

Original Research Article

Role of social media for sexual communication and sexual behaviors: A focus group study among young people in Nepal

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Abstract

Over the past decade, young people's use of the social media has increased steadily in many countries including Nepal. Studies in other countries suggest that social media platforms can play an important role in facilitating sexual communication and relationships. This qualitative study comprising focus group discussions (FGDs), intends to explore: (a) perceptions of and motives toward social media re. sexual communication in educated unmarried young people in Nepal; and (b) their views of the link between social media and risky sexual behavior. We carried out eight FGD, four with young men and four with young women. FGDs were audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed. All FGD participants were students (age range 15-22) from Kathmandu. Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis: a) use of and motives for using social media; b) sex education in general; c) sexual information through social media; d) social media's role in forming romantic and sexual relationships; and e) negative experience of social media. Social media are popular among young people in Nepal and is considered as an important platform to access sexual health information. Young people also use these to establish romantic and sexual relationships, however, it doesn't necessarily mean that social media are directly leading to unsafe sexual behaviors in young people. It is the lack of awareness and inadequate education about sex that is resulting in unsafe sexual practices. Overall, suggesting the need for more appropriate health promotion activities in the field sex and relationship education.

Keywords: adolescents, focus groups, health promotion, Nepal, relationship, sex education, social media

Introduction

For the past few years, online social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become extremely popular worldwide. Even in the low-income countries, users of these social media or digital platforms have been growing very fast due to internet penetration in rural areas via smart mobile devices. For example, in Nepal internet use increased exponentially from fewer than 50 users in 1995 to 11 million users in 2021 (38% of total population) and almost half of active social media users are aged 15-24 years (Kemp, 2021). These statistics suggests that the internet can be a powerful channel for reaching many people easily, maintaining

connections between people, and accessing health information, including sexual and reproductive health education. However, there is also a growing concern about young people's exposure (intended or unintended) to sexual content through these social media and online platforms (Regmi et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2016; Eleuteri et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2018; Owan et al., 2020). Social media may influence young people's sexual attitude and behaviors by acting as a 'super peer'.

Attitudes of Nepali youths towards sexual partnership formation have steadily changed with the rapid modernization in society (Regmi et al., 2011; Acharya et al., 2015; Greene, 2015). Several studies claim that young men and women in Nepal are now more comfortable in each other's company and more likely to initiate sexual relations before marriage (Singh et al., 2006; Adhikari & Tamang, 2009; Regmi et al., 2011; BC & Basel, 2013; Bhatta et al., 2013; Adhikari et al., 2018; Pahari & Adhikari, 2021). Many young people also engage in unsafe sex; the Nepal Demographic Health Survey (2016) reported that sexual risk-taking behaviors (e.g., multiple sex partners, inconsistent condom use) are common among young people (MoH/New ERA, 2017). These risks are mirrored in the country's abortion data. For example, the prevalence of abortion was 27% among 15-24 years (Yogi et al., 2018). Evidence suggests risky sexual behavior can lead to violence (Seth et al., 2010; Shorey et al., 2015) and sexual transmitted infections including HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) (Raj et al., 2008; Afriyie & Essilfie, 2019).

As Nepal is at the crossroads of social transformation, young people no longer follow the previously held social norms such as restriction of sexual relationships before marriage. Nepali media often portrays that social networking media (SNM) have played an increasingly important role in facilitating sexual relationship in Nepalese young people. Although Regmi and colleagues (2010) reported that exposure to electronic media was one of the factors in encouraging premarital sexual intercourse, no previous studies have explored how these social media platforms facilitate sexual communication or sexual relationships in Nepal.

Although m-health or health education or promotion via digital and social media platforms are widely accepted in most high-income countries, a systematic review shows it is still at an early stage of development in most low-income countries (Marcolino et al., 2018). We argue that the interactions and messages young people receive from these social media may make them more curious about sexual topics. This qualitative study therefore aims to understand: (a) perceptions and motives toward social media for a sexual communication among young people; and (b) the influence of social media on risky sexual behavior.

As social networking media have the potential to reach a large and diverse population with frequent, quick, and tailored messages, understanding how these platforms are used by young people may help to develop effective health promotion interventions in the field of sexual and reproductive health communication through these platforms.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study included eight focus group discussion (Hennink, 2013), with young male and female aged between 15 and 22 from Kathmandu. Skilled same-gender researchers conducted FGDs in Nepali language for their respective gender (Axinn, 1991). Considering the

sensitive nature of the research objectives, participants were invited through purposive and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). The research team with the support of Green Tara Nepal first made a list of potential participants from Green Tara field sites within Kathmandu Valley. The shortlisted group of youths was then approached by telephone. The contacts who were willing to participate were further requested to invite their friends a similar age and of the same gender to participate in our FGDs. All those contacted by telephone agreed to participate if the FGDs were conducted in a convenient location, time and dates. Data were collected during December 2018 and January 2019.

Two FGDs were conducted in a school hall in the holidays and six FGDs were conducted in a separate quieter space inside a café at a convenient location. Only the researchers conducting the FGDs and the participants were present. All FGDs were audio recorded with participants' written consent.

We collected data until the information reached data saturation (Forrest Keenan et al., 2005) for each gender. After each FGD, the researchers summarized the key discussion points to the participants to ensure that the researchers understood their statements correctly (Torrance, 2012).

The FGD guideline in a question form was developed with relevant experts and stakeholders to ensure that it was comprehensive. Key questions included young people's experiences of and motives for using social media, their perceptions about social media's role in forming sexual and romantic relationships, and positive and negative aspects of using social media.

Data Management and Analysis

The audio recordings of the FGDs were transcribed before being reviewed by PR and RD, who summarized key issues from each FGD and manually generated initial codes, using a Microsoft Excel file. The initial codes were then merged into broader themes that were based on the study's research question (Clarke et al., 2015). Next the generated codes and themes were reviewed by all authors to ensure that the data aligned with the overall research objective of this study. Anonymous original quotes were selected for each theme to provide deeper insights into the responses from the participants. We followed consolidated guidelines for reporting qualitative study (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007) to report our finding.

Ethical Considerations

The approval for this study was obtained from Nepal Health Research Council. Information sheets were provided, and we obtained written informed consent (Regmi et al., 2017) from all participants. Participants below the age of 18 years needed consent from a guardian prior to taking part. Study objectives and the role of the participants were clearly discussed and all participants were ensured of their privacy by the research team. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, an informal environment was created by the researchers to establish a comfortable relationship before the start of the FGD. Privacy and confidentiality of the participant are maintained throughout the data analysis and while reporting and presenting findings.

Findings

In total 48 young people participated, each FGD comprised five to seven participants with an age range of 15-22 years (Table 1). Most participants were in secondary schools or had recently left school. One female group comprised undergraduate students and another intermediate-level nursing students.

Table 1

Characteristics of FGD Participants

FGD ID	Gender	Age group (years)	Occupation and education	Number of participants
1	Female	15 -19	Students (4: secondary; 1 higher secondary)	5
2	Female	18-20	Students (all higher secondary)	6
3	Female	20-21	Students (all undergraduate)	6
4	Female	18-20	Students (3 higher secondary; 3 undergraduate)	6
5	Male	15 -21	Students (1 undergraduate, and 6 secondary)	7
6	Male	18-22	Students (4 higher secondary, 2 undergraduate)	6
7	Male	18 -20	Students (all higher secondary)	6
8	Male	18-22	Students (2 higher secondary, 4 undergraduate)	6

Five major themes were generated from the data: (a) use of and motives behind using social media; (b) sources to sex education; (c), sexual information through social media; (d) role of social media in forming romantic/sexual relationships; and, (e) negative experience on social media and each theme is discussed below. Relevant quotes are provided to support the themes.

Use of and Motives Behind Using Social Media

All participants used various social media platforms on a daily basis. Participants listed Facebook and Instagram as the popular social media followed by Facebook Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp for communication and YouTube for entertainment. Most also named TikTok, Snapchats and Twitter. Few participants also listed the popular dating app Tinder, and networking apps such as TanTan and professional sites such as LinkedIn were also reported.

The age of initiation ranged from as early as eight to 18 years of age. Facebook was the first social media account opened by all, for example:

“I had my first social media account when I was in Grade 2. Actually, my father had opened a Facebook account for me.” (Male participant, FGD 7)

The common reasons everyone cited included communication with family and friends, entertainment, and getting news and other information. Almost all thought that social media platforms had made people’s life easier by improving communication and access to new information.

“Now, people can easily communicate with people in different countries through different social media and that too without paying if you have free access to WiFi internet connections.” (Female participant, FGD 2)

Some participants also suggested that online shopping through social media had grown in popularity in recent years.

“Before, we needed to spend time going out and exploring different shops to buy the things we want. Now we can simply sit at home and do online shopping through online shopping platforms as well as through Facebook. It saves time.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

When asked about gender differences in the use of social media, most male participants stated that while their use of social media or their posts are simple and straightforward, young females used more details in their social media. They suggested that female youths use social media as a platform to post nice pictures.

“Girls prefer posting more pictures in different dresses and poses. But boys are simpler.” (Male participant, FGD 5)

Though only few female participants admitted that they access sexual information through social media. Most female participants had a view that all boys are interested in was looking for sexual contents through social media. A few of them also suggested that boys are also interested in sports and spend time equally on sexual contents and science-related topics, while the female are more inclined towards cuter things or beauty and fashion related information. A female participant said:

“They [boys] are into looking for sexual contents on social media. I think they are also more curious in general about science and technology. While girls are more curious about beauty tips and cute videos.” (Female participant, FGD 2)

Most participant agreed that they have good access to social media through their personal devices. The majority reported no problems accessing the Internet, as there are currently many options available. They can use the WIFI connections in their home or other hotspots or use mobile phone data to access social media. Many agreed their parents controlled their internet access at home (especially during exam period) as parents worry about their school performance. The older participants shared that it used to be more challenging for them to access social media freely in the past when smart phones were not so common.

“When we were younger and still in school, in order to use social media, we had to line up at the cyber places. But now you have internet everywhere. You can use your own phone data or go to a coffee shop with free WIFI.” (Female participant, FGD 4)

Sources to Sex Education

Almost all participants indicated that they have fair knowledge about sexuality and sex education. The majority suggested that they had their sex education through the school textbooks (although there was limited learning support from teachers), however most obtained detailed information after discussing with friends and internet including different social media.

“I think it was mainly through friends that I understood a lot about sex.” (Male participant, FGD 7)

Many suggested that it was easier to understand about sex while discussing with friends or through the access of internet.

“Now with smart phones in our hand, and with the use of internet searches, we can get more information about sex. We can have our own privacy and enough time to understand the things better.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

Participants also suggested that advertisements in the radio and TV have helped them know about different types of contraceptives.

“We now know many branded condoms [laugh] such as Manforce, and Durex ... We have also heard about female contraceptives used by women such as the pill.” (Male participant, FGD 5)

Participants often reported that the biggest barrier to getting information about sex is the taboo in the society. They felt while the younger generation doesn't consider discussing sex as a taboo, the older generation always hesitate to educate the youngsters about sex. Many shared that their schoolteachers themselves used to feel uncomfortable or that their parents didn't provide them enough information.

“When we used to have reproductive health classes in school, we used to feel shy. All the boys used to giggle, and all the girls would have their heads down.” (Female participant, FGD 4)

Many felt that Nepali society is more conservative when it comes to having healthy discussions on sex as compared to western countries.

“In western society they are more open and the people are taught about these (sex related) things from a young age and they consider it normal. But that's not the case in our [Nepali] society. Parents don't talk about such things with their kids.” (Male participant, FGD 8)

Sexual Information through Social Media

Almost all the participants admitted that they learnt in more depth about sex using the internet and through different social media platforms. However, they also admitted they learnt about sex in awkward ways such as through porn sites and other social media offering explicit sexual contents.

“I first learnt about sex while I was randomly going through the different websites on the internet. I accidentally came across the porn sites on the net. I was really shocked and also curious. So, watched it with a curiosity and learnt a lot about sex.” (Female participant, FGD 2)

Many also suggested that they have access to many closed groups in Facebook and Meme pages that have a lot of sexual contents, for example, one male participant said:

“There are some pages on Facebook where there are information on reproductive and sexual health. I have learnt through them.” (Male participant, FGD 6)

The use of mobile apps to get sexual health information is also popular among few participants.

“There’s this app I use to track my menstruation and it does provide good information on reproductive health.” (Female participant, FGD 3)

Although everyone suggested that they get a lot of information about sex in general from the social media, most mentioned that they get limited information from them. Upon further probing if they have enough knowledge about safe sex, and if they are misguided about it, they said the abundance of information on sex may create more interest, but they know how to filter the information. Many suggested having more social media platforms that openly discuss health and safe sexual habits would be beneficial.

Role of Social Media in Forming Romantic/Sexual Relationships

The majority thought that in modern society social media plays a crucial role in starting new relationships, be it just friendship or more intimate romantic relationships. The popular sites suggested by participants included Facebook messenger, WhatsApp, Viber and dating apps such as Tinder.

Most participants perceived that social media played a positive role in forming new relationships. They found it to be a convenient medium to start a relationship with someone and keep each other updated about everything anytime.

“It is particular an easier medium for people who are shy and cannot express themselves openly when they meet in person.” (Male participant, FGD 8)

“I have a girlfriend and we started talking through messenger. I had seen her in college but had never talked to her in person. However, we added each other on Facebook and started talking.” (Male participant, FGD 5)

Another female participant created an account due to curiosity:

“I had once opened an account in a dating app out of curiosity. I met a guy there. He was already in a relationship, and he too admitted that he was exploring that social media out of curiosity only. We talked a lot and now he is a good friend of mine. We are just friends and not into romantic relationship.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

Some participants added that their family members first met through social media and ended up marrying each other.

“My sister and brother both found their romantic partners through Facebook and now they are both married.” (Female participant, FGD 4)

Some of the participants also admitted that they are in sexual relationship and that it is easier to communicate about their sexual feelings through social media as you are connected all the time. A few perceived that it is natural to develop sexual feelings for someone after communicating with through for a long time.

“After you communicate very closely with someone for a long time, it is natural for you to develop sexual desires.” (Female participant, FGD 3)

A few also hinted that in general, posts on social media may arouse their sexual desires.

“When you see certain contents or pictures on social media, it is natural for you to feel a bit horny.” (Male participant, FGD 7)

Negative Experience on Social Media

Almost all participants shared that there are lots of bullying and inappropriate sexual behaviors on social media and considered it a cybercrime. While the male participants discussed the use of abusive languages on social media, female participants shared their firsthand experiences, or the ones of their close ones, related to sexual misconducts in social media.

*“I had accepted a friend request in Facebook from an unknown person, was chatting with him for long but all of a sudden, one day the guy send me a voice message with groups of guys talking lots of swear words such as F*** Words and used a lot of bad languages. So I blocked the person.”* (Female participant, FGD 2)

Another female participant shared how her friend was a victim of so-called ‘revenge porn’:

“A friend of mine, when she was in relationship with a guy, they had shared nudes. But when they broke up, the guy’s friends saw her pics and the pic went viral in the college.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

Upon enquiry how they handle such situations, the female participants appeared to be well aware of the actions to be taken. One female participant mentioned clear procedures in way of dealing with unwanted attention on social media:

“I first decide whether I want to add a stranger or not, and once added, if someone starts misbehaving then we can block them and report their page. And if that too don’t work then we can report to the cybercrime branch of the police.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

Another female participant highlighted being hacked as part of cybercrime as a start of online harassment and blackmail:

“Once a friend of mine had recorded private intimate videos with her boyfriend. Their account was then hacked. And the hacker started blackmailing her. She along with her boyfriend went to the cybercrime branch of the police to report the case...” (Female participant, FGD 2)

Upon enquiring about sexual assaults, unsafe sexual practices and increasing rates of abortions in the country, most participants perceived that it is mainly due to lack of education and awareness about such things instead of direct result of social media.

“There used to be rape in our grandfathers’ generation too. Back then they didn’t have social media.” (Female participant, FGD 4)

However, some suggested that as social media have become a common tool for forming romantic and sexual relationships, these may also have been indirectly promoting unsafe sexual behaviors, as outlined by this female participant:

“You get a lot of contents on YouTube and other media that says condoms are no good for sexual pleasure and also a lot about natural method on social media. So, in a way social media it is leading to such unsafe sexual behaviors.” (Female participant, FGD 1)

Discussion

This study which is perhaps a first of its kind in Nepal suggested that social media are widely used by young people, who consider it as an important way to communicate and learn about sexual and reproductive health and other general health topics. This study also reflected that social media offer an important platform to form romantic relationships among young people and they perceived it to have a positive role. There is however evidence to suggest that social media and internet platforms might also have negative health consequences such as violence, suicide ideation, bullying, revenge porn, and coupled with less parental monitoring (Borzekowski, 2006; Houlihan & Houlihan, 2014; Bond & Tyrrell, 2021). Our participants were aware of these negative aspects and they seemed to be well informed about ways to overcome the negative effects of social media. One possible explanation would be that our participants are well educated.

Almost participants gained knowledge about sex through different sources including social media, however authenticity or quality of the information available on social media is another issue and readers requires good level of literacy skills. They reported school education and having discussions with friends as their main sources of sex education. However, they also highlighted the awkwardness they felt while sex education was being taught. Similar sentiments of embarrassment were previously reported in Nepal (Pokharel et al., 2006; Niraula, 2021) and elsewhere including Mongolia (Roberts et al. 2005) and the Scotland (van Teijlingen et al., 2007). Sex and relationship education is a health promotion challenge, and this study suggests the need for a health-facilitator-led-sex-and-relationship-education program to counteract (or complement) social media information, to help young people improve their sexual health knowledge, attitudes, and experiences (Acharya et al., 2017).

Participants felt that the internet in general and social media in particular were helpful tools to help understand the facts in depth. Many also suggested that their first experiences understanding sex was through their accidental use of sites with explicit sexual information on the internet. Both genders also admitted having consciously used internet and social media to gain more information about sex and they reflected on it as a positive and helpful experience. A previous systematic review and meta-analysis reported a strong association between exposure to sexual contents in online media and sexual behaviors among young people (Smith et al., 2016). This stresses that message about safe sex practice through social media are necessary and parents should be aware of the effect of social media use on sexual behaviors so that they can monitor, and, if necessary, intervene. Romo and colleagues (2017) reported that parental discussions of privacy settings were found to be protective.

This study provides both positive and negative perspectives of the social media use among young people. However, it does not conclude that social media has a direct role in the increase of unsafe sexual practices. A USA study about social media use and sexual risk behaviors of young people reported that those exposed to sexual health messages on social media were more likely to have used condoms or contraception at last intercourse (Stevens et al., 2017). Social

media are popular and commonly used by young people, there is potential for social media to be used for health promotion, including for potentially sensitive subjects such as sex education.

Participants of this study also seemed well informed about safe sexual practices and opined that lack of awareness or lack of education as a direct cause of unsafe sexual practices rather than the role of social media alone. While they admitted that social media are an important medium to initiate sexual relationships in present context, most had a very individualistic view and felt that it varies between individuals on who chooses safe and healthy practices. They also cited that instead of social media it is the mindset of the individuals that causes sexual misconducts on the social media or in real world.

Female participants of this study seemed to have experienced more sexual misconducts through social media than males. The majority of female participants shared their stories of encountering sexually abusive languages, of men sending sexually explicit pictures through social media, or of negative consequences of recording their intimate moments with their sexual partners. However, all female participants were aware of such actions as cybercrime and had faith that action can be taken by blocking the user and reporting them to the police.

This study has certain limitations. First, it only explores the perceptions of urban young people of Nepal's capital. Including semi-urban and rural young people would have provided a broader set of perspectives on social media's role in partnership formation and unsafe sexual practices. Secondly, this study only explored the perceptions of males and females. Perspectives from the young people identifying themselves as third gender would have provided in-depth information about the role of social media in their sexual behaviors. Thirdly, the FGDs naturally inclined towards heterosexual relationships and lacked information about the sexual behaviors and experiences of social media among those with homosexual or bisexual relationships. Despite the limitations, the study provides insights into the perspectives of the young people about sex, sexual relationships and their experience and perceptions related to the use of social media.

Conclusion

Social media are widely used by the young people in Kathmandu Valley including for establishing romantic and sexual relationships. However, it doesn't necessarily mean that social media are directly leading to unsafe sexual behaviors among young people. It is the lack of awareness and inadequate education about sex that is resulting in unsafe sexual practices. Moreover, adequate information on safe sex practices seems limited. Sex and sexuality are still a taboo subject to discuss in a family environment in many traditional societies like Nepal. We suggest disseminating sex education through social media may be effective in terms of both reaching large young population and easy access. We however acknowledge that many young people in rural areas of Nepal may not access to social media. A two-pronged health promotion approach can be beneficial. The first one aimed at parents/family members to make them aware of the limited or mixed quality of sex education on social media. Secondly, one aimed at young people to offer them access to high quality sex and relationship education at school settings partly to counteract the poor information on this topic on the web. Further studies among the young people from peri-urban and rural areas and with the sexual minority groups could provide a more holistic picture of social media's role and its influence on sexual relationships among young people.

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