

Parental Awareness and Perception of Online Dating Activities of Children

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Abstract

Online dating for children is risky as digital media devices saturate their lives. These digital devices, such as smart phones, iPhones, and tablets, are accessible to them and oftentimes provided by parents, notwithstanding the potential threats. With these devices, children get connected to the virtual world, are open to navigating the World Wide Web, and may access dating sites where they can form acquaintances with peers. In Nigeria, it has often been observed that children engage in a series of online activities, especially illicit relationship formations, sometimes without the knowledge of their parents, leading to severe negative effects. This paper interrogates the awareness and perception of parents about their children's online dating activities. The study specifically focused on parents with children below the age of eighteen (18). This study adopted quantitative and qualitative research designs involving a survey and a focus group discussion. The sampling technique for the survey is accidental, while the sampling technique for the FGD is intended for parents exposed to internet-enabled gadgets. The parental mediation theory served as the theoretical framework of the study. The population of the study is a total of 19,074 parents who have children in the state government's public schools. A sample size of 500 teachers was selected based on the recommendations of Comrey and Lee (1992). The instruments for data collection are the questionnaire and the FGD Guide. The study found that the majority of parents strongly believe that their children do not make use of dating sites but use the Internet for a number of other reasons. However, few of the parents are ambivalent about their children's use of online dating sites. However, they generally monitor their children's internet use and are yet to experience or observe their children making use of the dating sites. They are rather confident that their children are not patronizing these sites, as they are still too young to engage in dating activities. This paper concludes that even though parents are aware of the existence of dating sites, they need to be more conscious of their children's use of the internet. As some parents are still ambivalent about their children's use of dating sites, this paper recommends that parental efforts in monitoring their children's use of the internet should be intensified with a closer attention to their children's use of dating sites and that children should be more enlightened on the dangers of patronizing dating sites at a young age. Schools, families, and churches may serve as better avenues for carrying out these sensitizations.

Keywords: parents, parental awareness, perception, online dating sites

Introduction

Online dating platforms are evolving cyber communication environments that have radicalised the traditional environment of meeting potential romantic partners and business partners (Dunu & Abaneme, 2022). Some of the most popular dating sites are

Friendlite, Badoo, Hinge, MeetNigerians.com, Naija Planet, Afroromance, Afro Introductions, Tinder, The League, and eHarmony (African Launch Pad, 2020). These sites may expose these children to online predators and bullies who may desire to gain some kinds of sexual gratification from them in the disguise of love, dating, and social relationships. This situation has become contentious given the saturation of digital media devices among children these days (Adigwe & Van der Walt, 2020) and Internet accessibility. Some of these children, who are still inexperienced about cyber security, are obviously utilising the Internet. The likelihood therefore exists for the children to fall victim to predators and become sexually violated, abused, raped, molested, or lured to engage in undesirable sexual behaviours. As parents and guardians may provide mobile technologies with Internet access to children, perhaps for educational purposes (Henderson, 2011), and for numerous other uses, it has become essentially important for them to take cognisance of the potential effects of these devices on their children. Children deserve maximum protection as they increasingly engage in online activities.

As these children are born in the era of digital technology, these technologies may negatively impact their interpersonal relationships, dating, and sexual activities. Although there are over 1000 online dating sites in Nigeria, with evident evidence also showing that online dating has become an acceptable way to meet potential partners (Dunu & Abaneme, 2022), the likelihood exists for young children to log in and register on some of these websites, which are specifically designed for adults. For instance, there is a plethora of anecdotal evidence showing that children fall victim to online sexual predators who they have met online and on some dating sites. This is why this study, conducted in Awka City, is aimed at exploring the awareness and perception of parents about the online dating activities of their children. Therefore, this paper sought to address the following research objectives:

- i. To ascertain the extent to which parents are aware of online dating activities of their children;
- ii. To find out their views concerning the online dating activities of their children;
- iii. To determine how they monitor the online dating activities of their children.

Contextualizing the Study

The prevalence of dating sites has been documented in the literature (see Dunu & Abaneme, 2022), but the use of the websites by children should be considered serious by parents owing to the potential dangers. It does appear that many parents are unaware of the full extent of their children's online activities (Liau, Khoo, and Ang, 2008) and seem ambivalent about the potential risks of the Internet to their children, especially exposure to and use of dating sites and its possible effects such as sexual harassment, sexual violence, pornography, violence, cyberbullying, unsupervised social relations, and privacy and security issues (Ceyhan, 2011).

It could be understood that when children engage in some online dating activities, they may likely meet some online predators and sexual escapades who may lure them into negative and sexually related behaviours. However, one recent survey conducted in Lagos State, Nigeria, has shown that 54% of children aged 13–18 confront risks of harm online (Adigwe & Van der Walt, 2020). These risks of harm include cyberbullying, exposure to sexual content, chatting with strangers, sexting, and grooming (DQ Institute, 2018). It was also reported in the survey that chatting with strangers is the most prevalent risk confronted by children (Adigwe & Van der Walt, 2020). Three out of five girls are first contacted by males they met online (DQ Institute, 2018).

These show that a number of challenges trail children's use of digital technology, thereby exposing them to a number of risks that require parental awareness and possible interventions (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). As risks resulting from digital media use appear spontaneous and unplanned (Adigwe & Van der Walt, 2020), the level and nature of effects on children may be quite damaging to them in several ways, especially contacting strangers online and cyberbullying (Soh et al., 2018).

Based on prevalent occurrences within the Nigerian context, anecdotal evidence suggests that some users of dating sites scout for children who they find more easy to lure into sexual behaviors. The parental awareness of these sites, as well as their perception, become salient as they are to always protect their children from such risks. We therefore ask: how

aware are parents of the online dating activities of their children, and what are their perceptions towards them?

Justification

This work is very significant because the responsibility of monitoring teenage children's online activities heavily falls on parents (Costello & Ramo, 2017). Therefore, the need arises as to whether parents are aware of their children's use of dating sites and how they perceive such. However, children's personal encounters with online predators or dates could impact their social, cognitive, and psychological development, which are part of parental concerns.

Negative encounters with sexual escapades on the internet may also result in some kinds of negative effects, such as increased aggression, antisocial behaviour, addiction problems, poor school performance, low self-esteem, and identity confusion (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Fleming & Rickwood, 2001; Lăzărescu, 2010; Wartella et al., 2002). These should be considered by parents and then prompt them to engage in efficient monitoring mechanisms for the protection of their children from potential harm.

Some scholars have acknowledged that parental awareness and guidance are very essential (Adomi, Oyovwe-Tinuoye, and Igwela, 2020; Wang, Bianchi, and Raley, 2005) for the online activities of children, given the risks associated with them. Children may be challenged by the antics of online predators, who may lure them into sexual behaviours. Therefore, in this era of digital technology, the need to protect children from online sexual harassment, illicit relationships, cyberbullying, and exposure to sexual content (Hargittai, 2010; Staksrud et al., 2013) remains significant.

Literature Review

Research in numerous countries has indicated that large numbers of adolescents regularly use the Internet (Bjornstad and Ellingsen, 2004; Centre for the Digital Future, 2007; Liao, Khoo, & Ang, 2005; Livingstone and Bober, 2004). Recently, online dating platforms, which are social media platforms where users sign up primarily to make friends, meet potential partners, date, flirt, and even look for business opportunities has penetrated Nigerian

society, as an alternative way to seek out and meet potential romantic partners (Dunu & Abaneme, 2022). Given adolescents increasing internet use, there should be concerns about its impact on their social relationships with others. The existing studies seem to suggest that while parents may be anxious and insecure about the risks of the Internet, some parents may believe that the Internet can help their children do better at school and learn worthwhile things, and some may be concerned that their children may become isolated from others, be exposed to sexual and/or violent images, and risk their privacy (Livingstone 2003). Recognised globally as a new dating medium, this platform has raised concerns about its alleged guilt in promoting the use of deception by users, and central to these concerns is the absence of physical presence, the anonymity associated with the process, and the power of individuals to determine the pattern in which a user presents themselves through profiling and description, selecting images to display in their bio, and describing their potential date (Dunu & Abaneme, 2022). Hence, more research needs to be done to gain a better understanding of parental awareness of adolescents' Internet use, particularly on online dating sites, justifying the need for this present study on parental awareness and perception of their children's online dating activities.

Wang, Bianchi, and Raley (2005) compared parent and adolescent reports on one aspect of parental monitoring of adolescent Internet use and suggested that parents would underestimate the frequency of adolescents' use of the Internet, the frequency of visits to inappropriate websites such as pornographic sites, and the frequency of engagement in risky Internet behaviours such as meeting someone face-to-face that the adolescents first met online.

The existing literature from western countries has contrasting results regarding the awareness of parents towards their children's use of social media and online dating sites. For instance, Liao et al. (2008) found that most parents whose teenagers have access to the internet claim that they share and/or support their teenage children on social media, a claim not embraced by their teenage children. They further observed that most parents do not exercise significant supervision over their children's activity on the Web. Dor and Weimann-Saks (2013) stated that parents should instruct their kids on safe conduct on the

internet (e.g., “Don’t give personal information to strangers”), and they assume that their children follow their instructions. However, surveys by Lenhart and Madden (2007) revealed that children’s adherence to parents’ instructions is rare because teenage children often divulge personal information. These children may likely disregard the instructions from their parents owing to their preconceived notion of privacy. Parental awareness of their children’s online dating activities may lead to the promotion of more efficient monitoring mechanisms and the safety of children. Children should be guided by parents on the use of the Internet, especially social media and dating sites (Mesch, 2003), considering the possible future risks (Livingstone, 2003). This is because they could meet strangers online, while parents are more concerned about the risks that might accompany it (Lim et al., 2003).

However, steady access to and use of the internet and dating sites could influence a teenager’s social, physical, and mental development. It can also be associated with poor academic performance, sleep deprivation, reduced physical activity, and face-to-face social interaction, which impact negatively on their health, etc. (Green & Patwal, 2020). There are also several other negative influences attached to the use of social media and dating websites by teenage children, which include commercialism, sexting, cyberbullying, violence, harassment, entertainment, outings, impersonation, and breaking into computers, among others (Adomi, Oyovwe-Tinuoye, and Igwela, 2020).

There have been several studies that focused on children’s use of social media and dating sites (Adomi, Oyovwe-Tinuoye, and Igwela, 2020; Green & Patwal, 2020), especially teenagers. However, none, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, has explored parental awareness and perception of their children’s online dating activities. This study is intended to help contribute towards filling the gap in this area. The danger of adolescents falling victim to cyberbullying has become alarming (David, 2017), especially among the younger ones. According to UNICEF (2017), one-third of the world’s Internet users are under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2017). Model Legislation and Global Review (2017) also reported that an estimated 750,000 sexual predators are online at any given moment (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2017).

Considering the spread of digital facilities, the cyber-grooming of children by predators for sexual abuse and other negative effects can be recognised as a global problem that requires continuous awareness through research and practice (Whittle et al., 2013). Sociopsychology scholars are interested in how parents incorporate interpersonal strategies to mitigate the negative effects of the Internet and mobile technology on their children (Clark, 2011; Nikken & Graaf, 2013). Clark (2011) suggested that interactions between parents and children require rethinking, and for scholars to evaluate parental mediation theory, three types of techniques are involved, which include active, restrictive, and co-viewing strategies. Such strategies can be used to consider the emerging participation learning strategy that involves the interaction of parents and children through digital media (Clark, 2011).

Predators, or groomers, can interact easily with children and adolescents through the Internet, chat platforms, and smartphones. As parents may provide their children with smartphones with a 24/7 Internet connection for various reasons, especially to contact them after school or to manage subject-related chats, their awareness of how these children access some websites, such as dating sites, remains crucial.

Empirical Studies

In Singapore, Liau, Khoo, & Ang (2008) examined Parental Awareness and Monitoring of Adolescent Internet Use, focussing on four aspects of parental monitoring of Internet use by their children: parental supervision, communication and tracking, and adolescent disclosure. They obtained their data from a SAFT (Safety Awareness for Teens Project) national survey of Singapore youths and parents regarding Internet safety at home. Study 1 examined 1,124 adolescents and 1,002 parents; Study 2 examined a subsample of 169 dyads of adolescents and their parents. Frequency of use and engagement in risky Internet behaviours such as visiting inappropriate websites were analysed. The results indicated that parents tend to underestimate adolescents' engagement in risky Internet behaviours and overestimate the amount of parental monitoring regarding Internet safety that occurs at home. The study suggested that mothers have a better awareness of their adolescents' Internet use than fathers. The findings were explained in the context of parental

monitoring. The results suggest that parental monitoring needs to be reconceptualised and that parents need to improve communication with their adolescents regarding Internet use.

Oluyemi, Yinusa, Abdullateef, Kehinde, & Adejoke (2017) investigated the influence of parental communication and parental monitoring on adolescents' sexual behaviour in Ogbomoso, Oyo State, South-West Nigeria. The study employed a multi-stage sampling method, which included first a purposive selection of four secondary schools in the study population, comprising of public and private schools, to have a mixture of parental social background; secondly, a hierarchal selection of senior secondary schools 1, 2, and 3, where adolescents majorly occupy; and third, a random selection of 215 participants from each school based on the number of students available in the schools when the survey was conducted, totalling 860 participants. They collected the data using a self-administered structured questionnaire, and 860 participants were selected through a multi-stage sampling method. They found that 99% of the participants were close to both parents, 63% of whom were closer to their mothers. They also found that 52% of the participants already had a boyfriend or girlfriend, 40% had kissed, and 14% had previously had sexual intercourse as of the time of the review. It's interesting that the scholars found that 64% of participants' parents never had knowledge of these happenings in their lives. Monitoring measures adopted by parents included standing rules (34%), banning visitors of the opposite sex (28%), stay-at-home orders (21%), tracing adolescents' movements when they go out (20%), and timing their outings (13%). Some of the avenues participants employed in accessing their sexual partners despite parental monitoring include: when sent on errands (18%), during school periods (15%), sneaking out of the home (9%), and lying to their parents to see their boyfriend or girlfriend (7%). Also, despite the fact that 82% of the participants are being prevented from having opposite sex as friends, participants were still able to access their boyfriend or girlfriend. A significant relationship was found between participants' sexual behaviour and parental communication and parental monitoring ($p < 0.05$). The study recommended increased parental involvement in communication and monitoring of adolescent sexual behaviour, bearing in mind the consequences of risky sexual behaviours on adolescents' health and society at large. This study was able to address the influence of parental communication and parental

monitoring on adolescents' sexual behaviour, but this current study looked at parental awareness and perceptions of the online dating activities of their children.

Badr, Alnuaimi, Rashedi, Yang, and Temsah (2017) employed a survey to examine schoolchildren's use of digital devices, social media, and parental knowledge and involvement in Abu Dhabi. Their finding revealed that about 82.2% of the respondents agreed that their parents were aware of their online social activities, followed by 12% of the respondents who were not sure of the parents' awareness of their online social activities, and 5.8% of the respondents said no. The study was carried out in Abu Dhabi using a survey, but this current study used both a survey and FGD to conduct a Nigerian-based study.

Adigwe & Van der Walt (2020) examined the parental mediation of online media activities of children in Nigeria using a parent-child approach. They sampled a total of 1,270 children and their parents. They obtained their data through a questionnaire from children aged 13–18 years old and their parents aged 25–55 years. Findings of the study show stronger associations between the reports of parents and children in the cases of restrictive mediation and active mediation. Some of the associations found were positive, which indicates more mediation results in more risky activities. The study was conducted among public-sector secondary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria, but this current study is domesticated in Anambra State, specifically among the parents of children in state-owned public secondary schools.

Adomi, Oyovwe-Tinuoye, and Igwela (2020) examined parents' awareness of their teenage children's use of social media in Delta State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study, using a self-constructed questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. The questionnaire was constructed after extensive consultation of related literature in order to ensure that relevant items were included in it. The population of the study comprised all parents in Delta State, and a purposive sampling technique was adopted to select respondents for the study. Data were collected through the use of a self-constructed questionnaire entitled "Parents' awareness of their teenage children's use of social media (PATCUSM)". The collected data were analysed using frequencies and simple

percentages. The study revealed that all parents' were aware that their teenage children used social media; a majority of them indicated that their teens used their mothers' device to access social media; teenagers use of Facebook attracted the highest responses, followed by WhatsApp; a majority of the parents indicated that their teenage children access social media during the day, though most of them were not aware of the length of time their teens spent per visit to social media sites; a majority of the respondents were unaware that their teens used social media for academic matters, and they monitored their teenage children. The study recommended that parents should ensure that they guide the children on fruitful use of social media to enhance their academic achievement and advancement; that efforts should be made by parents to regularly monitor and supervise their teens children on social media in order to mitigate their use for antisocial purposes; and that parents should provide their teenage children with smart phones, but should monitor their use to ensure the teens use them for productive purposes. This work was based in Delta State and focused on social media, while the present study is focused on online dating sites and also on the profiles of children in secondary schools.

Dorasamy, Kaliannan, Jambulingam, Ramadhan, and Sivaji (2021) studied parents' awareness of online predators in view of cyber grooming deterrence in Malaysia. This study reflects on the current cyber-grooming situation. Investigating the current state of online grooming and the means through which parents can ensure the online safety of their adolescents from adults offering "candy" or wanting to start a relationship. Teen behaviour-related scholars believe that parents play a vital role in building safe environments. They conducted a qualitative study by interviewing 19 parents with children between the ages of 13 and 17 in an urban setting to determine the level of the parents' awareness. Interviews were conducted based on five key components, namely, social media, unknown friends, sex education, private chats, and family time. The results present the actual situations of the parents and highlight related challenges as well as adolescents' ignorance and vulnerability to cyber-grooming. Results were mapped to three main determinants of cyber grooming, namely, parental factors, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. They concluded with insights and recommendations for parents, schools, and the government to be vigilant for online predators by increasing awareness of cyber-

grooming. This work was based in Malaysia and was primarily focused on online predators, but the current study focusses on the awareness of parents of the online dating activities of children as well as their perception of these activities.

Dunu & Abaneme (2022) examined why young females in Nigeria use online dating platforms, the gratification gained from using them, and the most dominant mode of communication. Using the survey method, they studied eight hundred and eighty-nine (889) single women in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, within the age bracket of 18–40 years, living in the state capitals of Imo, Anambra, and Ebonyi. They established two major findings from the study that resonate with the literature. First, the majority of the respondents (66.4%) are active users of online dating platforms, who use them mostly on a daily basis. Second, multiple response answer (MRA) findings show that the most gratified need desired by the respondents is emotional needs (36.4%). This work focusses on the reasons why young females in Nigeria use online dating platforms, but this study sought to determine the parental awareness of and perception of online dating activities among their children.

Dunu & Abaneme (2022) explored the dominant type of self-presentation among online dating participants as well as how young adult females in Nigeria manage their online presentation of themselves in order to accomplish the goal of finding a romantic partner. Using a semi-structured interview and netnography (scroll-back method), they interviewed and observed 45 single females' online dating profiles, aged between 18 and 35 years. Findings show that the majority of the participants presented multiple selves on their online dating site profiles. The study also found that these participants used both pictures of their real selves and enhanced pictures on their profiles. The work is centred on self-presentation among the online dating participants, but this current study is basically on the awareness and perception of parents of the online dating activities of their children.

Martha (2012) studied parents' perceptions of the influence that social media networking has on their children, with a special focus on parents whose children attend Demonstration Secondary School Zaria. The study adopts descriptive Research design, while a survey was used as a method of data collection and a questionnaire was employed as an instrument for

data gathering. The research adopts a simple percentage as a method of data analysis. Of a total population of 1,974 parents of students in the senior secondary classes, 450 parents constitute the researcher's sample size, thereby representing the whole. This sample was picked using the purposive sampling method. The study finds that parents have different perceptions of the influence that social media networking has on their children. The study goes on to show that 76.7% of the respondents are computer literate. Even though most of the study population (84%) had access to the internet, only 46.6% are registered on one social media site or another. The study also shows that it is difficult to deny children access to social media because advances in technology have made internet accessibility via mobile telephone possible. Findings show that parental monitoring is a mediating factor in supervising children's activities online. This work is centred on social media, but it also addresses online dating sites.

Emelumadu, Onyeonoro, Ezeama, Ifeadike, and Ubajaka. Adogu, Umeh, Nwamoh, and Ukegbu (2013) examined the parents' perceptions of the timing of the initiation of sexuality discussions with adolescents in Anambra State, south-eastern Nigeria. This study was aimed at determining the perception of the timing and practice of sexuality discussion among parents in south-eastern Nigeria. It was a cross-sectional, descriptive, community-based, and exploratory study carried out in Anambra State, South Eastern Nigeria, between August 2010 and March 2011. The projected total population size of Anambra State based on the 2006 census figure as of 2010 was 4,670,462, out of which adults in the reproductive age group account for approximately 50% of the total population (17). The sample size was determined based on a reported prevalence of 41% of mothers who believed that sexuality education should commence before puberty, a margin of error of 5%, and a confidence interval of 95%. Using EpiInfo version 3.3.2, the approximate sample size for the study was 372 patients. The study was carried out in three randomly selected local government areas (LGAs) in Anambra State, south-eastern Nigeria. The study participants were parents with adolescent children resident in the study areas for at least two years. The study revealed that most parents opined that sexuality discussions should be initiated after puberty. Only 20% of them discussed reproductive health issues often with their adolescents, while another 20% never discussed them with their adolescent

children. The study also revealed that topics most commonly discussed bordered on the adverse consequences of sex rather than measures for preventing them, and that about half of them were willing to discuss contraception with their adolescent child. The study also found that predictors of parent-child communication were age, gender, and educational status. The study also concludes that common reasons for low parental involvement in sexuality discussions are their lack of capacity and the perception that discussing such issues before puberty is ill-timed. It was then recommended that measures be taken to improve the capacity of parents to provide sexuality information to their teens. The study addressed the parents' perceptions of the timing of the initiation of sexuality discussions with adolescents in Anambra State, South Eastern Nigeria, but this current study looked at the parental awareness and perceptions of the online dating activities of children.

The foregoing literature has been able to bring out some salient points. Children use the internet, and their parents are aware of such use. The literature also found a relationship between parental communication and children's sexual behaviour. The literature also shows that parents are often watchful over their children's internet use, but what has been scarce is their awareness of whether their children use the online dating sites. The literature has established that some parents monitor the social media activities of their children in some areas, but parental awareness of the use of online dating activities is still an area underexplored.

Theory

This paper subscribes to the parental mediation theory as propounded by Clark (2008), which posits that parents utilize different interpersonal communication strategies in their attempts to mediate and mitigate the negative effects of the media in their children's lives. The theory further assumes that interpersonal media interactions that take place between parents and their children play a role in socialising children into society. The theory also considers how parents utilise interpersonal communication to mitigate the negative effects that they believe communication media have on their children. What is today referred to as parental mediation theory has therefore long been a hybrid communication theory that, although rooted primarily in social and psychological media effects and information

processing theories, also implicitly foregrounds the importance of interpersonal communication between parents and their children.

In a sense, then, although the theory grew out of an interest in the negative effects of the media, it also sought to explore the positive ways in which other factors within a young person's environment, namely, the child's parents and their intentional efforts at mediation, might mitigate the negative effects that the media is presumed to have on young people's cognitive development. The theory applies to this work as it will capture the extent to which parents mediate on the use of online dating sites by their children.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative research designs were employed in the study. For the quantitative, a survey was used, while a focus group discussion was employed to address the qualitative angle. The population of the study is a total of 19,074 parents who have children in the state government's public schools. The population was obtained from the principal administrators of the state government's public schools as follows:

Table 1: Population

S/N	Schools	Population
1	Igwebuikwe Grammar school, Awka	3085
2	St. John of God secondary school, Awka	2986
3	Girls secondary school, Awka	3196
4	Community secondary school, Umuokpu, Awka	2857
5	Capital city secondary school, Awka	2572

6	Kenneth Dike memorial secondary school, Awka	1368
7	Ezi-Awka Community secondary school	1681
8	Community secondary school, Agulu-Awka	1329
Total		19074

Source: The Principal Administrators (Form Teachers, Vice Principals and Bursers) of the school

A sample size of 500 parents was used based on the recommendations of Comrey and Lee (1992), that in any given study, a sample size of 50 = very poor, 100 = poor, 300 = good, 500 = very good, and 1000 = excellent. In view of this recommendation, the study adopted a population size of 500 people. The instruments for data collection are a questionnaire and an FGD guide.

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the parents on their meeting days at the school via accidental sampling, with the assistance of the school management, while the FGD was conducted online with teachers with the assistance of the school management, who provided the contacts of the parents who are digitally savvy and are conversant with the internet and online facilities. Therefore, the sampling technique for the survey is accidental, while the sampling technique for the FGD is purposeful. Only the parents who are digitally savvy were selected for the FGD. The sample size for the FGD is a total of eight (8) participants, such that one (1) participant each would represent each of the eight state government public schools in Awka City.

For the survey, all eight (8) schools had a share of the distribution using proportion statistics as follows:

$$\underline{3085 \times 500}$$

19071 1 = 81 parents from Igwebuiké Grammar school, Awka

2986 X 500

19071 1 = 78 parents from St. John of God secondary school, Awka

3196 X 500

19071 1 = 84 Parents from Girls secondary school, Awka

2857 X 500

19071 1 = 75 Parents from Community secondary school, Umuokpu, Awka

2572 X 500

19071 1 = 67 Parents from Capital city secondary school, Awka

1681 X 500

19071 1 = 44 parents from Ezi-Awka Community secondary school

1329 X 500

19071 1 = 35 Parents from Community secondary school, Agulu-Awka

Results

The Extent to which Parents are aware of the Online Dating Activities of their Children

Table 2

Extent of Parental Awareness of online dating Activities of Children

Aware of Dating sites?	Aware of children’s use of the Internet	Aware of Children’s use of dating sites
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Yes	No	They use it	They do not use it	I am not sure	They do not use it	They use it	I am not sure
67%	33%	93%	4%	3%	98%	0%	2%
(N=313)	(N=155)	(N=429)	(N=19)	(N=12)	(N=460)	(N=0)	(N=8)
100%		100%		100%			
(N=468)		(N=468)		(N=468)			

This table shows the extent of parents’ awareness of the online dating activities of their children. The table shows that 67% of parents are aware of dating sites. This shows a prevalent awareness among parents of the existence of online dating sites. This re-echoes the observations of Dunu & Abaneme (2022) that online dating platforms are evolving cyber communication environments that have radicalised the traditional environment of meeting potential romantic partners and business partners (Dunu & Abaneme, 2022). The table further revealed that these parents are aware that their children utilise mobile phones with Internet connectivity (93%). However, 98% of these parents were confident that their children do not make use of dating sites, although 2% of them were uncertain about their children’s use of the sites. These show that there is greater parental awareness about the existence of dating sites and their children’s use of the internet, but many are confident that these children do not make use of dating sites. Some of the parents who participated in the FGD also made the following comments:

Participant 3: My little children are all doing well and are decent. I believe they do not use such sites. It’s really not encouraging and it may not be proper asking them about it.

Participant 1: I don’t think there is anything wrong with asking your children about such. It depends on how the questions were posed to them.

I can't say I completely trust my children because they may have some little secrets but generally, I believe God that they will not engage in such behaviours.

Participant 5: I will not say that my children are completely innocent; neither will I say that Internet has destroyed our children but I will say that this research is an opener to parents who may not be watchful about their children's use of the Internet. Personally, I am beginning to understand this research the more. I have kids in secondary but they do not use mobile phones in their schools unless when they are home on holidays and for purposes of doing their assignments. I bought phones for them but they do not use it at will.

Participant 7: I have worries about my children's use of the internet but my major worry is about my kids being exposed to pornography which I basically monitor. I have not been bothered about their use of dating sites because I believe they are still young to make use of them.

Participant 2: I have learnt many about dating sites but I intentionally never wanted to bring up such discussions with my children, instead I prefer to keep monitoring them and advising them generally against using some undesirable websites. I wouldn't be the one telling them that such sites exists because they may want to check it

Theses excerpts demonstrate that the parents are aware of the existence dating sites which they hardly discuss with their children. The reason according to them is to avoid introducing such sites to their children. Rather, they monitor and revisit their children's use of the Internet/ mobile gadgets.

Parental Views Concerning their Children's Use of the Sites

Table 3

Parental views concerning their children’s use of dating sites

Children should attain adulthood before using the dating sites		Dating sites should not be used by my secondary school/ teenage children		Presently, dating sites are not helpful to my children in secondary school		Dating sites can promote negative relationship formations among children	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%
(N=468)	(N=0)	(N=468)	(N=0)	(N=468)	(N=0)	(N=468)	(N=0)
100%		100%		100%		100%	
(N=468)		(N=468)		(N=468)		(N=468)	

This table presents the divergent views of the parents regarding their children’s use of dating sites. It was established that parents are protective of their children and therefore contend that children should attain adulthood before using dating sites; dating sites should not be used by my secondary school or teenage children; dating sites are not helpful to my children in secondary school; and that dating sites can promote negative relationship formation among children. All these show that the parents consider dating sites to be predominantly inappropriate for these children. The parents further revealed further details following the focus group discussion. The excerpts are hereby presented:

Participant 4: I will never support my kids to use such sites. I believe some kids who use such sites may have gone wild.

Participant 8: I don’t think so. Some kids may not be aware of the risks involved in it but if a child has gone so wild to the extent of meeting strangers and forming acquaintances with them, it becomes very risky.

Participant 2: why will little children visit such sites if not to seek a partner?

Participant 8: They may not be fully aware of the dangers involved.

Participant 1: Mind you, some bad friends may lure them into such behaviours and then we may begin to experience what we never envisaged.

Participant 5: God forbid! My children use their phones when they return from school or when they are on holidays. I often check their browser history to confirm the sites they have visited and I am sure they have never visited such sites.

Participant 6: I think some of such sites are basically for adults who have reached 18 and they may be using the sites to gratify some needs

These show that parents dislike the use of online dating sites by their children. They contend that such sites may be risky for their children who may become abused or assaulted when they use such sites. The parents further acknowledged that the dating sites are specifically for adults and therefore children.

Table 4
Parental Monitoring of children’s online dating activities

Monitoring the Children’s online activities?			Monitoring the Children’s use of dating sites?				
Never	Occasionally	Always	When something is suspected	Never	Occasionally	Always	When something is suspected

0%	83%	12%	5%	0%	93%	7%	0%
(N=0)	(N=359)	(N=52)	(N=20)	(N=0)	(N=399)	(N=30)	(N=0)
100%				100%			
(N=429)				(N=429)			

Among the total number of parents (429) who admitted that their children use Internet-enabled devices, the study was able to discover that 83% of them occasionally monitor their children’s internet activities. Twelve (12%) of them always do so, while 5% of them engage in the monitoring only when there is suspense. The implication is that there is less frequency of monitoring these online activities of children.

Also, 93% of the respondents occasionally monitor whether their children make use of dating sites. However, 30% of them usually do so. The finding suggests that the sampled parents have yet to experience or observe their children using such sites, given that some of the schools do not promote the use of mobile phones by the children.

Mentoring of Children’s Online Dating Activities

Table 5

How parents monitor their children’s internet activities

Internet monitoring mechanisms by Parents	Percentages
Checking the Children’s Browsing	51% (N=217)
Limiting the time of Children’s Internet Use	29% (N=125)

Observing the children's moods during browsing	20% (N=87)
Others	0% (N=0)
<hr/>	
Total	100% (N=429)
<hr/>	

Even though the parents had earlier reported that their children do not use dating sites, this table revealed the various ways parents monitor their children's internet activities. Prominent among these mechanisms is checking their children's internet browsing (51%). Others include observing the children's moods during browsing (20%) and limiting the use of the Internet by their children (21%). Further responses were obtained from the parents during the focus group discussion. The excerpts are hereby provided:

Participant 5: Like I said earlier, I always monitor my children's browsing history on their phones.

Participant 1: I learnt about the use of Apps to monitor what my kids do online.

Participant 4: You mean mobile Apps?

Participant 1: Yes, there are mobile Apps that help to check all that. For instance, there is an app called fami-safe parental control.

Participant 2: I don't think I have the time for such protocol. I rather uninstall and deactivate any strange app I see on their phones. I only leave out the app s that they need at their age.

Participant 3: I have a very simple android phones, I am really not used to all the Apps but I think I will look into it but io am certain that mny kids do not join bad group.

The following excerpts revealed that some of the parents engage in several regulatory mechanisms to monitor what their children do online. Essentially, the parents were more keen on monitoring their children's exposure to pornography and other harmful contents than dating sites. The mechanisms the parents use include checking browsing history, monitoring harmful contents, and having conversations with strangers.

Discussion of Findings

The spread of digital technologies among children these days calls for an interrogation of parental awareness and perception of the online dating activities of their children. As there is increasing evidence that the amount of time teenage children spend online at home and in school has increased, there should be concerns about the impact of these activities on their development (Kanthawongsa and Kanthawongs, 2013). This is also in view of concerns about the risks of digital media use on the online behaviour of children (Nikken and Oprea, 2018; Pfetsch, 2018).

As obtained from this study, the majority of parents strongly believe that their children do not make use of dating sites but use the Internet for a number of other reasons. However, few parents are ambivalent about their children's use of online dating sites. However, they generally monitor their children's internet use and are yet to experience or observe their children making use of dating sites. They are rather confident that their children are not patronising these sites, as they are still too young to engage in dating activities.

As Martha (2012) observed, parents should be supportive of any effort towards educating them about the negative influence that social media may have on them. This observation is hereby upheld in this study to contend that parents should be more proactive in monitoring the activities of their children in cyberspace. Even though there were no reported incidents of use of dating sites among the students, they should educate their children about the possible risks of joining dating platforms at a younger age. To this end, the parental mediation theory is upheld to contend that since parents monitor their children's use of the Internet, they are to be more proactive in doing so and then give special attention to their children's exposure and use of online dating sites.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that even though parents are aware of the existence of dating sites, they need to be more conscious about their children's use of the internet.

Recommendations

As some parents are still ambivalent about their children's use of dating sites, this paper recommends that parental efforts in monitoring their children's use of the internet should be intensified with a closer attention to their children's use of dating sites.

The paper further recommends that children should be more enlightened on the dangers of patronizing dating sites at a young age. Schools, families, and churches may serve as better avenues for carrying out these sensitizations.

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