despite these measures, adolescent sexting has become a growing concern linked to aggression, violence and psychosocial risks (Barroso et al. 2021). The Department of Basic Education (DBE 2020a) has implemented school-based violence prevention strategies, yet gaps remain, including the absence of standardised guidelines and limited social work services to address the phenomenon and consequences of sexting cases.

Social workers, trained in human behaviour and multidisciplinary practice, are well-positioned to address such complex challenges (Kirst-Ashman 2017). Yet, their role is vaguely defined in key DBE policies, such as the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) (DBE 2015) and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE 2014). Inconsistent appointment, role definition and utilisation of social workers across provinces further hinder effective case management (Vergottini and Weyers 2020).

This lack of clear policy guidance, coupled with inconsistent implementation across provinces, creates a gap between the expectations placed on school social workers and the practical support, clarity and resources available to them in managing adolescent sexting. This gap highlights the need for targeted strategies to strengthen social workers' roles, clarify policy guidelines and enhance their capacity to address adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences in South African schools.

Rationale for the Study

While the extant literature identifies sexting as common among adolescents, there remains a notable research gap concerning school social workers' understanding and management of this issue (Vergottini and Weyers 2020). Although studies have examined sexting and cyberbullying among students extensively, limited attention has been given to the perspectives and expertise of school social workers, particularly in cases where sexting intersects with cyberbullying (Vergottini and Weyers 2020). Much of the current research on sexting is international, with limited focus on the South African context. This gap highlights the need for research exploring school social workers' insights and expertise in managing adolescent sexting in South African schools.

Literature Review

Bradley et al. (2020) highlight that sexting, that is, the exchange of sexual content via social media platforms, has become increasingly common among adolescents. These platforms create a false sense of privacy and encourage the sharing of explicit messages and images. Studies show that more than one-third of adolescents have shared nude or semi-nude images, with prevalence rising among older teens driven by curiosity and peer acceptance (Kings and Rings 2022). Smartphones and social media have, therefore, normalised sexting behaviour as part of adolescent interaction (Yépez-Tito, Ferragut and Blanca 2020).

The risks that are linked to sexting often remain hidden until they result in social or psychological harm to the users. Although many adolescents view it as private or harmless, research has identified serious consequences, such as cyberbullying, blackmail and suicidal ideation (Kings and Rings 2022), along with higher risks of online harassment, anxiety and depression (Howard et al. 2023).

Since sexting occurs mainly through social media platforms, understanding how these platforms shape adolescents' behaviour and privacy perceptions is essential. The need for constant connectivity pressures young people to share their lives online, affecting their self-esteem and mental health (Betts and Bliuc 2022). These platforms promote curated self-images that can encourage risky behaviour. Ahmed et al. (2023) further warn that excessive social media use contributes to anxiety and social comparison. Subsequently, adolescents must navigate the tension between self-expression and social validation, often with real-world emotional consequences.

School-based support systems are vital in addressing these risks. Social workers, with expertise in adolescent development and digital culture, are well placed to respond to the behavioural and technological aspects of sexting. They provide education and protection, particularly in socio-economically challenged contexts where adolescents' vulnerabilities may be heightened by factors, such as limited parental supervision; lower levels of digital literacy among caregivers; constrained access to support services; and greater reliance on schools as primary protective environments (Commey et al. 2024). While sexting occurs across all socio-economic groups, these contextual factors can increase adolescents' exposure to risk and reduce their capacity for timely support.

Therefore, global and local organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2020) and Commey et al. (2024), advocate a whole-school approach that engages students, educators and parents to create safe learning environments. Multi-level, community-based interventions have proven most effective in addressing adolescent risk behaviours. In South Africa, the DBE (2015) has adopted this model through the NSSF in an attempt to reduce school-based violence. However, poor resource allocation and fragmented coordination continue to limit the implementation thereof (Hochfeld et al. 2022). A lack of standardised guidelines further hampers social work interventions, and many practitioners are responsible for multiple schools, reducing their ability to offer adequate support (Vergottini 2018 cited in Reyneke 2020).

Despite these obstacles, social workers remain central to addressing the phenomenon and consequences of sexting. They mediate between schools, families and communities, designing interventions that move beyond punishment to education and empowerment. Their expertise helps them to assess contextual influences, such as family dynamics, peer pressure and digital exposure (Adlem 2025). Common strategies include: forming peer-support groups on consent and boundaries; conducting learner and parent workshops on legal and emotional consequences; and collaborating with educators to integrate digital safety into the curriculum (Waling et al. 2022).

Still, the absence of clear guidelines and insufficient professional capacity is weakening these efforts. Studies have underlined the importance of proactive prevention through education programmes that discourage non-consensual sexting and promote healthy online relationships (Morelli et al. 2021). South African schools continue to face social

worker shortages and weak institutional backing, leading to inconsistent management of the consequences of sexting cases (SACE 2020).

Addressing adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences thus requires a coordinated, whole-school strategy. Even with limited resources, social workers play a pivotal role in promoting digital safety, emotional well-being and informed decision-making. Strengthening policy guidance, inter-sectoral collaboration and professional training can help to create safer school environments where learners navigate digital challenges responsibly.

Given the context, the study sought to answer the following question:

- How do school social workers perceive and manage the behaviour of sexting and its consequences among adolescents, and what strategies and collaborative roles do they employ in prevention and intervention?

Therefore, the exploration aimed to identify service and policy gaps and enhance understanding of how social workers can prevent and manage problematic sexting behaviour and its fallout in schools.

Theoretical Frameworks

The study on the management of adolescent sexting behaviour is grounded in an integration of Bronfenbrenner's (1970) Ecological Systems Theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory. Together, these frameworks emphasise how individual, social and environmental factors collectively influence sexting behaviours among South African adolescents (Brodie, Wilson and Scott 2019; Crawford 2020).

Ecological Systems Theory highlights the nested and interconnected structures shaping adolescent behaviour, including sexting. The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem provide insight into the diverse contexts influencing adolescents' online conduct as follows:

- The microsystem, comprising family, peers and educators, is central, as it reflects the immediate environments where social workers play a role in addressing sexting behaviour and its consequences (Laff, Stephens and Ruiz 2019).
- The mesosystem, such as schools and community settings, affects how adolescents perceive and respond to sexting. Collaborative engagement among parents, educators and social workers strengthens awareness and reduces risk (Dodaj and Sesar 2021).
- The exosystem refers to settings that adolescents do not directly participate in but that still influence their behaviour, such as school policies, parental workplace demands, child protection systems and social media regulations. Decisions made

within these systems shape how sexting is managed, reported and addressed in schools (Laff, Stephens and Ruiz 2019).

- The macrosystem, consisting of cultural norms, social values and political contexts, also shapes societal attitudes toward sexting (Dodaj and Sesar 2021).
- The chronosystem captures the influence of life transitions, historical events and technological shifts on adolescent behaviour (Laff, Stephens and Ruiz 2019).

Social Learning Theory complements this framework by explaining how adolescents learn and engage in sexting behaviours through observation, reinforcement and social interaction. The processes of differential association, reinforcement and imitation highlight the mechanisms through which adolescents internalise and reproduce online behaviours (Brodie, Wilson and Scott 2019).

In summary, the integration of Ecological Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory provides a comprehensive lens for understanding adolescent sexting in South African schools. These frameworks guide the exploration of school social workers' perspectives, illuminating how multiple systems and social influences interact to shape adolescents' digital behaviour (Brodie, Wilson and Scott 2019; Crawford 2020).

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing phenomenological, explorative, descriptive, and contextual designs to examine the research problem systematically. Qualitative research provides a comprehensive and subjective understanding of school social workers' insights into adolescent sexting (Muzari, Shava and Shonhiwa 2022). The phenomenological design focused on capturing the participants' lived experiences, while the explorative, descriptive and contextual designs allowed analysis and articulation of relevant findings within their social settings (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

The population comprised all school social workers rendering services in public school settings in Gauteng, estimated at approximately 127 according to the Department of Education. While some were appointed through School Governing Bodies, the majority of the study participants were employed by the Department of Social Development (DSD) and rendered school-based social work services to learners in public schools. Detailed provincial statistics on school social workers remain limited.

In qualitative research, sampling refers to the selection of participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study (Casteel and Bridier 2021). The inclusion criteria required the participants to be:

- registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions;
- employed by the Department of Social Development and rendering school-based social work services;

- providing services to learners within public school settings; and
- willing, available and proficient in English.

Purposive and snowball sampling, both non-probability methods, were employed. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of participants aligned with the research objectives, while snowball sampling addressed access limitations (Pandey and Pandey 2021). Assistance from the DBE's Psycho-social Services and school principals, acting as gatekeepers, facilitated recruitment. Telephonic conversations with principals confirmed the presence of social workers and scheduled interviews. Throughout the recruitment process, the principles of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) 4 of 2013 (RSA 2013) were adhered to, ensuring lawful, minimal and confidential handling of the participants' personal information.

The final sample comprised 36 school social workers. The majority of the participants (29) held a Bachelor of Social Work, while three participants held a Master's degree, and three a PhD in Social Work. With regard to professional experience, 16 participants had between two and five years of experience, ten had six to ten years, four had 11–15 years, and six participants had more than 16 years of experience. In terms of gender, the sample consisted predominantly of females, reflecting the gender composition of the social work profession in South Africa.

Following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) sampling guidance, the interviews continued until data saturation was reached after 36 participants. The data was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face and online interviews. This flexible format encouraged open exploration and the emergence of new ideas (Muzari, Shava and Shonhiwa 2022).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Tesch's (1990 in Creswell and Creswell 2018) systematic data analysis approach. The researcher applied inductive coding to identify themes and subthemes (Creswell and Creswell 2018). An independent coder verified the coding process to enhance analytical rigour and ensure alignment of the identified themes.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study addressed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Daniel 2019). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, rich descriptions, and independent verification. Transferability was supported by detailed contextual and methodological descriptions. Dependability was ensured through consistent data collection and systematic analysis, while confirmability was maintained through an audit trail, verbatim transcripts, and transparent documentation. This rigorous methodological approach enhanced the study's reliability and authenticity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa (Ethics Clearance No. 90187709_CRECHS_2023). Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and each participant provided written informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and anticipated benefits. No significant risks were identified, and the participants responded comfortably and confidently to all questions. To protect the participants' privacy, no identifying information, such as names or identity numbers, was collected; instead, each participant was assigned a unique code as indicated in brackets after their comments. The importance of confidentiality was emphasised, and the participants were assured that all information shared would remain confidential and be used solely for research and academic purposes.

Limitations of the Study

The researcher acknowledges that the study had certain limitations that may have influenced its scope and applicability. Firstly, the participant pool predominantly consisted of individuals from black and white backgrounds, with limited representation from the coloured and Indian communities. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of all ethnic groups in South Africa. Secondly, the study was conducted solely in Gauteng, which may limit the generalisability of the results to other regions. Regional and contextual differences across provinces could influence the participants' experiences and viewpoints, therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution when applied to a broader national context. In addition, the study primarily drew on the perspectives of social workers rendering services in public school settings, which may limit the applicability of the findings to private school contexts where organisational structures, resources and support systems may differ.

Research Findings and Discussion

Three key themes emerged from the study on managing adolescent sexting behaviour and consequences, namely: (1) social workers' perspectives on managing sexting behaviour and its consequences among adolescents; (2) strategies for effective prevention and management of adolescent sexting; and (3) social workers' collaboration with families, schools and communities in sexting prevention.

These themes provided insights into existing practices and areas for improvement, as illustrated in figure 1:

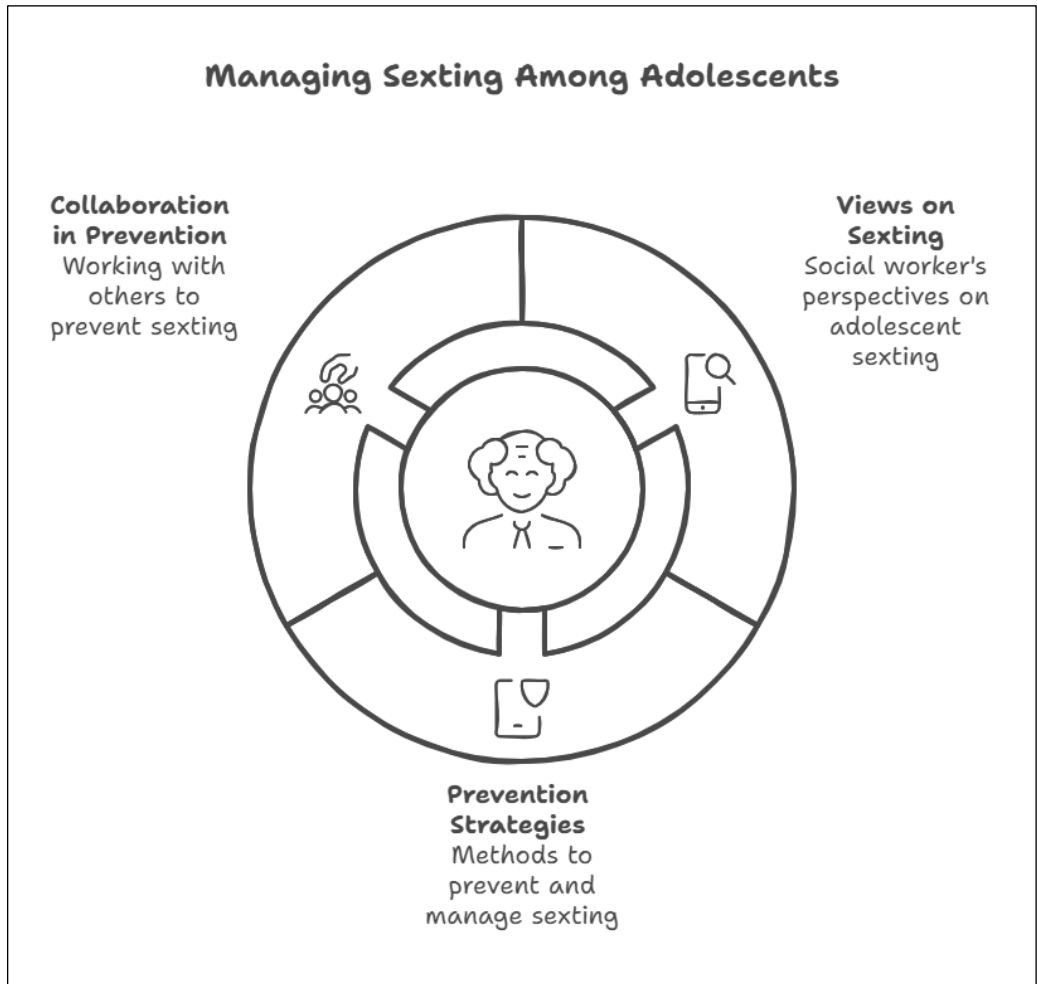


Figure 1: Managing sexting among adolescents

Theme 1: Social Workers' Perspective on Managing Sexting Behaviour and Its Consequences among Adolescents

This theme explored social workers' perspectives on managing adolescent sexting, thereby highlighting the limited programmes and resources, parental barriers and emotional effects on adolescents and their families. The theme further emphasised the need for stronger support systems and the balance between online safety and privacy in home and school settings.

Subtheme 1.1: The Need for Structured Programmes and Resources

Adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences remains a challenge because of the lack of structured programmes and accessible resources. Social workers often improvise interventions without clear guidelines, while parents struggle with limited digital literacy and rapidly changing technology. The following storylines reflect these experiences:

Due to the absence of any dedicated curriculum, we mostly adapt general discussions on internet safety and modify them for sexting-related cases. However, these approaches often feel insufficient and lack structure. (BP)

Many parents have no idea what their kids are exposed to online. Even with school support, they feel ill-equipped to handle these new challenges, especially when balancing work and household duties. (NR)

Right now ... I don't think there are any resources that can help. But if there is something like sex education, I think it can help them because it will also help them understand the consequences ... (KM)

Formalised and consistent programmes are crucial in addressing adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences (Harris 2019). Such initiatives ensure standardised, age-appropriate content and sustained awareness rather than isolated interventions. Empirical studies show that fragmented responses often fail to reach adolescents effectively, underscoring the need for continuous, structured education embedded in school and community systems (Harris 2019).

Social Learning Theory emphasises the influence of peer role models and the normalisation of online behaviour through observation and reinforcement (Brodie, Wilson and Scott 2019). Similarly, Ecological Systems Theory highlights the necessity of multi-level interventions involving families, schools, and broader social systems (Laff, Stephens and Ruiz 2019), ensuring alignment between micro- and macro-environments in shaping adolescent behaviour.

Most parents have limited digital literacy and time constraints hinder their engagement, while adolescents exploit privacy tools and temporary apps to bypass parental and other restrictions (Aventin et al. 2020; Bradley et al. 2020; Scull et al 2019). Social workers, meanwhile, face institutional barriers and unrealistic expectations when guiding families. Therefore, sustainable, context-specific interventions must promote responsible digital conduct through coordinated, multi-system strategies (Guy-Evans 2024).

Comprehensive, digitally informed sex-education programmes remain one of the most effective prevention methods. Such programmes should integrate digital ethics, consent, privacy and emotional literacy from early schooling (DBE 2020a; Hinduja and Patchin 2023), encouraging healthy relationships and informed online choices.

Subtheme 1.2: Parental Barriers, Emotional Consequences and Support Needs

Parental involvement is crucial in protecting adolescents from online risks, such as engaging in sexting and its consequences. However, barriers like limited digital literacy, time constraints and discomfort with sensitive topics often prevent parents from effectively guiding and supporting their children. As a result, adolescents may face the emotional consequences of sexting without sufficient parental or community support:

Therapy and counselling ... we provide that ... when it was found out, they were being blamed by their communities ... they were in very bad spaces ... (RH)

The social workers noted that parents often rely on professionals instead of collaborating, creating confusion about boundaries and responsibilities:

Our department emphasizes that social workers are there to support, not supervise, online activities. However, parents frequently request us to ‘talk sense’ into their kids, which blurs these lines. (HP)

The participants also emphasised the need for therapeutic services and outreach efforts, using platforms familiar to adolescents, in order to promote their safety and well-being:

We provide individual counselling for students involved in sexting incidents. Additionally, we recognise the importance of reaching students through platforms they frequently use, such as TikTok, to promote awareness and understanding. (YMM)

The participating schools reported implementing social media policies but noted the need for continuous evaluation of their effectiveness:

In our school environment, we have established a social media policy to guide students on appropriate behaviour online. I’ve realised that we need to further investigate how these policies impact students’ understanding of sexting and its consequences. (YS)

The challenges parents face in navigating their children’s digital lives are well documented. Aventin et al. (2020) found that low parental participation in digital literacy programmes is often linked to scheduling conflicts, limited resources, and lack of awareness. Similarly, Scull et al. (2019) reported that even when resources exist, parents are either hesitant or unable to engage, leaving a knowledge gap that adolescents may exploit.

Bradley et al. (2020) emphasise the growing need for parents to understand digital risks and the evolving nature of online content, noting that adolescents are adept at using privacy features and hidden applications. Klicksafe (2022) highlights the emotional consequences of sexting exposure, including isolation, shame and distress.

Therapeutic interventions are crucial, as Murphy (2020) advocates for mental health support combined with cybersecurity education to address both emotional and

psychological impacts. Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans 2024) supports a multi-layered response involving families, schools, peers, and society. Sustainable interventions must move beyond punitive measures and instead create environments where parents are empowered and supported to engage actively in their children's digital lives.

Subtheme 1.3: Balancing Online Safety and Privacy in Schools and Homes

As digital platforms continue to evolve, maintaining online safety while respecting privacy has become increasingly complex for both families and schools. While parents and educators recognise the need to protect children from harmful online content, finding a balance between supervision and privacy rights remains a sensitive and ongoing challenge:

The rise of streaming platforms with minimal content control settings has made inappropriate content accessible even in homes with good parental monitoring. (QS)

Our policy on device monitoring is extremely restricted. While some teachers take initiative during breaks, we can't enforce it consistently due to privacy policies. (AM)

There's a fine line between monitoring for safety and violating privacy, which sometimes leads to reluctance in addressing digital behaviours. (RB)

These accounts highlighted how institutional rules and privacy concerns hinder consistent oversight, even as educators acknowledge online risks. Research by Livingstone and Bulger (2017) confirms that monitoring tools are often either too restrictive or ineffective, underscoring the importance of proactive adult-child communication about digital risks.

Legal frameworks, such as the South African Schools Act and child protection policies, mandate responses to threats against learners' welfare (DBE 2020a). However, privacy regulations limit schools' ability to monitor online behaviour effectively. The United Kingdom Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS 2016) recommends systems that balance protection and privacy through clear reporting procedures, risk assessments, and parental involvement. The Kings Group (2022) further emphasises that prevention and digital literacy initiatives should empower learners to navigate risks and understand digital consequences, echoing the study participants' concerns about limited monitoring capacity and the need to foster student responsibility alongside institutional oversight.

Theme 2: Strategies for Effective Prevention and Management of Adolescent Sexting

Addressing adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences requires proactive, holistic strategies centred on prevention, education, and safe digital behaviour. This theme focused on developing policies, digital literacy programmes, technology safeguards, and open communication to empower adolescents through awareness and

support. Together, these elements create a comprehensive framework for reducing risks and promoting responsible online engagement.

Subtheme 2.1: Policies, Digital Literacy and Technology Safeguards

The rapid integration of technology into adolescents' lives presents both opportunities and risks. This subtheme highlights the need for clear policies, digital literacy education, and effective safeguards to reduce sexting and promote responsible digital behaviour. The participants noted that although schools restrict phone use, poor monitoring, and inconsistent enforcement limit policy effectiveness:

At schools, there are policies that learners should not bring cell phones. However, I don't see it working. Maybe it's due to a lack of monitoring. When children leave school and return home, where there might not be policies, what happens then? (MM)

Kids don't know that even if their boyfriend asks them to send a photo, they could be the ones prosecuted. Education on these issues is crucial. (RH)

The participating social workers highlighted the risks associated with social media platforms, such as TikTok, WhatsApp and Snapchat, calling for improved privacy safeguards and parental oversight:

With sexting, even when they are violated, the person whose privacy is being violated, they don't even know that their privacy is being violated ... they can even screen record the screen ... Facebook or other platforms should build in privacy safeguards to prevent this. (DT)

These platforms have not only reshaped adolescent socialisation but also increased their exposure to privacy violations, cyberbullying, and harmful content (Lahti et al. 2024). These risks underscore the need for digital literacy and responsible online behaviour supported by parental involvement (Oshodi et al. 2024).

Legislative and policy efforts aim to create safer online spaces through regulated content filters, privacy controls and collaboration among researchers, policymakers and technology companies (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2021). Schools are central in implementing monitoring tools and digital-use policies that encourage accountability (DBE 2015).

Social workers play a key role by educating parents and adolescents about digital risks; advocating for privacy protection; and promoting responsible social media use in school and community contexts (NASW 2013). Ecological Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory reinforce the need for structured education, parental engagement, and policy enforcement to promote safer, more resilient digital spaces for adolescents.

Subtheme 2.2: Fostering Open Dialogue and Safe Communication Spaces

Creating safe, non-judgmental spaces for open dialogue is vital in helping adolescents navigate sensitive issues like sexting. Schools should shift from punitive responses to supportive environments where learners feel heard and guided. Building trust among social workers, educators and peers, alongside ongoing, age-appropriate, peer-led education, fosters openness and responsible digital behaviour:

Students need to feel they can come to someone when crises arise, especially when it involves sensitive topics like sexting. (MV)

If we had been educated earlier about the risks, I think many of us would have made different choices. Education should not be a one-time thing but ongoing discussions. (SM2)

The extant research supports these insights: open dialogue helps adolescents to share their online experiences and seek help when facing risks like sexting or cyberbullying (NTIA and SAMHSA 2024). Trust between adolescents, parents, educators, and social workers is central, when supportive relationships exist, young people are more willing to discuss online challenges and seek guidance (Coli et al. 2023). Sustained conversations in schools and families make digital safety a proactive, continuous process rather than a reactive response.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to support these efforts. Integrating them into schools strengthens interventions that reflect adolescents' real experiences (Ding et al. 2023). Structured conversations about both the risks and benefits of technology help students develop balanced, critical engagement with digital media (Subrahmanyam and Smahel 2011). When adolescents feel respected and supported, they are more likely to adopt safe online behaviours and turn to trusted adults when challenges arise (Darvasi 2021). Creating such environments mitigates sexting and exploitation while promoting agency and responsible digital citizenship.

Subtheme 2.3: Empowering Adolescents through Education and Awareness

Education and awareness initiatives are essential in equipping adolescents to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. With increasing exposure to risks such as sexting, cyberbullying and explicit content, early intervention and engaging, age-appropriate programmes are crucial:

We must begin at primary school because, by high school, it's too late. (YMM)

When children understand their self-worth, they're less likely to engage in risky behaviour. (RH)

Let's allow students to practise how they would respond to risky situations. It builds confidence and prepares them for real-life dilemmas. (YvS)

The extant research has underscored the value of early digital safety education to build responsible habits before risky behaviours escalate (Hinduja and Patchin 2023). Developing self-worth and confidence acts as a protective factor, enabling adolescents to resist social and peer pressures (Dobson 2019).

Experiential and peer-led learning, through role-playing, group discussions, and scenario-based interventions, empowers adolescents to set boundaries and respond effectively to online challenges (Setty 2021a; 2021b). These participatory approaches foster openness, reduce stigma, and enhance critical reflection. Social workers play an ongoing role in supporting and sustaining such programmes (Pretorius 2020).

These strategies align with Ecological Systems Theory, which recognises that adolescent behaviour is shaped by multiple environments, family, peers, school and digital platforms (Guy-Evans 2024). Similarly, Social Learning Theory explains how adolescents model observed behaviours, reinforcing the value of experiential and peer-driven education in promoting safer online practices (Firmansyah and Saepuloh 2022).

Theme 3: Social Worker's Role in Collaboration with Families, Schools and Communities in Sexting Prevention

Social workers play a key role in addressing adolescent sexting behaviour and its consequences through targeted interventions, education and collaboration. This theme highlighted how ongoing training, stronger partnerships with communities and parents, and equipping caregivers with essential digital literacy can collectively foster safer online environments for adolescents.

Subtheme 3.1: Training and Continuous Professional Development for Social Workers

In the current digital age, where sexting and online risks increasingly affect adolescents, social workers play a critical role in prevention and support. As many parents lack digital literacy, social workers bridge this gap. This subtheme highlights the importance of continuous professional development (CPD) and government-supported training to equip them with essential digital and emotional competencies:

I think it's always good to build capacity for us to empower a child. So if you also don't know, but you're not ready, you know, how are you going to help? ... I'm also going to do my own research after this and also see where I can have like segments that are included in my already existing workshops. (AG)

Government should support us with resources and training on how to manage sexting ... if we are knowledgeable enough, we can pass on the knowledge to learners or even parents. (EM)

The South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP 2021) identifies CPD as a professional obligation that is essential for maintaining quality and ethical standards. Without ongoing learning, social workers risk falling behind as online risks

evolve. Mokone and Seema (2024) note that managing digital challenges like sexting requires both technical and emotional readiness, supported through workshops, toolkits, and peer-learning initiatives. Likewise, MSW Online (2025) emphasises that CPD enables practitioners to navigate complex legal frameworks and uphold ethical competence in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

From a theoretical standpoint, Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans 2024) highlights how CPD enhances social workers' capacity to function effectively across systems, from family to community and the digital environment. Developing context-relevant skills allows them to model responsible online behaviour, educate adolescents, and strengthen digital resilience.

Bridging the digital divide in under-resourced communities also remains critical. Without equitable access to technology, training, and resources, social workers cannot effectively reach vulnerable families. Thus, CPD becomes not only a professional requirement but a social justice intervention, ensuring protective knowledge reaches those most in need (Mokone and Seema 2024).

Subtheme 3.2: Strengthening Community and Parental Collaboration

Collaboration among parents, communities, social workers and educators is essential in order to address growing digital risks, such as cyberbullying, sexting and online exploitation. These challenges extend beyond the digital sphere into adolescents' emotional, social and academic lives, requiring an integrated, community-driven response for safety both online and offline:

We must be collaborative as social workers, parents, everybody in the community. If we are many, we can come up with different strategies, maybe that can work for us. (LB)

As social workers, I think it's also my duty to sit down with educators, teach them about these things and emphasise how these things can affect learners and schools ... make sure they don't turn a blind eye to the things happening in children's lives. (KL)

The extant research reinforces the importance of such collaboration. Dennehy et al. (2020) emphasise partnerships between families, schools, and communities to address sexting and related risks through educational and behavioural initiatives. Benedetto and Ingrassia (2021) highlight how parental education strengthens communication and monitoring and advocate for community-based mental health and awareness programmes involving local leaders.

In South Africa, Desai and Burton (2022) describe government efforts to develop digital literacy campaigns and partnerships among educators, social workers and technology sectors to safeguard minors online. Reyneke (2020) underscores social workers' responsibility to guide families and schools in understanding ethical, legal, and

reporting obligations in child protection, while also promoting awareness and policy-driven initiatives that foster safe digital environments and respect for privacy.

Subtheme 3.3: Equipping Parents with Digital Literacy and Technological Safeguards

In today's rapidly evolving digital world, parents play a crucial role in safeguarding their children from online dangers such as sexting and cyberbullying. Yet, many parents lack the awareness and skills to guide their children's digital behaviour effectively, as reflected in the following storylines:

Parents often buy phones for their children but fail to monitor their usage. There are apps that can alert parents when children access inappropriate sites. (NM)

By educating parents about technology and its risks, we can create a more supportive home environment for students. (MM)

Active parental engagement is key to reducing online risk-taking (Livingstone and Bulger 2017). Helsper, Veltri and Livingstone (2024) emphasise co-viewing, communication, and boundary-setting, while Waling et al. (2022) advocate for digital literacy workshops that equip parents with cyber safety skills.

However, Hertog and Weinstein (2024) caution that control tools are only effective when combined with open dialogue. The Kids Online Health and Safety Task Force (NTIA and SAMHSA 2024) notes that parents' digital habits directly influence their children's behaviour. Legal awareness is equally vital, especially as sexting involving both text and images may fall under child pornography laws.

Social workers are well-positioned to support parents through workshops, counselling, and practical resources. While resistance and ethical dilemmas persist (Martín-Criado, Casas and R. Ortega-Ruiz 2021), empowering parents remains essential to fostering responsible and safe digital engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study explored the role of social workers in managing adolescent sexting behaviour and consequences, identifying key challenges, interventions and areas for improvement. The findings highlight the need for structured programmes, stronger parental involvement, clearer policies, and enhanced training to address the complexities of digital risks among adolescents.

The absence of formal, consistent programmes remains a major challenge. Schools often rely on improvised awareness campaigns that lack structure and sustainability, diminishing the impact of proactive interventions. Consequently, sexting behaviour and its consequences is frequently overshadowed by other social concerns, limiting opportunities for comprehensive prevention and education.

Parental involvement also emerged as critical. Many parents lack digital literacy and understanding of their children's online experiences. Competing responsibilities further constrain their engagement, leaving adolescents more vulnerable to online risks. Social workers face difficulties bridging this gap because of parents' inconsistent participation in school and community initiatives.

Another concern is related to inadequate training and limited professional development for social workers on sexting behaviour and its psychosocial consequences. Many participants reported insufficient preparation to address the psychological, social and legal implications effectively. Weak policy enforcement compounds the problem, as schools struggle to balance learner privacy with appropriate digital monitoring.

Adolescents involved in sexting frequently experience emotional distress and fear of stigma, discouraging them from seeking help. Shame, victim-blaming and the absence of confidential reporting systems hinder timely intervention. As a result, many suffer in silence, lacking the psychosocial support needed to manage emotional and other consequences.

Thus, the findings underscored the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach involving social workers, educators, parents, policymakers and technology companies. Effective prevention and response require collaborative strategies integrating structured education, early intervention, and sustained support systems. Building adolescents' resilience, self-worth and digital responsibility are essential protective factors. Equally important is fostering non-judgmental, age-appropriate communication spaces where adolescents can express their concerns and access emotional support without fear of blame.

In order to address these challenges, several recommendations are proposed. Schools should integrate sexting behaviour and its consequences into their existing curricula focusing on digital ethics, consent, online safety and emotional intelligence. Awareness efforts must be proactive and continuous, reinforcing responsible online behaviour from an early age. Schools and community organisations should also provide digital-literacy workshops to equip parents with the knowledge and confidence to guide their children's online activities.

The government and educational institutions should prioritise CPD for social workers, offering specialised training on digital safety, trauma-informed intervention, and the legal aspects of sexting. Clear and enforceable school policies are needed to promote balanced monitoring that respects learner privacy while ensuring accountability. Schools and social services must expand access to counselling and confidential reporting channels to provide timely, stigma-free support for affected adolescents.

Finally, collaboration must extend beyond schools to all stakeholders. Community-based organisations, law enforcement, and social service departments should strengthen

public awareness and protective measures. The government should also engage technology companies to enhance online-safety mechanisms, including improved content moderation and privacy safeguards. By fostering shared responsibility across systems, these measures will help create safer, more informed, and resilient digital environments for South African adolescents.

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