Silent Threats: Uncovering Parental Gaps in Understanding Online Sexual Exploitation and Its Public Health Implications

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Abstract

Children's lives have been profoundly changed by the explosion of digital technology, but it has also brought forth new dangers including crimes involving online sexual exploitation. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the degree of parental awareness and understanding regarding the risks of online sexual exploitation of children. Seven respondents with children under the age of eighteen who lived in Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, participated in in-depth interviews for this qualitative study. The results show that although the majority of parents are aware of the dangers of sexual crimes committed online, they still don't fully comprehend the types of digital crimes. Without actively seeking to expand their knowledge, most parents obtain information from government websites such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH). This study highlights the necessity of raising parental awareness through digitally adapted teaching platforms. This information is essential for prevention as well as for public health initiatives that safeguard the mental and emotional health of kids who are at risk of being sexually exploited online. Parents who receive digital literacy training can identify early indicators of online sexual abuse and offer victims early support. To fully address this issue, this study also recommends a cooperative strategy encompassing communities, family institutions, and the government.

Keywords: Children's Mental Health, Digital Exploitation, Online Sexual Crime, Parental Awareness.

Introduction

Children's lives have changed significantly because of the pervasive technological expansion. Technology has many advantages, but it also presents new risks, such online sexual crimes, which are extremely concerning for public health [10]. Online sexual exploitation has psychological repercussions that affect children's emotional and social development in addition to mental health, such as anxiety, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder [18].

Online sexual crimes against minors are a growing concern in Malaysia, particularly for kids who spend more time on social media and other technological platforms. Although parents and society at large are not entirely aware of the impact of this crime on children's physical and emotional well-being, it is crucial to raise awareness of the risks that children confront when using technology [6]. In Malaysia, 4% of children between the ages of 12 and 17 have experienced online sexual exploitation [17]. Public health is seriously threatened by this phenomenon, which calls for immediate action from all parties concerned. Children who are the victims of online sexual crime suffer emotional and psychological repercussions in addition to physical ones. According to [13], victims

frequently experience severe trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and despair, and a fear of social interaction. Children who see online sexual offenses may find it difficult to form positive social bonds, suffer academic setbacks, and engage in more delinquent behavior. Additionally, studies show that children who experience abuse online are more prone to distance themselves from friends and family and may experience long-term developmental problems [1].

This risk is further facilitated by children's growing usage of digital technology. Busy parents frequently give their kids unrestricted access to electronic gadgets without enough supervision, leaving them open to dangerous websites or apps. This makes the problem of "sharenting," in which parents inadvertently post their children's private information on social media, where it could be abused by nefarious people, worse [12]. Given that it pertains to the mental health of the country's youth, this issue is becoming more and more significant from a public health standpoint. The disturbance of mental health brought on by online sexual exploitation may result in higher medical expenses for social assistance and psychological treatment. In addition to that, this condition may lead to future social issues and increased teenage crime rates. Thus, it is essential to provide prevention initiatives that emphasize public awareness, especially among parents and guardians. To guarantee that parents and kids know how to defend themselves against online dangers and restrict exposure to damaging content, digital literacy education should be increased.

Malaysia's internet sexual crime statistics are becoming more and more alarming. In recent years, complaints about child sexual exploitation online have increased, according to a report by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). According to statistics, the number of cases of online grooming and sexual extortion has significantly increased. This underscores the

urgent need for the government, public health organizations, and law enforcement to take tough and systemic measures to regulate this phenomenon [5, 18]. A serious public health concern in this nation is the risk of internet sexual crime against minors. Addressing this issue requires a focus on early prevention through education, more stringent parental supervision, and all-encompassing support from the community and government. As a result, the main goal of this study is to determine how much parental knowledge there is of the risk of online sexual crimes that children face, particularly given how common digital technology is in Malaysia. The purpose of this study is also to determine the variables that affect parents' knowledge of this problem and their comprehension of their responsibility to shield their kids from internet dangers.

Materials and Methods

The qualitative approach in this study enables the in-depth and detailed collection of data on parents' perceptions and experiences regarding online sexual crimes. Open-ended interview questions enable respondents to freely express their opinions and understanding. Because it offers a platform for gathering rich and detailed information about complex social problems, like parental sensitivity to online sexual threats against children, this approach gives researchers access to a variety of perspectives on the issue under study, which is essential in social research like this. According to [7], a qualitative method is appropriate for comprehending phenomena that take place inside particular social and cultural contexts, where respondents can provide in-depth insights into their reality. This study supports this viewpoint.

Furthermore, as suggested by [9], convenience sampling is a practical option that enables researchers to reach a community near the study site. Given that the chosen respondents are parents who reside in Kuala

Nerus, Terengganu, where children's use of technology is becoming more and more common, this is quite pertinent to the study. Despite its propensity for bias, this sampling strategy is appropriate in this situation since it gives the researcher access to seven (9) pertinent respondents who can supply enough data for the study. To collect comprehensive data for qualitative research, a sample size of three to ten participants is sufficient [8]. Additionally, as parents with children under the age of 18 are the most pertinent demographic for a study on the risks of online sexual crimes against children, choosing this group of people is appropriate. Children, particularly those 11 years of age and older, are at a vital developmental stage where they start to distinguish between right and wrong [11], but they are still susceptible to harmful online influences [4].

The analysis of qualitative data can also be done more methodically and effectively with the help of Nvivo software version 14. Nvivo makes it easier for researchers to classify and code themes that surface from complex data, including interview data. This allows for full and comprehensive data analysis, which is one benefit of employing a qualitative approach aided by technology [15]. Researchers can find important themes or patterns through this technique that could go unnoticed through manual analysis. Therefore, determining the degree of parental sensitivity and awareness in this situation is essential to creating more potent preventative measures.

Results & Discussion

This section examines the level of parental knowledge and understanding of online sexual crimes against children. There are two findings regarding the level of parental knowledge and sensitivity: either they are aware and understand online sexual crimes against children, or they are unaware of these crimes.

Awareness and Understanding of Online Sexual Crimes

According to Table 1, the results show that most respondents were aware of the risks associated with online sexual crimes, which are becoming more frequent each year. They do, however, think that authorities should be congratulated for their efforts to solve this issue and that relevant laws need to be improved [5]. This knowledge is essential from a public health standpoint when it comes to prevention and shielding kids from grave risks that could affect their physical, mental, and emotional health [6]. Grooming, sexting, and sexual extortion are examples of online sexual crimes that can cause long-term trauma and major psychological consequences, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and behavioral problems [18]. Similar to this, initiatives to increase parental knowledge and the preventive measures taken by government are crucial in averting these long-term consequences. Here are some quotes taken from the interviews:

Table 1. Awareness and Understanding of Online Sexual Crimes

Respondent	Reference	Interview Excerpts
R1	1 reference has been coded (6.81% coverage)	This is not good; sometimes children see and watch inappropriate images on smartphones because they are easily influenced by such content.
R4	1 reference has been coded (8.91% coverage)	I understand about sexual crimes. Sexual crimes include instances where a male friend, a friend of the opposite gender, or a stranger sends inappropriate messages or pornographic images or videos to another individual.

R6	1 reference has been coded (19.66% coverage)	I understand this crime. Online sexual crimes can influence children's behavior. Little by little, the children involved may become withdrawn and so on because they worry their parents will be angry with them. They also spend more time on their phones because they receive more attention there than at home, like being called terms of endearment.
R7	1 reference has been coded (9.94% coverage)	I understand this crime. It mainly involves sharing images with strangers. This is very difficult to control because it's so easy to access information on the internet, and children have a desire to make new friends.

Related to public health education, the study's findings also reveal that the majority of parents get their information from social media and other online sources. Digital platforms are used as information sources, which emphasizes the need for more organized public health initiatives to give parents conveniently available training on how to safeguard their kids from online dangers. According to earlier research, children are more vulnerable to exploitation when they use social media and the internet unsupervised [14]. Therefore, to guarantee kid safety, authorities must be strengthened by stronger legislation and suitable penalties.

It is also necessary to strengthen community participation in this prevention initiative by working with other public health and educational organizations. For children exposed to or victims of these crimes, a coordinated effort by family institutions, communities, and the government can improve protection and offer the psychosocial care required [13]. Public awareness campaigns, early intervention initiatives, and victim therapy are a few ways to lessen the detrimental effects on kids' mental health.

Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Online Sexual Crimes

Some respondents do not have a deeper awareness of online sexual offenses, according to table 2's findings. The following are quotes from interviews that pertain to this goal:

Table 2. Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Online Sexual Crimes

Respondent	Reference	Interview Excerpts
R2	1 reference has been coded (5.57% coverage)	There isn't much exposure to online sexual crimes. I understand sexual crimes, like when male friends touch my child.
R3	1 reference has been coded (7.22% coverage)	I don't know about this. I only know about sexual crimes against children, like molesting children and so on.
R5	1 reference has been coded (8.93% coverage)	I am not aware of online sexual crimes. I know about sexual crimes where someone touches places they shouldn't without the individual's consent.

Particularly for parents who are only exposed to physical risks of sexual crime, the results of the interviews show a substantial knowledge gap. More thorough instructional initiatives are desperately needed, as seen by the respondents' incapacity to recognize different types of online sexual offenses. Parents are not taking proactive steps to better understand online safety, as evidenced by the fact that respondents in this context

exclusively use official websites like the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH).

Children's emotional and psychological health is directly impacted by the rise in these criminal cases; some may suffer from chronic trauma as a result of sexual harassment or online exploitation. According to recent research, children and teenagers who are exposed to online sexual crimes are at risk for mental health issues like stress, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts and behaviours [3]. As preventative measures and support systems to identify early indicators of online sexual abuse, parental education and the application of public health methods are essential in tackling this issue. Children who are victims frequently display behavioural abnormalities like social isolation, sadness, or an overwhelming dread of technology [2]. Through a variety of platforms, such as print and electronic media and official and informal educational initiatives, the public health approach is crucial in raising awareness of the dangers of online sexual crime. In addition to protecting kids, this program gives parents the tools they need to better supervise their kids' safety and well-being in the increasingly complicated digital world. A comprehensive strategy that includes prevention, education, and prompt action in any instance of sexual abuse—whether it be online or in person—is necessary for effective public health [16]. Malaysia experiences comparable difficulties around the world in shielding kids from internet sexual exploitation, necessitating more proactive measures from the government, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and communities. According to recent studies, awareness efforts that involve all societal stakeholders can more successfully lower the prevalence of online sexual crime [19]. Parents will be better equipped to shield their kids from the more sophisticated threats of the digital age if they are more informed and attentive.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that parents' awareness of sexual crimes committed online is still alarming. The risks of online crimes are becoming more complicated, and most parents are primarily exposed to information about physical sexual assaults. Public health professionals must be able to safeguard children from these online dangers to address psychological effects, including trauma, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as to guarantee their physical health. In order to shield the next generation from these crimes, more thorough digital education and assistance from a range of sources, including the government, educational institutions, and the community, are required. The initial steps of a successful public health plan include launching digital literacy training for parents and putting in place extensive awareness campaigns.

Acknowledgements

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