

Internet-Mediated Dating/Romance of Mauritian Early Adolescents: A Grounded Theory Analysis

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Abstract

This study focused on describing the ecology of Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance. It used a grounded theory analysis of 136 narrative interviews and eight focus group discussions from Mauritian early adolescents (10-14 years old). The main findings were that (a) within a conservative society like Mauritius, cyberspace has become the new secret environment for early adolescents to experience, understand, learn and fantasise dating/romantic behaviour; (b) Internet-mediated dating/romantic patterns described by the early adolescents in Mauritius is somewhat similar to those patterns identified in face-to-face dating/romance within the western context; (c) contrary to some common beliefs, Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance is not idealised by sexual activities, but rather by the approval of their parents for relationships, marriage and having children.

Keywords: Mauritius; Internet; romance; early adolescence; grounded theory

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Introduction

The island of Mauritius has a population of about 1.2 million (50% women) and covers an area of 1,865 square kilometres. At July 2004, the total number of early adolescents (age 10-14) in Mauritius was estimated to be around 108,949, of whom 55,251 were male (CSO 2004). In terms of economy, Mauritius has undergone a deep transformation over the last 25 years from mono-crop (sugar) production into a diversified economy built on five pillars: sugar, textile, tourism, financial and information and communication technologies services (ICFTU-AFRO 2006). As from the year 2000, Mauritius entered a new phase of development, one that could be described as a technology-based society.

Childnet International (2003: 3) reports: "The Mauritian Government is actively encouraging computer ownership/access and Internet use in Mauritius as part of an ambitious programme to turn Mauritius into a CyberIsland". Consequently, young people in Mauritius are very much attracted by new technologies. Mobile phones, computers and computer-based technologies have become the new craze for early adolescents in Mauritius. It could be said that more than 90% of adolescents have access to the Internet in Mauritius (Childnet International 2003). The National Computer Board (2003) shows that adolescents are more likely than any other age group to use the Internet at home, and e-mail/chat is the most popular activity. In fact, more than 9% of children below the age of 12 years old were surveyed as users of the Internet (National Computer Board 2000). It is also known that a number of early adolescents access the Internet from various Cyber-café's, which are mushrooming around Mauritius. However, use of the Internet by early adolescents in schools is restricted to academic related tasks only (International Telecommunications Union 2004).

Mauritius is considered to be a conservative society. Early adolescent's dating/romance is still a taboo subject and is severely sanctioned by parents and responsible parties like teachers (Mauritius Institute of Health 1996). Generally speaking, Mauritian early adolescents are often left without formal sex education, and many opinion leaders do not tolerate early adolescents' romance/dating in public spaces (University of Mauritius 1989). However, there are clear indications in the local press that a proportion of Mauritian early adolescents are sexually active and have dating partners (see L'Express 2006a; 2006b)

The paradox is that a type of moral conservatism prevails at the same time as liberal access to, and use of, the Internet is being promoted. The Internet is certainly breaking down cultural barriers by bringing information, communication and opportunities to Mauritian early adolescents. A common belief shared by many local people is that formal sanctioning of dating/romantic activities by adults is leading early adolescents to pursue such relationships in secret within cyberspace. In fact, in Mauritius there is a remarkable intergenerational digital divide and therefore cyberspace is, to some extent, out of certain types of parental control (Childnet International 2003). In this sense, the Internet is providing a new dimension to early adolescents' dating/romantic relationships in a conservative, but technology-driven Mauritian society. Particularly, there is a belief among some people in Mauritius that early adolescents are driven towards Internet-mediated dating/romance in pursuit of sexual activities.

In fact, the establishment of meaningful social relationships during early adolescence is referred to by some researchers as a fundamental need and a crucial activity for healthy

youth development (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Gross, Juvonen & Gable 2002; Prezza, Guisepina & Dinelli 2004). Dating/romantic relationships are a central aspect of most early adolescents' social worlds (Erikson 1968; Brown, Feiring & Furman 1999; Coleman & Hendry 1999; Shulman & Kipnis 2001; Bouchey & Furman 2003). According to Furman and Wehner (1993) early dating/romantic experiences are central in the social life and emotional experiences of adolescents. Montgomery and Sorell (1998: 677) write: "Early romantic experiences are believed to play a central role in the development of the adolescent's self-identity and capacity for intimacy".

Hardey (2004) states that the Internet provides a new mode of meeting people and forming relationships and, as such, is likely to become increasingly common as a means of facilitating relationship formation. Furthermore, Merkle and Richardson (2000: 187) argue: "When one examines this developing civilisation of virtual worlds and cyber-relationships, it becomes apparent that some interpersonal relationships have experienced a transformation during the last decade of the twentieth century." For example, through the Internet people can interact over greater distances in a shorter period of time and at less expense than in the past and therefore are able to maintain online romantic relationships (Ben Ze'ev 2004; Lawson & Leck 2006). The Internet is believed to have altered our understanding of dating/romantic relationships (Ben Ze'ev 2004).

According to Cornwell and Lundgren (2001) continued research on the dynamics of romantic relationships which are formed through the Internet, represent an important research focus and one that will be increasingly important in the future. In a similar vein, Merkle and Richardson (2000:188) state: "...currently a large existing literature base on computer mediated communication, Internet culture, and Internet relationships, exists. However, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research specifically dealing with romantic Internet relationships." Levine (2000: 573) also states: "Although there are many observations...and assumptions based on literature about offline attraction, there is very little, if any, empirical research that has been done on the nature and progression of online attraction." Currently, there is no single piece of research that has focused on looking at early adolescents' Internet mediated dating/romantic patterns specifically outside the western context.

In particular, dating/romantic relationships can be seen as important contexts for learning and understanding early adolescent sexuality (Coleman & Hendry 1999). Some social scientists argue that during early adolescence, dating/romance often serves as an avenue for participation in sexual activity (Miller & Moore 1990; Brown, Feiring & Furman 1999; Harper et al. 2004). According to many researchers, dating/romantic relationships have a peculiar intensity and the intensity can be marked by expressions of affection - including physical ones and perhaps, the expectation of sexual relations (Reis & Shaver 1988; Brown, Feiring & Furman 1999). However, Coleman and Hendry (1999) write:

One of the criticisms that is sometimes levelled at academic researchers engaged in studying sexuality in young people is that there is far too much emphasis on behaviour (on who has done what at which age), and too little interest in the meaning of sexual relationships. It is important, therefore, to pay some attention to ideas of love, romance and intimacy (p. 105).

Given that early adolescent sexuality is better understood within social contexts, developing an understanding of Internet mediated dating/romance might help social scientists to better explain early adolescents' sexual behaviours, activities and risk taking and therefore be better prepared to provide appropriate supportive interventions and services. For example, Albright and Conran (2003: 42) opine: "an understanding of the stages of engagement in online relationships can offer a framework for therapists working with individuals..."

Thus, this study focuses mainly on the ecology of the Mauritian early adolescents' Internet mediated dating/romance. Such a focus might better equip policy makers who are working on child safety and protection as well as early adolescent sexuality in Mauritius. Focusing on this specific area might also make a valuable contribution towards filling the existing gap within social science discourses on the scientific study of early adolescents' Internet mediated dating/romance. By using grounded theory this research also allow patterns of behaviour to emerge from the data, rather than being forced to comply with pre-existing assumptions about the nature of dating/romantic relationships among the Mauritian early adolescents in this new social environment.

Materials and Methods

The main aim of the study was to explore the ecology of the Mauritian early adolescents' Internet mediated dating/romance. The specific research questions driving this study were as follows:

- How do Mauritian early adolescents construe Internet-mediated dating/romance?
- In the narratives of respondents, what are the main stages in the process of early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance?
- At each of the stages of Internet-mediated dating/romance, as construed by the respondents in their narratives, what are the main striking issues?
- How does Internet-mediated dating/romance construed by Mauritian early adolescents evolve?

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was considered to be appropriate. Two specific qualitative data collection techniques were used in this study; narrative interviews (NIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). In order to cater for validity, the findings from the NIs were brought back to the participants in the form of FGDs. This strategy was to check whether the participants would agree, in a collective setting, with the findings that had been gathered from individuals. Participants' validation strategies fed the findings back to the participants to see if they regarded the findings as a reasonable account of their experience (Mays & Pope 1995). According to Brink (as referenced in Long & Johnson 2000) the use of respondent validation ensures stability. Thus FGDs were used mainly used as a strategy for validation.

Narrative research methods use oral and written narratives as a tool for collecting data from research participants. In written narrative research participants are asked to reflect on specific issues and then write down the narratives (Nygren & Blom 2001). Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) describe narrative interviewing as a qualitative method used to stimulate interviewees or study participants to express their experiences of, and views on, the topic. Murray (2003: 113, referring to Murray 1999; and Sarbin 1986) points out: "... we are born into a storied world, and we live our lives through the creation and exchange of narratives".

As a qualitative method, narrative research has gained enormous popularity among health and education researchers (Clandinin & Connelly 2004). In fact, the World Health Organisation (1993) states that the written narrative research method is identified as an appropriate tool to seek answers for exploratory questions which are sensitive in nature, and importantly, when research participants are early adolescents. For more than 10 years, narrative methods have been used successfully to research sexuality-related issues with early adolescents (World Health Organisation 1993).

In particular, researching with young people requires flexibility and creativity on the part of both the researcher and the 'data collection' approaches (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller 2005). Narrative method provides relatively more flexibility than other conventional techniques of data collection, such as in-depth interviews or self-administered quantitative questionnaires. In particular, when using narrative methods, research participants are given the opportunity to write around certain issues and not forced to respond to specific questions. Narrative method is also creative in nature. In fact, young people are given the opportunity to express their creativity through writing/narrating/relating/expressing freely.

Narrative, as research tool, provides rich data on the meaning of peoples' understanding and experiences, and facilitates the accumulation of baseline data for further exploration into peoples' attitudes and perceptions on particular issues. Murray (2003) points out that narrative accounts are not emitted in a vacuum; rather, they are encouraged and shaped by a certain social context. In other words, narrative interviews are believed to allow research participants to construct meanings and explanations from a real social context and not an imaginary one.

Moreover, Frid, Öhlén and Bergbom (2000: 697) state: "Through narrating, reality and its problem may be reformulated by viewing reality as a dynamic process". In essence, the use of the narrative research method enables researchers to gain access to, and develop an understanding of, the study participants' meanings and experiences of the world, and in particular, the social and informational environments that influence their construction of social realities (Bates 2004: 20). The world of narration does not drift freely, but is anchored and related to the lived world of the narrator (Frid, Öhlén & Bergbom 2000). Elbaz-Luwisch (1997: 78) opines: "...narrative research implies not only an alternative way of acquiring knowledge but also constitutes an alternative way of conceptualising human nature".

Theoretical Sampling and Participants

Theoretical sampling constitutes the core of qualitative analysis in the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (see description in Boeije 2002). In a similar vein, Thompson (1999: 816) explains: "In qualitative research, sampling is guided not by the need to generalize about people but rather by the need to select subjects and data likely to generate robust, rich, and deep levels of understanding. It is systematic but non-probabilistic sampling". Theoretical sampling does involve the purposeful selection of a sample in the initial stages (Coyne 1997). Usually, in theoretical sampling researchers look for groups where social phenomena can be studied and where the research can begin. Therefore, theoretical sampling does make use of purposeful selection, in its early stages.

In principle, qualitative research aims to reflect the diversity within the given population (Kuzel 1992). Indeed Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that a maximum variation in sampling is the preferred strategy for constructivist inquiry. A series of groups from secondary schools and youth centres was therefore identified as a potential sample for this study. The groups were from very diverse backgrounds (See Appendix 1). Both urban and rural areas were included, as well as participants both in-school and out- of-school (through Youth Centres), and finally, three different sets of school groups (boys, girls, and mixed), were identified to ensure a wide range and variety of groups for data collection.

Sampling in qualitative research is based on the evolution of the theory being developed. The researcher collects data from the field until saturation is achieved, that is, when the codes fully fit the emerging theory from the data. As Duchscher and Morgan (2004: 610) point out: "Naturally, returning to the field for further data ceases when individual codes are saturated, elaborated upon, and fully integrated into the emerging theory". On this issue,

Charmaz (2000: 265) states: "...the aim of this sampling (theoretical) is to refine ideas, not to increase the size of the original sample. Theoretical sampling helps us to identify conceptual boundaries and pinpoint the fit and relevance of our categories". Therefore in qualitative research, sample size is based on saturation and data collection is stopped when data categories have been exhausted (Endacott 2005).

The researcher ensured that data were collected from at least one of the group from each of the set as identified in the initial sample (Appendix 1). The intention was to collect data from a diverse population. The sampling method chosen at the initial stage of this research was therefore purposive in nature. However, once data were gathered from the purposively chosen sample, it was ascertained that there was enough data for theoretical saturation. However, to make sure that all the diverse groups were represented in the study, data were collected from at least one of each group per set (such as one group from Set A, one group from Set B, and so on). Thus, the resulting sample size (after data were completed for theoretical saturation) was 136 NIs and 8 FGDs (see Appendix 2).

In particular, theoretical saturation was felt to be reached, when each of the concepts and categories had no new data that was any different from what was already found in the analysis. In this sense, when 136 NIs from all the diverse group of respondents were analysed, the researcher observed a repetition in the information obtained. Given that some narratives from the early adolescents were not adequately and clearly expressed, quite a large number of NIs had to be analysed before the theoretical fit was observed. As mentioned earlier, the FGDs were mainly used as a strategy for participant validation. Therefore, the researcher ensured that all sets (from A to H as per Appendix 1) were given the chance to validate what had been gathered during the NIs. Thus, this was how the number of FGDs was determined to be eight.

The research participants (both for the NIs and FGDs) were adolescents in the age range 10 to 14, with the majority (about 70%) being 13 years old. Most of the participants (97%) were from secondary schools; and a small group (3%) were from out of school. The FGD participants were volunteers, who were obtained from those who participated in the NIs. In order to participate in this study, early adolescents had to provide consent, as well as that of their parents, and their school/youth centre directors. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, all other ethical issues (anonymity, privacy, no harm, right to refuse participation at any time, approval from an ethical board and so forth) were carefully considered during the research process.

Procedure and Measures

Each research participant was provided with a floppy disk with some open-ended questions and a story-type narrative task in word format. The open-ended questions and the narrative task were framed so that the early adolescents would have to narrate (compose written narratives) about Internet-mediated dating/romantic issues. The specific research questions driving this study informed the construction of narratives. For instance, some of the questions/tasks in the NIs were as follows: Do you have (a) friend/s on the Internet? If yes, tell me about how the person/s is/are (without revealing name/s)? Do you know someone who has met a friend from the Internet? If yes, what do they know about the person/s? What can you say about early adolescents (10-14 years old) meeting others online? Narrate a story about a boy or girl meeting someone who s/he has contacted through the Internet (Make it as realistic as possible based on what is happening around you). Tell how they met on the Internet. What happens when they are interacting on the Internet? How and why did

they arrange the face-to-face meetings, when and where they met? What happened during the meeting etc?

More than 75% of the respondents were able to provide full narrations about Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships. Those research participants who did not know certain aspects asked in the narratives, were briefed to write 'Don't Know': about 40% of respondents wrote 'Don't Know' at least once in their narratives. However, most of the respondents (more than 75%) were able to describe an Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationship.

During the FGDs, research participants were given questions on issues that required participant validation and also some probing for clarity and support on Internet-mediated dating/romantic. The FGD questions were mainly on the early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating patterns, venues and outcomes. The questions (both in the NIs and FGDs) were prepared as an initial tool. As per the rule of the grounded theory, several amendments were made to the questionnaire after each successive data collection. In other words, some new questions were added and some removed depending on what needed to be known and what had reached saturation.

In order to explore the ecology of early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance, a grounded theory analysis of the collected data was carried out. The grounded theory analysis was based on Glaser's (1978) non-linear method of theory generation through data analysis. The basic components of the non-linear method of theory building started with the theoretical sampling (as mentioned earlier). Data analysis was therefore carried out after a layer of data was obtained from a group of participants from the set. The data analysis started with theoretical coding through identifying familiarity by looking at the inter-relationships across the different types of open coding. For the open coding, say for example in a NI, the following quotation was gathered from a research participant: "*Alan first chatted with Nella on Servihoo. Days went by and both chatted more and more. They learned more about each other. They decided to meet after a month of chatting with each other*". Then, based on this particular quotation several open codes such as 'Building Relationship', 'Learning', 'Face-to-Face Meeting' were selected with the help of Atlas-ti 5.0.

Once an adequate level of similarity was achieved, then these open codes were meaningfully linked together through theoretical codes (Connell & Lowe 1997). To have an idea of what an adequate level of similarity was, the network building capability of the Atlas-ti 5.0 was used. The next step was the constant comparative analysis. At this stage the theoretical categories were created through a process of tentative conceptualisation whereby categories were created and then theoretically sampled to see how they fit across new data (Glaser 1978). For the sake of maximising the constant comparative analysis, findings, reports and supports from other studies were used from time to time. In this connection, an articulation of discussion between the findings from this research and other studies/reports was carried out throughout the analysis of the gathered data. Another essential step within this process of grounded theory analysis was 'theoretical memoing'. Theoretical memoing involves theorizing the write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding (Connell & Lowe, 1997). Finally, the memos were sorted into batches and linked so as to create a theoretical outline of the connections across categories.

The emerging theory on the ecology of Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance was built, as shown in Figure 1, by looking at the conceptual relationships. Within the theory-making process, it was ensured that the theory was conceptually dense (Strauss & Corbin 1994). That is, the theory was made with many conceptual relationships.

These conceptual relationships were therefore embedded in a context of descriptive and conceptual writing, as presented in the results section of this paper.

With a view to providing support and examples, some gathered quotations were also included in the presentation of the analysis. It is worth noting that the quotations are presented here as they are gathered from the research participants; hence, with some vocabulary, typing and grammatical mistakes. Most of the quotations are in English, but research participants were free to write in French or Creole (Mauritian lingual-franca).

Results

Findings

In fact, very few research participants narrated that they had met a dating/romantic partner online. However, in the FGDs most respondents pointed out that online dating/romance was common among certain early adolescents. The FGD participants also highlighted that they were aware of some of their peers who had gone to meet others after their online interactions. From the collected data, Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships seem to progress through six major stages, as shown in Figure 1 (see over page). It is worth noting that there may be some overlapping and leap-frogging within the process; nevertheless, for most early adolescents the following schema seems to depict the general progression of Internet-mediated dating/romance. In addition, not all relationships go through the whole process up to the final stage 6; some of them remain or terminate at the initial stages. Moreover, the whole process is not necessary a linear trajectory, as shown in the drawn schema. Nevertheless, the schema is based on how research participants narrated the progression of early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships – from the beginning to the end – in linear form.

Stage 1. The First Contact: Chance, Curiosity and Third-Parties

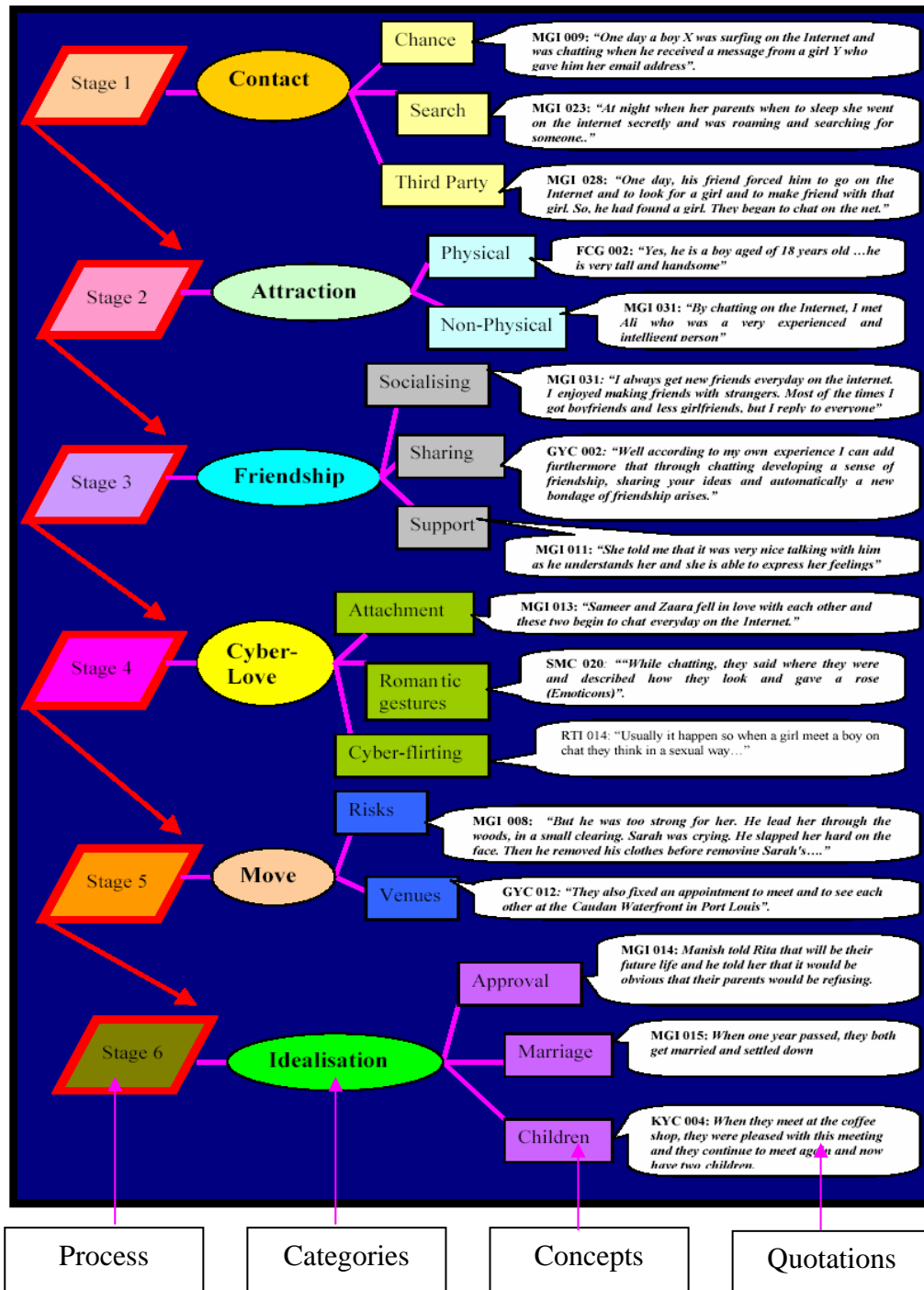
A notable proportion of the research participants wrote that getting into contact with an online dating/romantic partner happened by chance. Specifically, early adolescents narrated that while using e-mail, chat, and e-messenger, people accidentally came into contact with other people. Some quotations in relation to this particular issue are given below:

“One day a boy X was surfing on the Internet and was chatting when he received a message from a girl Y who gave him her email address. And from now girl Y and boy X became ...boyfriend and girlfriend and decided to meet somewhere as boy X wanted to see how girl Y looks like. They settled the date and place to meet and their first meeting took place”.

“Once there was a boy who lived in Mauritius was surfing on the chatting on the internet and by chance came in contact with a girl who was living in France”.

A group of early adolescents narrated that the first contact with the Internet-mediated dating/romantic partner happened by curiosity. In this connection, research participants reported that early adolescents are eager to know about how online dating/romance is done, and in particular how it feels to be in such a relationship. Some quotations which describe this process are provided over the page:

Figure 1. The stages of Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships



“One day, she was surfing when she came across a name, which read Fuckus. She thought it was rather an interesting name. So, she thought to chat with that guy...today they are happy together”.

“At home the curious girls send an email in which there was their email address. Then they started chatting. They fixed a meeting and they gave a phone number”.

From the findings, it could be said that early adolescents are sometimes driven by curiosity while being logged on to the Internet. In fact, new things easily fascinate early adolescents (Thompson 1990). Research participants reported that the Internet is fascinating mainly because of its vastness, rapidity and power. In particular, the interviewees stated that things could happen very quickly on the Internet. For example, a few of them reported that they thought it was amazing that they could perform searches to look for e-mail addresses from Mauritius, and that within a fraction of a second a large quantity of data from all around the globe was retrievable in this way. Such characteristics of the Internet seemed to incite curiosity among Mauritian early adolescents.

Another group of research participants wrote that the first contact with an Internet-mediated dating/romantic partner was often initiated through the help (or pressure) of a third party (usually close friends or siblings). In this context, some of the statements gathered from the research participants are as follows:

“He met the girl by Internet by his friend help”.

“I once asked one of my friend to give some hints on how to make friends on internet. Then she gave someones Biodata. Then I entered friend with him.... we are in love now”.

“One day, his friend forced him to go on the Internet and to look for a girl and to make friend with that girl...he had found a girlfriend.”

This part of the findings is in line with several studies carried out in other contexts. For example, Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (2001) found that adolescent romantic relationships develop within the web of relational contexts. Similarly, Harper et al. (2004: 357) report “in addition to friends being important in the partner acquisition process, youth revealed that close friends also play a significant role during the course of dating relationships”. In particular, several other studies have pointed out that peer groups play a significant role in the initiation, frequency and intensity of romantic relationships in early adolescence (Furman 1989; Brown 1999; Connolly & Goldberg 1999; Kuttler & La Greca 2004). According to Connolly and Johnson (1996), without access to contacts through a third party, adolescents are limited in their formation of romantic and dating relationships.

Stage 2. Attraction: Physical and Non-Physical

In this particular research, the female participants commonly referred to the physical appearance of being ‘tall’ and ‘handsome’ as a criterion of attractiveness. For the majority of the male participants, physical attraction was characterised by the ‘beauty’ and ‘sexiness’ of girls. A few of the research participants narrated how young people try to chat about their physical appearance to attract dating/romantic partners over the Internet. For example, a number of interviewees reported that on the Internet many early adolescents describe what their bodies and parts of their bodies look like. Specifically, some research participants stated that they believe some early adolescents deliberately promote themselves by constructing a different physical appearance – depending on whom they are interacting with – over the Internet. Some of the quotes which describe this are as follows:

Female participants:

“Yes, he is a boy aged of 18 years old. he is very tall and handsome”

“I have even seen him by internet and he is very handsome”

“... they chat... Y claimed himself to be a handsome boy of 15 from a known college”.

Male participants:

“Yes, she is a girl and a beautiful girl”

“The girl sent a –photo of hers. She was a beautiful girl.”

“When the boy saw the beautiful girl something happen...”

Physical attraction has been identified as one of the features characterizing adolescent romance by some researchers (Merkle & Richardson 2000; Shulman & Kipnis 2001; Lawson & Leck 2006). According to Merkle and Richardson (2000) physical attractiveness is often what sparks initial interest in another person and leads each party to want to continue to interact. From their study carried out in a different context, Lawson and Leck (2006) report that the Internet provides a medium for people to present themselves in a way that they think is flattering and thus increase the likelihood of forming a relationship. In his book, Ben-Ze'ev (2004: 140) writes: “Physical attractiveness is usually the stumbling block for transforming online relationships into offline ones”.

Some research participants narrated that early adolescents found the right dating/romantic partner because of the ideas, attitudes, values and opinions that they share. A small number of those early adolescents, who mentioned offline meeting after online contact, wrote about a feeling of attraction because of the non-physical characteristics of the partner (such as intelligence, caring and understanding). They therefore confirmed that non-physical characteristics also play an important role within Internet-mediated dating/romance. For a large number of research participants, seeing photos of the other person was not a sufficient motivating factor on it's own in order to meet face-to-face, since personality was also considered as an important element. In this respect, some participants wrote the following statements:

“By chatting on the Internet, I met Ali who was a very experienced and intelligent person.”

“...A boy very intelligent, sensible and straight forward...she began to love her [him] more and more...”

“She told me that it was very nice talking with him as he understands her and she is able to express her feelings...”

Donn and Sherman (2002) argue that it is the lack of traditional social cues (such as physical appearance), which makes Internet-mediated communication ideal for forming genuine social relationships, such as dating/romantic. Several other researchers have found that people try to discuss each other's shared similarities, express liking and exchange humour as a means of attracting others (Brehm 1992; Wanzer & Booth-Butterfield 1996; Wallace 1999). From his research, Mantovani (2001: 239) writes: “...on the Internet, humour can be a powerful force in interpersonal attraction, particularly because it isn't overshadowed by the physical appearance factor”.

The findings on attraction (both physical and non-physical) from this research are similar to those reported by other researchers. For example, Brehm (1992) states, that the first step towards a relationship is always the same: interpersonal attraction; and Cooper, Mcloughlin and Campbell (2000) assert that in cultures that emphasise physical attractiveness, the Internet provides a different way of developing attraction.

Stage 3: Friendship: Socialisation, Sharing and Support

In their narratives, almost all early adolescents mentioned friendship formation as an important phase within the process of Internet-mediated dating/romance. Most research participants described the beginning of the Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationship as a friendship phase in their narratives. Participants reported that the formation of friendship was an important phase just prior to the stage of dating/romance, as it allowed the persons involved to know each other without a great deal of emotional commitment and to develop trust and confidence. For the majority of these early adolescents, the nature of online friendship could be described as having three important elements: socialisation, sharing and support.

Early adolescents seem to initiate online friendship with a view to having more opportunities to socialise and, in particular, to have a good time, fun, laughter and to “feel good” in the company of their peers. Various ways were mentioned in which early adolescents socialise with each other over the Internet. For example, in addition to MUDs and MOOs (multi-user text-based virtual realities accessible via the Internet), chat and messaging, there are many varieties of online games, such as pool, dominoes or scrabble, where early adolescents interact with their online friends. A few of the research participants wrote about these sorts of social interactions as an avenue for the development of stronger relationships. In this connection, the following quotations were gathered:

“I just love to chat with her because then we don’t have to fear parents and talk about anything secret...we felt at ease to speak about anything. We understand each other...”

“On chatting everyday and constantly they became good friends and the boy then told her truly. They had made an arrangement to meet each other through the phone as through the internet they had exchanged each others number”.

“The boy has met the girl when they were both chatting. First they were just friends and very often they send mails to each other. For the meeting they have met each other when they were at the university”.

A number of early adolescents wrote about sharing files, songs, lyrics, clips and posters among online friends, as a common online activity. Importantly, a few of them also referred to sharing of attitudes, beliefs and values through social interactions over the Internet. From the narratives, when early adolescents find someone who shares similar values, beliefs, attitudes and other social activities, the intensity of the friendship seems to move to a higher level. Some interesting quotes gathered from the narratives are given below:

“Well according to my own experience I can add furthermore that through chatting developing a sense of friendship, sharing your ideas and automatically a new bondage of friendship arises.”

“They started mailing each other and through the Internet ... Their friendship became very deep day by day as everyday she mailed Rajiv and told her everything she has done at school”.

“During that internet meeting they talked a lot about their lives and their relationship extended to lovers”

Several early adolescents wrote about supporting others over the Internet as a meaningful activity. In particular, a small number of adolescents referred to Internet chat as a relaxing environment, as the users receive emotional support from other chat-users. In this sense, a number of early adolescents described the online exchange of emotional support as a crucial marker for the shift from being a ‘friend’ to a ‘lover’. Some of the quotations related to this issue are provided below:

“Soon they were very good friend and related to each other their feelings and emotions”.

“They would meet to discuss their problems and there was a great understanding among them. This is why the love each other”

“When I am in difficulty, he helped me. He has a good behaviour and share all my happy moment sad moment with him. I feel he is the right boyfriend”.

When comparing this part of the data from other studies carried out in other contexts, many similarities could be observed in the findings. For example, Schulman and Scharf (as quoted in Shulman & Kipnis 2001: 338) found that “younger adolescents (14 and 16 year olds) perceived romantic relationships more in terms of friendship”. LaVoie et al. 1998 (also as quoted in Shulman & Kipnis, 2001: 337) described a continuum of dating status that starts from “close friends” via “casual dating” to “exclusive dating”. In addition to this, several other researchers have reported that during early adolescence, forming and maintaining friendship becomes important, as it serves numerous functions including the provision of intimacy, security and trust, instrumental aid and norm teaching (Brinthaup & Lipka 2002; Rubin et al. 2004). Lawson and Leck (2006: 206) argue: “The need to obtain companionship motivates people to seek out romantic relationships in a variety of ways, and the Internet is merely the latest technological development used by people to assist their romantic goals”.

Stage 4. Cyber-Love: Attachment, Romantic Gestures and Cyber-flirting

Most of the early adolescents narrated that once a close online friendship was developed, many young Internet users start experiencing a gradual shift towards a more intimate dating/romantic relationship, which could be termed as cyber-love. The research participants pointed out that the shift from being a close friend to a dating/romantic partner involved some skills, motivations and actions. From the gathered data, the early adolescents’ cyber-love could be described as having some specific characteristics such as attachment, romantic gestures and cyber-flirting.

According to some of the narratives, during the stage of cyber-love, early adolescents experienced a kind of attachment. In particular the attachment was described as a need for going on-line, meeting, interacting and sharing affection with someone. A few of the research participants reported that early adolescence is a critical period where they feel a lack of affection and therefore they feel attached to caring, loving and romantic environments, such as online chat. For a number of early adolescents, online chat is seen as an environment in which they can always choose or find someone who is caring, loving and understanding. Some of the quotations describe this below:

“...Almost everyday they would be on the net chatting with each other, telling what they have done during the day and about their personal life. By the time

passed they tell their real name. Afterwards when they were attached to each other...”

“Raj sent information about himself to Rani and Rani also did the same. Rani became fond of Raj. They were interested in each other”.

“One day a boy X was surfing on the Internet and was chatting when he received a message from a girl Y who gave him her email address. And from now girl Y and boy X became close friends and they extended their relationship to boyfriend and girlfriend ...they talked a lot about their lives and their relationship extended to lovers ...these two lovers could not lived without each other”

This part of the research findings is similar to some of the findings from other contexts. For example, from a study carried out in a western context on adults, Levine (2000) writes that in the virtual world, people who develop relationships tend to be online at regular intervals. She also reports that among regular users of the Internet, an increase in social interaction with close friends over the Internet occurs and the level of intimacy tends to increase (Levine 2000). Ben-Ze'ev (2004: 53) describes this phenomena as 'detached attachment' – that is, “online personal relationships are characterised by physical distance and emotional closeness”.

According to analysis of the narratives, it seems that progress towards the establishment of a dating/romantic relationship involves some online romantic gestures. The research participants narrated that romantic gestures work towards reinforcing the burgeoning interest in intimate companionship. In particular, young people mentioned about expressing online romantic gestures in several ways, such as sending/exchanging e-cards, smilies, emoticons and cyber-buddies. From early adolescents' responses, it is evident that chat rooms and e-mails are the most common places to see and observe such online gestures.

Romantic gestures convey a lot of emotions (Cerpas 2002). From their studies, Albright and Conran (2003) write:

Attraction in face-to-face relationships is often communicated through playful banter and smiles. Online, the banter continues, and the smiles are communicated through various emoticons, which can denote everything from a regular smile to a huge grin (p. 46).

In particular, romantic gestures are closely linked with another major romantic/dating-related activity within Internet-mediated romantic/dating relationships of early adolescents, commonly referred to as 'Cyber-flirting'.

Flirting is commonly defined as the initial actions one takes to convey a message of sexual interest or attraction (Whitty & Carr 2003). For Ben-Ze'ev (2004: 149) cyber-flirting is “a type of verbal dance in which the boundaries of sexuality are not clearly drawn”. In this sense, cyber-flirting is different from online romantic gestures, in that in the former the interest of sexual attraction might not be present. In online romantic gestures there are messages about love, whereas in cyber-flirting the dominant message is about sex. Dating/romantic relationships usually involve sexual attraction, and therefore it is quite normal that those who are involved in the establishment of such relationships take steps to convey the message of sexual interest and attraction to their respective partners (Alapack et al. 2005).

Research participants described cyberspace as a convenient place to initiate intimate interactions, as many early adolescents felt less shy in disclosing their feelings of sexual interest and attraction. For the vast majority of early adolescents, chat was the usual place where people started to flirt. A number of research participants highlighted that 'cyber-flirting'

started only after several initial contacts, through which trust and confidence levels were built up in the Internet-mediated relationship. According to a few early adolescents 'cyber-flirting' usually progressed from initial interactions in the 'open chat room', to invitations to join a 'private chat room'. It is important to point out that a large number of the research participants revealed that early adolescents are curious to experience new things and that quite a number of early adolescents go to private chat rooms with strangers. In addition, a small number of research participants perceived cyber-flirting as a safe, unreal and fun-seeking activity. The following quotes describe this in such a way:

"Usually it happen so when a girl meet a boy on a private chat they think in a sexual way..."

"When I was chatting with a boy in a chat room he was talking about sex..."

For some researchers, cyber-flirting is related to a kind of play where early adolescents learn about developing a romantic relationship (Whitty & Carr 2003; Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Cyber-flirting allows young people to learn about sexual communication and negotiating sex. However, it is important to note that some cyber-flirting can become abusive, such as when it becomes online harassment.

Levine (2000: 572) states: "we all need human interaction and the virtual world does provide the necessary companionship, as well as a playground where all people can feel sexually desired, even those whom 'the rest of the world' has shunned". Whitty and Carr (2003), for example, state that the Internet provides many with the appearance of a safer environment; a safer space to play and experiment at flirting. According to Albright and Conran (2003: 46), "face-to-face, people may try to get the person away from the crowd, and into an intimate conversation. Online, a person may ask their online lover into a "private chat", which entails a conversation readable only by the two of them". Through such activities, therefore, some early adolescents get tempted, build confidence and develop intimacy in order to make a move from cyberspace to real space. In his book Ben Ze'ev (2004) states: "Some online communications use icons – termed 'emoticons' or 'smilies' – to signify the emotional states of the sender (p. 30) Further, he added that: "A typical development of cyberlove is... private chat, private e-mails, sending pictures" (p.155).

Stage 5. Move: Risks and Venues

The decision to move to face-to-face meeting is mainly driven by a feeling of attraction and the need to have some physical contact and more intimacy. For a few of the research participants, relationships in cyberspace were like virtual play, and the relationships were not considered to be something serious and fulfilling enough. In many narratives, arranging to date face-to-face is referred to as a move towards making the romantic relationship a bit more serious.

Studies carried out in other contexts and with different research audiences have reported that after some time Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships develop into face-to-face relationships. For example, Suler (2004) writes:

Cyberspace relating is... wonderful... but in the long run it's not ultimately fulfilling... especially when it comes to our most intimate relationships. Most people who develop close ...romances in cyberspace eventually want and need to meet their ...lover in-person (p. 8).

From her study, Levine (2000) reports: "Internet relationships can never wholly take the place of face-to-face interactions. There is too much to be gained from the touch and feel, the

human interaction with another person in the development of intimacy.” Young et al. (as quoted in Griffith 2000: 543) write: “what starts off as a simple e-mail exchange or an innocent chat room encounter can escalate into an intense and passionate “cyber-affair”.

According to a few of the research participants, it was quite normal that young people who had been involved in cyber romance or dating, at a certain point in time would like to meet face-to-face with the other person involved. Given the relatively small size of the island of Mauritius and a relatively good transport service – which is free for students – it was quite easy for young people to meet face-to-face. Meeting people face-to-face, in itself, is not a problem but, if early adolescents are not aware of the potential risks and are not careful about who and where they meet, then it could be problematic. Some of the quotes extracted from the narratives are given below:

“There was a time when everyday I was going on chat sites and everyday I was making friends. Some were good while others were bad. I got many invitations to go to meet them but I never accepted”.

“Many times those people ask you to meet them but I never met any. My cousin also usually chats on the Internet, making friends etc., keeping a distance. Some of the people may have bad intentions”.

“When finally one day they met, the girl saw that the man was very old and did not have right intentions.”

“But he was too strong for her. He lead her through the woods, in a small clearing. Sarah was crying. He slapped her hard on the face. Then he removed his clothes before removing Sarah's....”

“Then after they went to a hotel. There the boy had some sexual relationship with Rita”

“...they were both excited and when they met, to exhaust this level of adveralism, they had a sexual relationship without any protection (e.g. contraceptive pill or condom). Therefore the girl got severe problems afterwards”.

Given that Mauritius has a significant tourist industry, cheap bungalows, hotels, restaurants and other venues for entertainment can easily be found all around the island. However, it is worth noting that most of the research participants, who narrated the move to face-to-face meeting in their Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships, specified that public venues were their first dating places. This is quite important, as the risks involved in meeting strangers for the first time in public is relatively smaller than meeting in private venues such as bungalows and remote beaches.

From the gathered data, most of the dating venues were those that are commonly seen as romantic/dating venues in Mauritius. Surprisingly, public beaches were rarely mentioned as dating venues in the narratives. The chosen public venues – such as Pamplémousses Garden and Caudan Waterfront – are those that are regularly presented in the media and local romantic literature as being lovely and romantic venues. Moreover, places that are free such as bus stations, shopping malls and free public gardens or parks were also commonly referred to as dating venues. Some of the quotes illustrate this fact:

“One day Y asked X to meet him at ‘la gare’ (Bus Station) Rose Hill”.

“After some months, she was tired that she told the boy to meet her at Jardin de la Compagnie (public garden)”.

“They also fixed an appointment to meet and to see each other at the Caudan Waterfront in Port Louis”.

“So, they decided to meet each other one day at Pamplémousses garden”.

“ its not necessary when you go for the first time to go to ‘rented beach bungalows’ most of the times it's Caudan or watching films”

Stage 6. Idealisation: Approval, Marriage and Children

Quite a large number of research participants narrated meetings offline that had gone well and led to an ideal relationship. The nature of the idealised relationships appeared to have three major aspects: (a) approval of parents (b) marriage and (c) having two children. For quite a large number of research participants the approval of parents seemed to be a way to express the success of a love story that had made the transition from the private sphere to the public through main gatekeepers (their parents). It also confirms that cyberspace has become the new secret environment for early adolescents to experience, understand, learn and fantasise dating/romantic behaviour. Some of the quotations illustrating parental approval read as follows:

“They met and express their emotions and finally they told their parent about their experience”

“Both of them was surprised to see and to meet each other. Both of them talked to their parents”

“After meeting two to three time they fell in love and got married with the consent of their parents”

It seems that for some research participants, marriage signified the success of a dating/romantic relationship, as it was pointed out that a ‘true’ relationship between couples was one that was bonded through marriage. For them, marriage showed the seriousness of the relationship between the partners:

“So by chatting they decide to meet at the hotel “LE MERIDIEN” at two in the afternoon and by looking each other they agreed to marry”

“Finally, they got married due to Internet. What a love marriage!”

“And one day they fall in love with each another. Afterwards they meet and got married”.

The majority of the research participants idealised dating/romantic relationships as ending with having two children. The idealised relationship which included two children seemed to be influenced by social and cultural contexts. For decades, Mauritius has been campaigning on fertility and population control and therefore the ideal family in Mauritius has been depicted as a couple with two children (Wils & Prinz 1996). Therefore the majority of early adolescents’ perceptions of an ideal family could have been framed by this social and cultural context. In this respect, the quotations stated:

“Afterward they became lover then married and now Ravi is father of two sons.”

“They built their house and then they get married. Now they have 2 children...”

“...dating each other as lovers and later on they decided to get married ...they have two children. All this has happened just because of internet.”

“They were pleased with this meeting and they continue to meet again and now have two children.”

Several other studies have found that the early notions of romance are quite idealized (Connolly & Goldberg 1998; Montgomery & Sorell 1998; Bouchey & Furman 2003). It may be that early adolescents' idealisation of dating/romantic relationship is just a reflection of their age (Ben-Ze'ev 2004), but this is merely speculation at the moment. In the case of Mauritius, the idealisation of the dating/romantic relationship seemed to be conditioned by the socio-cultural context. In particular, in this research very few narratives idealised dating/romantic relationships as sexual relationships, and those that did contain sexual activities were linked to problematic outcomes such as rape, pregnancy and family breakdown.

General Discussion on Findings

This study is the first of its kind in Mauritius, therefore it was impossible to make any comparisons between this and other research. Further, the researcher was unable to identify any literature that described the process of early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships in other cultures. In the absence of Internet-mediated models, face-to-face dating/romantic relationship models of adolescents were used for comparison. In particular, Brown (1999), Connolly and Goldberg (1999), and Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (2001) have described models of adolescent romantic relationships in face-to-face settings. Their models of face-to-face adolescents' dating/romantic relationships could be summarised in four distinct phases:

- Initiation Phase: Physical attraction and desire are the prominent features
- Affiliation Phase: Boys and girls meet within mixed-gender groups
- Intimate Romantic Relationships Phase: Interaction between partners takes on the qualities of a dyadic relationship.
- Committed Relationships Phase: Commitment in the relationships is established.

Comparing face-to-face adolescent dating/romantic patterns to the one that was developed in this particular study (Internet-mediated), it was found that relationship progression is somewhat similar in both cases. Both cases involve initiation, becoming close, getting personal and then showing commitment. In both cases, emotions and desires involved. However, within Internet-mediated dating/romantic relationships, the rapidity, intensity and quality are very different from that of face-to-face ones. In this context, Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2002) write: “Given the interest adolescents naturally have in forming close relationships and the amount of time and emotional energy they put into their relationships, it is not surprising that the Internet has become another means by which young people expand their social networks and form close relationships with others”.

In addition, in Internet-mediated romantic/relationships, trust can be built without being physically in touch. For example, Lawson and Leck (2006) state that the Internet is a new social institution that has the ability to connect people who have never met face-to-face and is thus likely to transform the dating/romantic process. Moreover, within the Internet medium, dating partners can create false images of themselves (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Perhaps future research could compare and contrast the progression of early adolescent dating/romantic relationships in these two distinct contexts – face-to-face and Internet-mediated – to provide further clarity and empirical evidence.

Conclusion

In this technological era, the Internet plays a crucial role in romantic/dating relationships amongst early adolescents. This research makes the following contributions to the literature on the Internet and early adolescent behaviour:

- (a) within a conservative society like Mauritius, cyberspace has become the new secret environment for early adolescents to experience, understand, learn and fantasise dating/romantic behaviour
- (b) Internet-mediated dating/romantic patterns described by early adolescents in Mauritius is somewhat similar to those patterns identified in face-to-face relationships within a Western context
- (c) contrary to some common beliefs, Mauritian early adolescents' Internet-mediated dating/romance is not idealised by sexual activities, but rather by parental approval for relationships, marriage and having children.

The policy implications that could be considered from the findings of this research arise mainly from concern regarding online child safety and protection. Available figures (see National Computer Board 2003) confirm that the Internet is becoming a popular venue for children in Mauritius to interact with others. It could be said from the findings of this particular study that Mauritian early adolescents are secretly experiencing Internet-mediated dating/romantic behaviours. Within this context, there is a serious risk of Internet-mediated child abuse.

The collected evidence should be a cause for concern to Mauritian child protection workers and policy makers, in terms of child sexual abuse and exploitation; particularly in the light of 'Internet grooming' and the misuse of the Internet by child traffickers and predators (Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell 2004). Currently, there is no 'grooming law' in Mauritius. The United States Department of Labour (2006:1) recently reported that: "Mauritius has an estimated 2,600 child prostitutes and is a source and destination country for children trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation". Given the evidence contained in this paper and given that Mauritius is a small tourist-based country with a relatively good transport system, meetings arranged between early adolescents and strangers is relatively easy to accomplish.

Protecting children and looking after their welfare is a moral and legal responsibility of everybody and, more importantly, the State (Hetherington 1999; World Health Organisation 2003). Indeed, many countries, including Mauritius, have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which clearly stipulates the responsibilities of all stakeholders towards child safety and protection (United Nations 1989). In addition, the Mauritian National Children's Policy clearly establishes, amongst the aims of child protection measures, the protection of children from inappropriate and harmful contents (Childnet International 2003). Therefore, it is important to look at the implications of the main findings of this study, from the perspective of the rights of the child in relation both to their safety and protection.

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Appendix 1: Purposively Targeted Sample (8 Groups) for NIs and FGDs

	Urban	Rural	
Schools	<p>Boys (Set A)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SEC - Quatre-Bornes 2. SMC – Beau Bassin 3. RC – Port Louis 4. IC – Port Louis <p>Girls (Set C)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MI – Port-Louis 2. MC– Curepipe 3. QEC – Rose-Hill 4. SSS – Vacoas <p>Mixed (Set E)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MGI – Vacoas 2. MC – Curepipe 3. NE – Rose-Hill 4. SA – Rose-Hill 	<p>Boys (Set B)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SSS - R/Rempart 2. FB – Goodlands 3. EC - Flacq 4. SSS – Rose Belle <p>Girls (Set D)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CC - P/des Papayes 2. FG – Goodlands 3. SSS – Bambous 4. SSS – Flacq <p>Mixed (Set F)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. RTI Pamplemousses 2. UC– R/Rempart 3. BC– Flacq 4. HS – Rose-Belle 	
	Youth Centres	<p>(Set G)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. GYC 2. PYC 3. RYC 4. MYC 	<p>(Set H)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. RBYC 2. KYC 3. FYC 4. TYC

Appendix 2: Resulting Sample Where NIs and FGDs Were Carried Out

	Urban	Rural
Schools	Boys (Set A) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMC – Beau Bassin 	Boys (Set B) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSS - R/Rempart
	Girls (Set C) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QEC – Rose-Hill 	Girls (Set D) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FG – Goodlands
	Mixed (Set E) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MGI – Vacoas 	Mixed (Set F) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTI Pamplemousses
Youth Centres	(Set G) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GYC 	(Set H) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KYC