

Sexual communication between parents-adolescents during covid-19 pandemic in Malang

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Abstract

Implementing sexual communication between parents-adolescent is essential to protect adolescents' sexual health. This research seeks to determine how parents-adolescents' sexual communication was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research utilised a descriptive quantitative research method. One hundred sixty-seven parents participated in this study and were recruited through links that WhatsApp and Facebook shared. The parents must have adolescents between 11-19 years old and unmarried. The result revealed that the communication between parents and adolescents was more intense during the pandemic. Moreover, 16% of the time dedicated to it was increased. However, only a small number of parents (11.4%) recorded conducting sexual communication with their teenagers. 88% of respondents reported that the duration their teens spent online had increased, even though 55.6% of them implemented a limit on their internet time. The t-test independent sample result revealed communication differences assessed from gender (0.019) and age (0.025). However, there were no differences in education (0.081) and residential area (0.663). The expectation of this study's outcome could be expected as a reference for the related government institutions and private organisations to enact an intervention program for parents about the importance of sexual communication for adolescents' physical and mental health.

Keywords

adolescents' sexual development, covid-19, parenting, sexual communication, sexual communication content

Introduction

For the last two decades, researchers have studied parental influence on adolescents' sexual behaviour and development. Several studies have shown that parents-adolescents sexual communication had a role in forming teenagers' sexual attitudes and behaviours. Sexual communication is an interaction between parents and adolescents which involved a discussion about sexual topics and issues.

Sexual communication could increase the responsibility in making a sexuality-related decision (Wilson & Donenberg, 2004; Rogers et al., 2015; Harris, 2016), forming attitudes, beliefs and making a decision about sexual activities (Clawson & Reese-Weber, 2003; Boyas et al., 2012) in Adolescents. The parents-adolescents sexual communication also significantly contributed to establishing the attitudes, beliefs, and predicted the teenagers' decision-making to involve or avoid sexual activity (Clawson & Reese-Weber, 2003; Boyas et al., 2012). Sexual communication between parents and adolescents also influenced the enacting the sexual behaviour and delays the sexual relationship, which means that adolescents who are not conducting self-disclosure with their parents tended to do sexual relationships earlier (Boislard & Poulin, 2011; Grossman et al., 2016). However, the topic of sexual communication is rarely being discussed in family communication and even be avoided by parents and teenagers because it is taboo to tackle that topic (Ayalew et al., 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic which hit the international world, including Indonesia, offered a novel life situation such as conducting all daily activities from home e.g. working,

praying, and learning. These conditions have both positive and negative impacts on all family members. The examples of positive impacts for parents and adolescents such as an increasing duration that parents and teenagers spent together, more intense communication (Zhang, 2020) and the return of the family function (Abubakar & Alya, 2020). Whereas the negative effect on students (both young kids and adolescents) was experiencing and feeling frustrated which affected their emotional health and behavioural, and the rising number of time spent on the internet, which led to new emerging problems (Magomedov et al., 2020).

Similar issues also happened in Indonesia. The Ministry of Woman Empowerment and Children Protection of Republic Indonesia as stated through their press publication number B-121/Set/Rokum/MP 01/06/2020 explained that online learning from home cause students to access the internet longer. This condition was predicted to generate some issues related to health and social matter. Students were also vulnerable to being exposed to pornographic content and could become victims of online exploitation.

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Adolescents are individuals between 10-20 years old and characterised as having rapid physical development, high self-awareness and interest in trying new ideas. Developing social skills and empathy are the major tasks for adolescents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face meetings are being replaced by online meetings, which prompted teenagers to be socially disconnected from their peers. This condition led to the emergence of several negative behaviours such as pornography consumption and sexual behaviour. (Marchi *et al.*, 2021) stated that the consumption of online pornography in several countries had increased dramatically since the lockdown was implemented. Sexual live broadcasts such as pornographic content or sexual attractions have sold well. The biggest pornography website in America revealed that in March 2020, the number of visitors rose up to 6.4% from the domestic market and 11.6% from the international market share. The finding from the Indonesian Committee of Child Protection (KPAI) explained that from a national survey during the pandemic, at least 22% of Indonesian children had watched indecent and pornographic content (Purnamasari, 2020).

The adolescents' exponential physical growth also includes sexual development, with the addition of rising internet access, no particular learning hour at school, and social disconnection during the pandemic, thus guidance from the parental figures is needed. The parents are expected to offer some explanation about teenagers' current situation and help them be mentally and physically healthy.

One of the efforts that parents could do to guide teenagers during the COVID-19 pandemic was conducting sexual socialisation. Sexual socialisation is a process in which an individual obtains an understanding of the idea, beliefs, values, cultural symbols, behavioural meaning and code related to sexuality (Shtarkshall *et al.*, 2007). Sexual socialisation could be conducted by constructing sexual communication. Sexual Communication was established as an effort from parents to protect their children from the impact of the rising number of accessing the internet during the pandemic. Sexual communication was necessary to prepare teenagers so protection from the exposure to pornographic content which happened at the same time as their sexual development during the pandemic.

Several previous studies have been conducted to understand the relationship between parents and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Russell *et al.* (2020) stated that there was a rising conflict in the relationship between parents and adolescents, especially in older children. Chung *et al.* (2020) in their research discovered that higher parental stress was significantly related to high parenting levels and low relational levels. The relationship between parents and adolescents would be stabilised if the parents have the beliefs and competency to perform their duty, as explained by Morelli *et al.* (2020). They explained that the parental belief to be competent in doing their duty as parents could be a protective factor for their children's emotional well-being. Emotional well-being is crucial, especially during the pandemic when adolescents were prone to negative experiences.

The past research has not explained in detail how the parental-children relationship particularly about sexual communication helped the preparation of teenagers' sexual activity. The focus of this study is to understand the dynamic

of parents-adolescents sexual communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Research Design

The design of this study is descriptive quantitative, which was a research model that aimed to describe and interpret the individual's status, situation, condition or event. The researcher utilised the quantitative survey method by sharing the questionnaire online. This research used the sexual communication scale to comprehend the parents-adolescents sexual communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The limit of sexual communication in this research was the time spent on communicating before and during the pandemic, the interaction pattern, communication theme, and duration and limit of internet usage.

Participants

The respondents characteristics of this research are parents that have adolescents between 11-19 years old, and unmarried. The teenagers were excluded from the study because the researchers were focused on the parents as an initiator of the sexual communication. The data collection process was conducted over four months, between 23 March - 20 July 2021. The participants were recruited by snowball sampling technique via WhatsApp and Facebook link, and asking the participants to share the link with other parents who fulfil the criteria.

In total, 193 respondents participated in this research, however, only 167 subjects were analysed due to the elimination of 26 participants because their children's ages were older or younger which has been determined or their children have married. This number of respondents has been considered enough because, in quantitative research, both for correlation design and comparative is enough to have at least 64 subjects (Collins *et al.*, 2006).

Research Instrument

The instrument of sexual communication scale that has been utilised in this research was constructed by the researcher using the Focus Group Discussion technique which have been conducted in the preceding study Maimunah (2019). The indicator of the scale was constructed based on The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) which was developed by Sales *et al.* (2008). The scale has a validity index of 0.337 – 0.725 and a reliability index of 0.93. The sexual communication scale consists of ten items and is unidimensional. The questions were similar for all items but presented for various themes. For example, "In the past six months during the pandemic, how often your parents and yourself initiate communication about HIV/AIDS". The participants were asked to choose one of the options; Often (O), Sometimes (S), and Never (N). The scores were 1 for N, 2 for S, and 3 for O.

Data Analysis Technique

All the collected data were analysed via descriptive analysis and chi-square test. The descriptive analysis was administered

Table 1. The Parents-Adolescents Communication Divergence Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic

| Total (Hour) | Before Covid-19 | | During Covid-19 | |
|--------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| < 1 Hour | 9 | 5.4 | 6 | 3.6 |
| 1 – 3 Hours | 93 | 55.7 | 54 | 32.3 |
| 4 – 6 Hours | 42 | 25.1 | 36 | 21.6 |
| > 6 Hours | 23 | 13.8 | 71 | 42.5 |

to discover the frequency of each variable and chi-square was utilised for identifying the relationship between variables.

Result

Socio-Demographic Characteristic

There were 167 participants in this study, 68.3% of the lived in Malang City, and 31.7% lived in Malang Regency. 75.5% of the subjects were Female, 24.5% were Male, and the majority of respondents (50.9%) were bachelor's degree holders.

The Communication Time and Communication Pattern

The outcome of this study revealed that there was increased communication between parents-adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meaning of communication here was general communication between parents and teenagers with several themes. Before the pandemic, only 13.8% initiated communication more than six hours a day, however, during the COVID-19 this figure rose significantly to 42.5%. The policy of working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to finish their work at home, likewise, the students must attend their school online from their homes. These conditions provided a positive impact in form of more intensive meetings between family members, thus their communication time increased. The details of parents-adolescents communication divergence before and during the pandemic were presented in the tabel 1.

Besides the rising communication time, parents also reported that their communication patterns also transformed. 71.9% of parents mentioned that the communication with their teenagers became more intense, versus 24.0% of parents who disclosed that their communication was unchanging before and during the pandemic. Whereas, 4.2% of parents stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic and they have had more time to be together with their children, the communication pattern became ineffective because the intensive meeting led to more conflict occurring.

The Duration and Limit of Internet Usage

The government policy declared that all school activities should be moved online since COVID-19 provided the student to have more access to the internet. Tabel 2 indicated the collected research data about the duration of students' internet usage and the time limit given by the parents.

Sexual Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

It was previously explained that since COVID-19, communication time and communication patterns between parents and adolescents had changed. The majority of parents reported that more time has spent communicating and the pattern became more intense, nevertheless sexual communication was seldom discussed. Tabel 3 presented the data related to the parents-adolescents sexual communication and whether they discussed sexuality themes when they spent more time together during the pandemic.

From ten presented topics, it was obtained total scores which could be utilised as a base to categorise parental sexual communication. From the obtained total score, it was divided into three categories; high parental sexual communication, medium parental sexual communication, and low parental communication (SD = 5.04397, M = 17.5509). From the data, there were 19 parents (11.4%) who could be grouped into the high sexual communication category, 68 of them (40.7%) into the group of medium sexual communication and 80 of them (47.9%) grouped into the low sexual communication category. This result implied that the majority of the parents have not conducted sexual communication compared to the ones who have done or rarely done it.

Through the open questionnaire, parents indicated that the communication that have been conducted with their children before the COVID-19 pandemic was about school tasks, friends and dreams. During the COVID-19, the communication topics were quite similar, but the parents added health and hobby themes as communication topics.

The Sexual Communication Divergence Concerning the Age, Sex, Educational Background, and Residential Area

The researcher utilised the t-test independent sample to discover if there were a relation between sexual communication with sex, age, educational background and residential area. From the analysis, it was obtained that $t = 0.019$ for the sex variable, and $t = 0.025$ for the age variable with a significance value of 5%, which could be concluded that there was a significant divergence in sexual communication examined from sex and age variables. However, the t-test result revealed that for the educational background variable $t = 0.081$, and residential area variable $t = 0.663$, which could be concluded that there was not any significant divergence regarding the variables of educational background and residential area.

Discussion

The result of this research revealed that sexual communication was still considered taboo and not an interesting theme to be discussed by parents and their children. The respondents were assessed and categorised by their sexual communication from low to high communication levels. Of 167 subjects, only 19 of them (11.4%) belonged to the group of high-level sexual communication, in contrast with 80 of the participants (47.9%) classified as low sexual communication group. Whereas the rest of the 68 subjects (40.7) were categorised as medium sexual communication. This outcome was consistent with the

Table 2. Internet Usage during COVID-19

| Categories | Total | Percentage (%) |
|--|-------|----------------|
| Duration | | |
| Increase | 146 | 88 |
| Stable/Unchanging | 21 | 12 |
| Limitation | | |
| Parents limit the access | 96 | 55.6 |
| Parents give limitless access | 71 | 42.4 |
| Pornographic Video Access | | |
| Parents caught that their children accessed pornographic video | 8 | 4.8 |
| Parents did not catch/know that their children access pornographic video | | |
| | 159 | 95.2 |

Table 3. Parents-Adolescents Sexual Communication during COVID-19 Pandemic

| Theme | Parental Responses | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Often | | Sometimes | | Never | |
| | N | F | N | F | N | F |
| Female /& Male Relationship | 42 | 25.1% | 103 | 61.7% | 22 | 13.2% |
| Adolescents Growth | 44 | 26.3% | 85 | 50.9% | 38 | 22.8% |
| Love /& Marriage | 27 | 16.2% | 90 | 53.9% | 50 | 29.9% |
| The Consequences of Pregnancy | 10 | 6.0% | 38 | 22.8% | 119 | 71.2% |
| Abortion /& Its Consequences | 10 | 6.0% | 38 | 22.8% | 119 | 71.2% |
| Sexual Relationship | 10 | 6.0% | 41 | 24.5% | 116 | 69.5% |
| Premarital Sex Prohibition | 52 | 31.1% | 62 | 37.2% | 53 | 31.7% |
| HIV / AIDS | 28 | 16.8% | 61 | 36.5% | 78 | 46.7% |
| Sexual Harassment | 37 | 22.2% | 77 | 46.1% | 53 | 31.7% |
| Rape | 21 | 12.6% | 58 | 34.7% | 88 | 52.7% |

preceding studies that stated that the parents-adolescent sexual communication level was still low (Atienzo et al., 2015).

Furthermore, it was discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the parents-adolescents communication pattern became more intense and have a longer duration. There was a 16% increase in communication because both parents and teenagers spent more time at home, due to the government policy which declared that people must stay inside and engage in their work and school activities remotely to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

However, the rising number of communication between parents and teenagers was not proportionally followed by the sexual communication between them. Sexual communication was ideally conducted similarly to other communication topics such as career (Divatia & Pandya, 2017), problem-solving (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2014), politics and religion (Thakkar & Sheth, 2014), because sexual communication was a part of familial discussion topic between parents and adolescents. Nonetheless, the communication intensity between parents-adolescents during the COVID-19 only discussed school assignments, friendships, dreams, health and hobby. This condition demonstrated that sexual communication was not a crucial discussion topic, even though several previous research explained that parents-adolescents sexual communication provided a positive contribution to adolescents' sexual behaviours (Bastien et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2018).

This study presented some options for parents regarding sexual communication themes which have been discussed with their teenagers. There were three sexual communication themes which often conferred between parents and adolescents; 31.1 % (52) of the premarital sexual prohibition

topic, 26.3% (44) of the adolescents' growth such as menstruation and wet dreams, and 25.1% (42) of the relationship between female and male such as dating, friendship and close friends. The three least discussed topics between parents-adolescents were the topic of abortion and its consequences of 71.2% (119), 69.4% (116) of the topic of sexual relationships, and 45.5% (76) HIV/AIDS theme. This result illustrated the condition that not-so-sensitive topics were chosen by parents to be discussed with their children, which was consistent with the past study which mentioned that parents did conduct sexual communication, but with limited topics (Manu et al., 2015).

The sensitive themes tended to be avoided by parents because a lot of parents still considered sexual themes too taboo to be discussed openly. Indonesia is a country which emphasised on the culture of being polite in their behaviour and speech, and not mentioning sexual-related topics publicly was a part of unwritten social etiquette and acceptable for everyone. Subsequently, adolescents also refused to openly discuss sexual topics with their parents. There were several reasons why teenagers refused to engage in sexual communication with their parents; first, they were worried that their parents were being judgmental, worried that their parents would think that they have engage in a sexual relationship, feeling embarrassed and adolescents did not know how to start the discussion about sexual issues with their parents (Huberman & Miles, 2002). This outcome affirmed the research result by Ayalew et al. (2014) which stated that sexual issues or theme was a topic hardly ever discussed in family communication or even avoided by parents and adolescents because they considered the theme a taboo.

Ideally, communication between parents and adolescents should include the sexual theme as it could be intended to provide the children with sexual education. Kirby et al. (2005) explained the benefits of sexual education such as 1) delaying the early sexual relationship, 2) reducing the number of sexual partners, 3) informing about contraception choice, 4) reducing risky sexual behaviour and 5) reducing teenage pregnancy.

Researchers also attempted to understand the difference in respondents' demographic characteristics with parents-adolescents sexual communication, and the results were the communication divergence explored from sex (0.019) and age (0.025) variables. Male parents tended to rarely conduct sexual communication as opposed to female parents, and younger parents (35 - 40 years old) were often engaged in sexual communication compared to older parents (45-50 years old). The analysis also revealed that there was not any significant difference in sexual communication examined from the variable of residential area (0.663) and educational background (0.081). The notion of discussing sexual topics as a taboo might be the reason why these conditions occurred. The notion of sexual communication as a taboo has been discussed previously in several studies (Ayalew et al., 2014; Collins et al., 2009; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009). The result of this study could work as a suggestion for future studies to conduct research in the form of an intervention for parents about the importance of sexual communication with adolescents as a protection for their physical and psychological health.

The limitation of this study was the adolescents did not involve in this research, so the obtained information was from a one-sided point of view of the parents who have adolescents. On another hand, the age limit for the adolescents was too broad (11-19 years old), so it was expected there were some differences in parenting methods, especially in the communication process with their adolescents.

Conclusion

In Indonesia, the majority of parents still choose not to engage their adolescents in sexual communication, even though they have spent more time together and have more intensive communication patterns as an effect of working from home caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research recommended that related government institutions such as social ministry, woman empowerment ministry, health ministry and private institutions or future researchers hold an intervention program, particularly for parents or both parents and teenagers about the importance of sexual communication as a safeguard for teenagers' psychological and physical health. For future studies, the involvement of parents in the research process and the adolescents' age limit might be considered to receive more optimal results.

Declarations

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Author contributions

The author's contributed equally to this research.

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