



**EXPLORATION OF THE BLESSER-BLESSEE PHENOMENON
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN GAUTENG**

by

YOUTH RESEARCH UNIT

BUREAU OF MARKET RESEARCH

Behavioural and Communication Research Division



**EXPLORATION OF THE BLESSER-BLESSEE PHENOMENON
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN GAUTENG**

Technical Research Report

Compiled by

**A Basson
DLitt Et Phil (Psychology)**

Study Conducted by

**Youth Research Unit (YRU)
Bureau of Market Research
UNISA**

June 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Youth Research Unit (YRU) would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organisations for their contribution to the research study.

- Prof. Thomas Mogale (Executive Dean, College of Economic and Management Science) for the financial support of the Youth Research Flagship Programme.
- Prof. Deon Tustin (Head of Department) Bureau of Market Research, for his support of the research study.
- Prof. Pierre Joubert (BMR Consumer Neuroscience Laboratory) Bureau of Market Research, for his assistance with incorporating biometric measures in the research design.
- Mr Brad Huddleston (Brad Huddleston Ministries, United States of America) for his interest in the research activities of the YRU@BMR and participation in the research study.
- All the participants who participated in the study and shared their personal views and experiences.
- Mrs Pamela de Jongh for assisting with the successful completion of the fieldwork.
- Mrs Margie Nowak for transcribing the focus group discussions.
- Mr Jack Chokwe for language editing.

YOUTH RESEARCH UNIT

“Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation.” Nelson Mandela

The Youth Research Unit (YRU) of the Bureau of Market Research (BMR) was established in 2010 as a research flagship programme of the College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Since its inception, the YRU has established itself as a recognised research unit contributing to an understanding of issues impacting on the well-being of children and young people in South Africa.

The scope of the YRU’s research activities includes substance abuse, bullying (victimisation) and sexual exploitation. The most recent activities of the YRU focused increasingly on online and offline sexual exploitation of children and young people.

The YRU strives to provide applicable research information and established research networks with other key stakeholders nationally and internationally; including government departments, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, research institutes, and the private sector.

VISION:

To create positive change in society through conducting scientific research and engaging with the youth.

EXPLORATION OF THE BLESSER-BLESSEE PHENOMENON AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN GAUTENG

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The so-called 'blesser-blessee phenomenon' has become a common occurrence among young people in South Africa. Frequent reports about young women finding themselves in sexual relationships with older male partners in exchange for monetary incentives abound. This new form of the longstanding 'sugar daddy' relationship infiltrated different platforms including social media, with websites such as, BlesserInc., Blesserfinder and Blesserfinder Mzansi, specifically targeting those individuals with the desire to be a blesser or blessee.

The 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon can be described as a form of transactional sex, which has a number of similarities with prostitution, as it involves non-marital sexual relationships, often with multiple partners, in exchange for financial or in-kind incentives. However, transactional sex also differs from prostitution, since participants are known as 'boyfriends' and 'girlfriends' and not 'prostitutes' and 'clients', and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment (Hunter, 2002).

Literature review indicates that the involvement in transactional sex is often motivated by basic survival and subsistence needs such as the need for food, shelter and clothes. However, young people's motivations for engaging in sexual relationships with older partners can be much more varied and intertwined (Hunter, 2002; Luke, 2003). Most research studies uncovered financial benefits as major motivation for younger women to engage in sexual relations with older partners. These benefits can be divided into the following primary categories: assistance with economic survival; a way to secure longer-term opportunities such as education, employment or business opportunities and a means of gaining superior status among peers (Luke, 2003). Among their peers, these young women are seen as having a boyfriend and being sexually active, while having money and luxuries for which they are often unable to pay. The literature suggests that there is a wider occurrence of transactional sexual relationships for fulfilling desires for status and

gifts than for securing basic needs owing to poverty. However, it can be argued that within the South African context, poverty, unemployment and gender inequality to a large extent stimulate the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon.

Despite various reasons cited for engaging in transactional sex, the occurrence of the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon cannot be justified among young people. It involves high-risk sexual behaviour, which is associated with several long-term consequences for the individual, their family and community (Kuate-Defo, 2004). Several research studies identified that although young women have considerable negotiating power over certain aspects of sexual relationships with older men, they have little control over sexual practices within partnerships, including condom use and violence. A particular concern has been the growing HIV infection levels, especially in adolescent age groups where many more girls than young boys are infected (Luke, 2003). The South African national Department of Health recognises that the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon among young women is a driving factor for HIV infections. In an attempt to address this issue, the Department of Health has announced a national campaign. The campaign aims to reduce the number of sexually transmitted infections among young women, reduce teenage pregnancies and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, keep girls in school until Grade 12, and increase economic opportunities for young women to increase their resistance against 'blessers' (Sokanyile, 2016).

In response to the growing 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon among school-going children and young people in tertiary education institutions, the Youth Research Unit at Bureau of Market Research (YRU@BMR) embarked on a research study. The main aim of the YRU study was to investigate the motivating factors, participation and consequences of the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon among school-going children (16-18 years) and young people attending tertiary institutions (19-22 years) within the Tshwane metropolitan area.

It is envisaged that the research information presented in this report contributes to a complete understanding of the complex interaction of various factors related to the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon. This understanding is needed in order to develop appropriate prevention initiatives and counteract the practice of the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon among young people within the South African society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was used, including qualitative and biometric research techniques. A total of four focus groups were conducted including a representative sample of female and male participants between the ages of 16 to 22 years. The sample was stratified according to the age groups 16-18 years and 19-22 years.

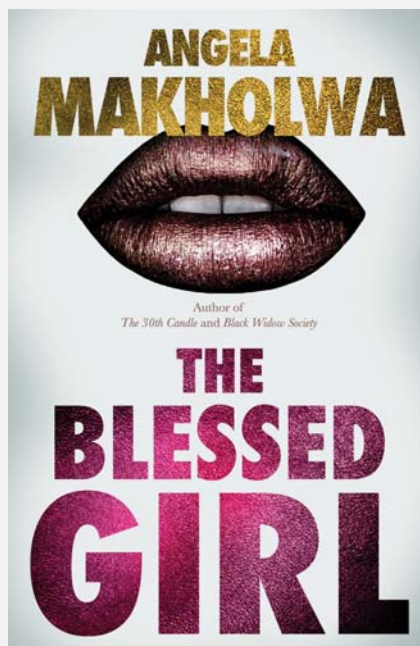
From a developmental perspective, school-going children at the age 16 to 18 years old continue to assert independence and find their own identity in the world. As they begin to look towards future career paths and romantic relationships, they face many temptations and need good role models and external inspirations. Emerging adulthood allow 19 to 22 years old to try out various possibilities and having opportunities that could transform their lives. They often have dreams about careers, long-term relationships, friends, and family but external challenges can disrupt these dreams.

During the focus group discussions, participants were allowed the opportunity to spontaneously share their opinions and experiences regarding the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon and its manifestation. After participation in the focus group discussions, participants voluntarily participated in biometric research measurements, including eye tracking, galvanic skin response, heart rate, and facial expressions, which was collected after participants have been exposed to relevant visual stimuli. Stimuli comprised of carefully selected images associated with the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon. This is explained in more detail in the section of the report, dealing with the key research findings obtained from the biometric research exercise.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research among children and young people requires special care and precautions. All YRU@BMR research studies are reviewed and cleared by the Bureau of Market Research, Research Ethics Committee at Unisa, ensuring the highest ethical standards. European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) provides specific guidelines for conducting research among children and young people. Based on the ESOMAR guidelines, the following guidelines were followed when conducting research with children:

- The welfare of children was paramount and they were not to be disturbed or harmed in any way.
- All members of the research team were thoroughly briefed before the commencement of the project.
- The parent or caregiver as well as the child participating in the research study will be thoroughly briefed with regard to the objectives of the study as well as the research process.
- Parental or caregiver consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the research study.
- Participation was voluntary and all participants were informed that they will be able to withdraw at any stage of the research project.
- All children participating in the research study were subjected to a debriefing session conducted by a psychologist after the research study.
- All information was treated as confidentially and used only for research purposes.



When you are accustomed to the finer things in life – designer shoes, champagne, VIP lounges, exotic holidays abroad, a luxury penthouse, expensive wheels – what independent young woman in her right mind would want to let them go? Certainly not the beautiful, ambitious and super-streetsmart Bontle Tau, the girl who has used her good looks and winning charm all her life to get exactly what she wants. The lifestyle doesn't come cheap, though, nor does maintaining the body that allows it (just ask Dr Heinz at the beauty clinic).

Luckily, Bontle has a degree in MENcology, and there is no shortage of blessers at her penthouse door, eager to give her all the love and (financial) support she needs. Papa Jeff might be overweight and getting on a bit, and receiving some unwanted attention from the Hawks; and Teddy might not have fully come through for her on that messed-up tender business; but Mr Emmanuel, the Nigerian businessman with deep pockets and the possibility of conferring second wife status ... could that be love? Keeping all her boyfriends happy and living a fabulous life is not without its challenges. With so many people clamouring for Bontle's attention – from her shebeen queen mother Gladys in Mamelodi, who is taking strain bringing up her teenaged brother, Golokile, on her own; to her girlfriends, Iris and Tsholo; not to mention her soon-to-be ex-husband, the ever-patient, ever-loving Ntokozo, Bontle barely has time to post on Instagram these days. Sooner or later something's got to give ...

Source: www.angelamakholwa.com/the-blessed-girl-angela-makholwa.php

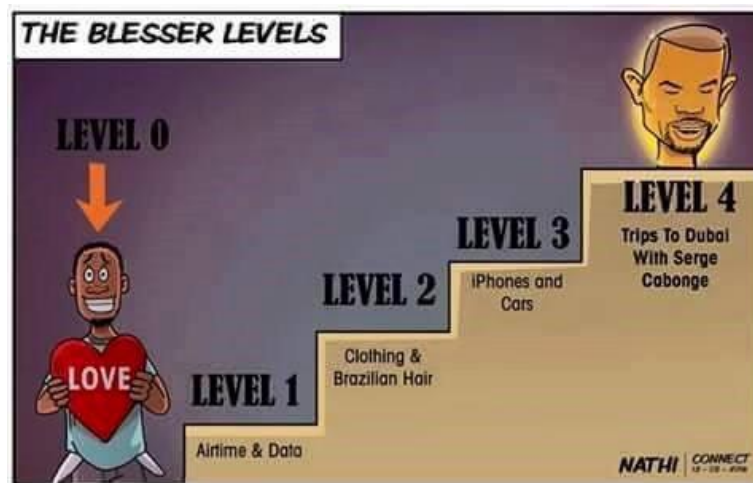
KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Awareness and knowledge about the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon

- Based on the research findings, the blesser-blessee phenomenon occurs across different communities within South Africa, as shown in the following verbatim quote: *“It might be dominant in the black culture but happens among all race groups. It might just be approached in a different way”* (Female participant, 15-18 years). *“We see these things everywhere. Like at a party you see girls throwing themselves at people who have money so that they can wake up tomorrow and get something”* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *“It is an everyday thing. We always see that girl being dropped off by that guy or being picked up”* (Male participant, 16-18 years).
- Participants described the blesser-blessee phenomenon as not something new; instead, it is a new term given to something that has occurred for decades and previously known as the ‘sugar daddy’ or ‘sugar mommy’ phenomenon, as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“It’s an old topic. It’s just that the term has changed from a sugar daddy to a blesser. The blessee would be the girl that’s getting blessed”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- Further exploration found that despite the fact that the phenomenon existed for decades, it evolved over time and now the ‘blesser-blessee’ phenomenon is more multifaceted and includes different levels of involvement as presented in exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1

BLESSER LEVELS



(A comic illustrating the stages of being #blessed www.sbs.com.au)

- During the focus group discussions, participants admitted that they obtain information about the blesser-blessee phenomenon from their direct environment at school, community or social media including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. All participants elaborated on the existence of websites dedicated to activities related to the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon. These included BlesserInc., Blesserfinder and Blesserfinder Mzansi as shown in the following verbatim quotes: *"So, I think this thing of blessers and blessees has been there for a long time, except social media was not there to capture the whole thing"* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *"You'll be having a good time with your friends at a club, us drinking our cocktails. And men would come to us, they have money"* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- Some participants shared personal experiences involving friends and family members being 'blessed' or have been personally been approached by potential blessers (girl participants). The participants emphasised that the blessers want to bless young girls because they are perceived as being pure and innocent.
- Participants who participated in the focus group discussions described the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon as a form of prostitution. Prostitution in South Africa has been illegal since the 1957 Sexual Offences Act, which states that any person who has unlawful carnal intercourse or commits an act of indecency with any other person

for reward is guilty of an offence. *“Yes, that’s what we say, they’re prostitutes”* (Female participant, 19-22 years). *“It is prostitution because she is selling her body”* (Female participant, 16-18 years). *“It is the same thing as prostitution. They are prostituting themselves. There are better ways to get money, I honestly think for struggling girls it is not the only option”* (Male participant, 16-18 years).

- During the focus groups discussions, participants referred to other high-risk sexual practices including ‘Ben 10’s’ and ‘Mavusos’. Being a ‘Ben 10’ involves a young male being involved in a sexual relationship with older women. In contrast, Mavusos refer to modified taverns where members pay to drink, dance and find sexual partners.

Motivating factors for involvement in the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon

- The study identified two primary reasons for young people to become involved in the blesser-blessee phenomenon. Firstly, poverty was identified as a primary motivating factor. Within the South African context, this is mainly among previously disadvantaged communities as shown in the following verbatim quote: *“I think it’s influenced by poverty and the bad economy. Because most of them they are done with school, they don’t have jobs, where are they going to get money to survive?”* (Male participant, 19-22 years).
- The second primary motivating factor identified was an aspiration for a middle-class lifestyle, especially among students (19-22 years old). This is clearly illustrated in the following verbatim quotes: *“And then you go to university, and there’s money there; there’s cars there and there’s fancy things. And it’s expensive. And you’re trying to fit in because you really do stand out. I mean, everyone wants a sense of belonging”* (Female participant, 19-22 years). *“Where the blessee is from a poor background, she’s doing this for money, for economical reasons. With us, we know girls who are from a very good background; they’re students, and their fees have been paid for. It’s about the lifestyle. These are slave queens”* (Female participant, 19-22 years). *“I think it’s about the status and the popularity”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).

"Blessers will thrive because young women's aspirations toward those middle-class lifestyles are easily accessible through Blessers" (Prof Deevia Bhana, expert in gender and childhood sexuality, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal).

EXHIBIT 2

**PRIMARY MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR INVOLVEMENT
IN THE BLESSER-BLESSEE PHENOMENON**

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| <p>Poverty</p> | <p>Aspiration for middle-class lifestyle</p> |

- The role of the social media was emphasised as playing a significant role in motivating young people to get involved in the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon. Young girls share photos of their lavish lifestyles and items with which they have been 'blessed' on Facebook and Instagram. This encourages other young people to become involved. Although participants argue that this has been an old practice, social media now fuel the fires and enable the practice to flourish. *"So what happens is your blesser/blessee situation comes with a term – a slave queen. This is when it goes to Instagram. They're expecting you to be slave queen. A slave queen, have an image to pop on social media. You need to travel, you need to eat expensive food..."* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- The motivating role of peer pressure cannot be ignored as shown in the following verbatim quotes: *"I would say, a young girl in high school trying to get a blesser; it's also like peer pressure in school* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *"And I also think peer pressure. 'Cos you see your friend getting something nice ... so you just decide*

okay let me push myself to get in (Female participant, 19-22 years). *“Some children at our school come from wealthy families. You find yourself in a group of friends and they are wealthy and you are not. You cannot afford nice clothes and don’t have a nice house...”* (Female participant, 16-18 years).

- During the focus group discussions, the role parents play in the life of young people were identified as a possible motivating factor. Participants agreed that many young people find themselves in manipulating relationships with their parents. This can play a motivating role in getting involved with a blesser as illustrated in the following verbatim quotes: *“She was a blessee; she was staying with an abusive guy, knowing like that he’s abusive. Just for money and the family knew about it”* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *“Okay, besides being a debtor as a blessee, your parents also get to be the debtors to the blesser. Because when it comes to the situation whereby the blessee comes from a family background whereby they are very poor, their blesser bless[eses] the blessee and the family”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- Interestingly, some participants shared the opinion that many young people perceive having a blesser as an easy way out of unfavourable circumstances. Many young people lack the aspiration to work and earn an honest living as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“Whereby those girls, most of them are lazy to work and all that. They want to be paid for whatever they do, those blessings and all that. That’s what I think the problem is”* (Male participant, 19-22 years).
- The study identified the involvement of third parties recruiting girls for blessers. Participants referred to the involvement of club owners and waitresses luring young girls in clubs introducing them to blessers as shown in the following verbatim quotes: *“What happens in clubs is that I’m a waitress and there’s these big Nigerian men, VIPs, and they’re like please get me girl. And then I wait at the entrance and Lebo and Thandi come in and I’ll be like ladies, this guy says he would like you to come and sit with him. And obviously, they don’t have money for drinks...(Female participant, 19-22 years). “We had a friend that pimped us out to her Nigerian boyfriend’s friends. Now we’ve stopped being friends because of that. The first time we went*

together as girls, and then she started inviting these guys” (Female participant, 19-22 years).

- The influence of public figures and celebrities on young people cannot be underestimated. During the focus group discussions, participants referred to Kenny Kunene and Serge Cabonge who practiced a blesser lifestyle. Participants also emphasised the influence of politicians as shown in the following quote: *“Okay, I’m sorry to say this, but I think somewhere somehow somebody said, the President (Zuma) said after 12 it’s lunch. He was the one who said it. So, do you see the problem?” (Female participant, 19-22 years).*
- Other motivating factors identified during the focus group discussions included absent father figures. Young girls long for the involvement of caring father figures in their lives that increase their vulnerability to become involved in the blesser-blessee phenomenon.
- Most participants disapproved of the blesser-blessee phenomenon based on personal values. After further exploration, some participants admitted that they will consider getting involved with a blesser if the ‘price is right’ despite risk factors. However, male participants mentioned that it is difficult to find older female blessers in comparison to older male blessers. It was considered a female thing.

Impact of the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon on young people

- During the focus group discussions, the impact and consequences of being involved in the blesser-blessee phenomenon were explored.
- Based on the research findings, it is clear that the blesser-blessee phenomenon has a far-reaching impact on individuals, their families and the broader community. However, participants shared the opinion that in many instances young girls being blessees do not recognise the dangers of what they are doing as shown in the following verbatim quote: *“They don’t see the danger, they are being spoiled with money and gifts... I see the potential dangers and that it is lucrative for the blesser” (Male participant, 16-18 years).*

- It was noteworthy that during the focus group discussions, participants emphasised the emotional impact of being a blessee. In most instances young girls who use to be involved with a blesser, have a very low self-esteem, feel worthless, disrespected and perceive themselves as being a sex object as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“Yes, but apart from that, I know that when I leave, he will replace me. I’m easily replaced. So if you leave it’s not like you are stopping his life or anything”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- Further exploration identified that the emotional impact goes hand-in-hand with the social impact. Young girls who are involved with blessers are often stigmatised by the community and lose their dignity. They lose the respect and support of friends and family members. It is noteworthy that most male participants agreed that they do not want a relationship with a girl who used to be involved with a blesser. This was ascribed to the fear of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, lack of trust and being victimised by the blesser as shown in the following verbatim quotes: *“A girl that has been with a blesser, then she like decides to stop that and then comes to you, there’s going to be pressure from you because now she’s used to this lifestyle where she gets everything that she wants. And on the other side you are just a student so you don’t really have money to actually like get anything that she wants* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *“I will feel like she’s the one rejecting me because I don’t have money”* (Male participant, 16-18 years).
- The participants elaborated on the physical impact on both the blesser and blessee. They specifically referred to contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV. It is noteworthy that falling pregnant was not perceived as an immediate threat, as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“Pregnancy is never part of the deal. It’s either they’re on the pill or injection. They do protect themselves from pregnancy, but I’m not sure from diseases...”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- It is noteworthy that participants elaborated on the connection between the blesser-blessee phenomenon and criminal activities, including the drug use, rape and sex trafficking as illustrated in the following verbatim quotes: *“Like most of these blessers, they’re Nigerian nationals. That’s no secret about that. These guys, most of them, they do drugs and drug sales”* (Male participant, 19-22 years). *“For someone*

who started as a blessee, they grow to be slave queens, then after being a slave queen they start recruiting girls... from being a slave queen to a trafficker (Female participant, 19-22 years).

- During the focus group discussion, it was explored if there is anything positive about the 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon. Some participants emphasised that in some instances, having a blesser can help a young girl to obtain education, provide for her family or even have a long-term relationship with a caring individual as illustrated in the following verbatim quotes: *"Not all blesser are horrible. They're really, really nice, like old men. They actually take you to school and stuff. They're not all bad"* (Female, 19-22 years). *"In black and white, if done in in the right way, it can be a means of poverty eradication"* (Female, 16-18 years).
- Overall, the feeling was that the blesser-blessee phenomenon was a bad thing crippling society as shown in the following quote: *"It is bad; there should be other ways of obtaining money"* (Male participant, 16-18 years).

Exposure to pornographic material

- During the focus group discussions, the exposure to pornographic material was explored. Further exploration identified that the majority of young people have been exposed to pornography at an early age. During the focus groups, participants it was estimated that 80-100% young males and 60-100% females view pornographic material.
- Exposure to pornographic material can influence the decision making of young people and therefore motivate the involvement in risky relationships and unsafe sexual practices.
- Participants agreed that the exposure to online pornographic material the fuels 'blesser-blessee' phenomenon among young people as shown in the following verbatim quote: *'Porn encourages this thing of blesser and blessees'* (Male participant, 19-22 years).

Prevention and protection of young People from the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon

- Based on the far-reaching negative consequences of the blesser-blessee phenomenon among young people it is important to determine what can be done to prevent young people from getting involved with a blesser.
- All participants agreed that early prevention is essential. It is important to communicate and reach out to young people before they get involved in the blesser-blessee phenomenon. Once they are involved, it is difficult to get out and they will not listen to any advice as shown in the following verbatim quote: *“They don’t care if you tell them it is wrong... (Female participant, 16-18 years).*
- During the focus group discussions, participants agreed that the blesser phenomenon among young people in South Africa is flourishing because these issues are not openly discussed at important community platforms such as schools and religious institutes. In most instances, people are still hesitant to talk about sexual issues despite the devastating impact it might have on young people and communities.
- A need was identified to strengthen religious believes among young people. They need to know that God loves them and will take care of them despite their unfavourable circumstances as shown in the following verbatim quotes: *“They need to be educated about the Bible, the rules in the Bible. I think that will really help” (Male participant, 19-22 years).* *“I think it’s also important that even if the pastor doesn’t talk directly about blesser-blessee situation, I think what’s most important is the pastor strengthening a young person’s character” (Female participant, 19-22 years).*
- It is noteworthy that participants emphasised that to be successful it is important to strengthen an individual’s character and teach them self-love. Teach children to love themselves from a young age as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“Self-love. Expose young girls to opportunities. If you are from a township, you don’t see a lot of things. Your life is just in there” (Female participant, 19-22 years).*

- Teach children that you need to work hard to get what you want. Especially girl children must know that they cannot be bought by another person as illustrated in the following verbatim quote: *“You must get yourself a job, buy yourself nice things. Go to school, don’t go to a club and say I’m going to look for a blesser”* (Male participant, 19-22 years).
- Young people need to be protected from the possible negative influence of social media. Children and young people need to know how to use smart phones and social media platforms responsibly and be aware of the online dangers as illustrated in the following quote: *“Instagram does not even have messages. That’s the thing. You post a picture and this is most psychological because you see what you want. It reflects on you”* (Female participant, 19-22 years).
- Children need positive role models that set good examples for them to follow.
- Positive parenting educates children about the blesser-blessee phenomenon and the dangers involved. Talking must go beyond talking. Parents need to explain and motivate why they do not want their children to become involved with a blesser. Parents must also be careful not to indirectly motivate involvement in the blesser-blessee phenomenon as shown in the following quote: *“Mommy I want this... no, I cannot give you that, you have a boyfriend who is working. Why don’t you tell him? And they are telling the mother because they don’t want to ask handouts from the boyfriend. So, they are being pushed by the parents to do that”* (Male participant, 19-22 years).
- The South African government must take a firm stand and label the blesser-blessee phenomenon as prostitution and rape of young girls.
- Skills development for young people including financial education as shown in the following quote: *“There is something incredible about being independent. I think when you start to get educated and you start seeing that actually this is a bad thing and I don’t want to be indebted to anyone... (Female participant, 19-22 years). “And the poor needs to learn that they have to stop victimising themselves. Because their background does not determine their future (Female participant, 19-22 years).*

“I am the change that I want to see” (Female participant, 19-22 years).

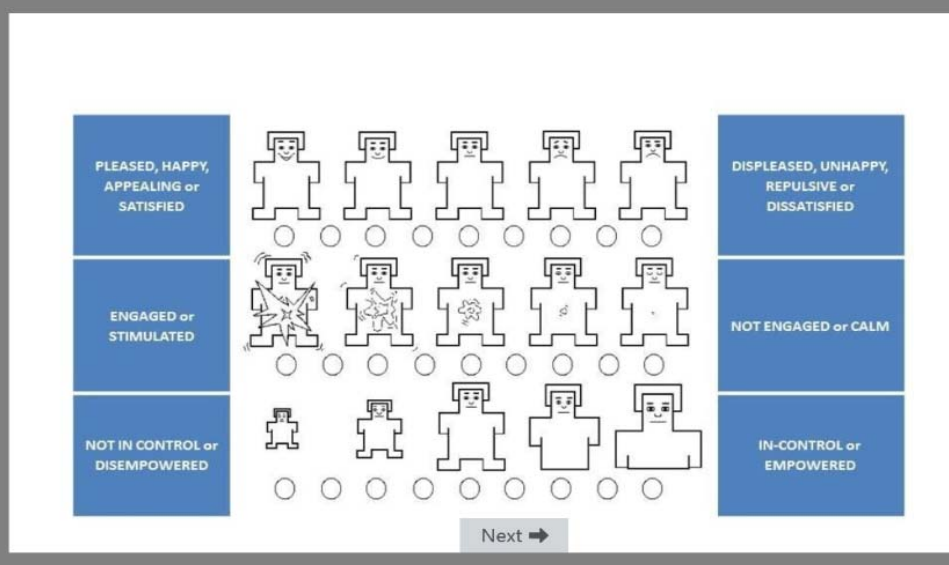
KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS: BIOMETRIC RESEARCH

The research study was the first YRU study that included biometric measures, including eye tracking, galvanic skin response, heart rate, and facial expressions. The purpose of the biometric measures was to explore the subconscious thoughts of participants and gain an in-depth understanding of participants' attitudes and emotive reactions towards the blesser-blessee phenomenon. Participants were requested to view carefully selected images associated to the blesser-blessee phenomenon. After viewing each of the selected images, the participants had to complete a self-assessment manikin (SAM) exercise to obtain self-assessment ratings of primary emotions while looking at the images. This instrument provides a measure of a participant's immediate reaction, minimising any cognitive rationalisation. The immediate emotive response is an important factor that aids in understanding attitudes, preferences and behaviour.

EXHIBIT 3

SELF-ASSESSMENT MANIKIN (SAM)

The following question uses SAM, a simple but scientifically validated way for you to indicate how you normally feel. First read the instructions before proceeding to answer. Below, you'll notice three different rows of graphic characters (Manikins), which represent you and your feelings. The three rows of manikins represent your feelings that range in nature from happy to unhappy, engaged to calm and not in control to in-control.



A total of 20 participants voluntarily participated in the biometric research exercise. The participant information is presented in table 1.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

| Description | Male | Female |
|---------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Number of respondents | 12 | 8 |
| Average age | 19.2 | 17 |
| Median Age | 19 | 16 |
| Std. Dev | 2.2 | 2.8 |
| Eye tracking Data Quality | 92% | 92% |

The YRU@BMR adheres to strict ethical guidelines when conducting research with children and young people. Each participant was before and during the study clearly informed about the biometric measures and what participation in the research study involves. A written consent was obtained from a parent or caregiver for all participants' younger than 18 years and participant assent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary and participants could refuse participation at any time during the research study. It should be noted that generally, young people are familiar with technology and inquisitive about new developments such as biometrics. It was observed during the research study that participants were eager to participate in the biometrics. Participation in the biometrics was administrated by trained professionals and closely monitored by experienced research personnel involved in the research study.

Biometric results

A total of 15 images related to the blesser-blessee phenomenon were displayed to the participants. Exhibit 4 presents the images that had the most emotional activation among the participants as well as the heat maps. Heat maps, as reflected in exhibit 4 serve as an excellent method to visualise which elements of the stimulus were able to draw attention. The red areas suggest a high number of gaze points and therefore an increased level of interest, yellow and green areas point toward flattening visual attention.

EXHIBIT 4

HEAT MAPS AND EMOTIONAL ACTIVATION


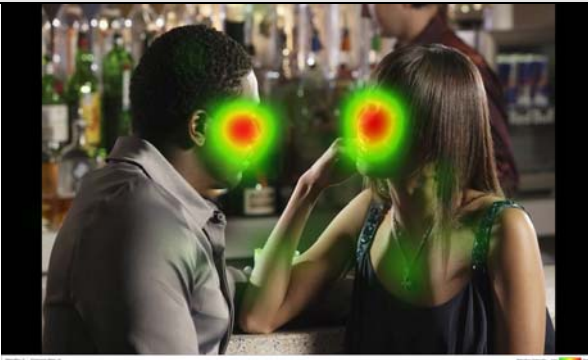
| Heat Maps | Emotional Activation |
|---|--|
| Image 1 | |
|  | <p>Result generated by iMotions® (7.0.1.0) provided by iMotions A/S</p> <p>EMOTIONAL ACTIVATION</p> <p>strong 10</p> <p>AVERAGE 4.9</p> <p>95% Confidence 3.5 ; 6.3</p> <p>weak 0</p> |
| Image 2 | |
|  | <p>Result generated by iMotions® (7.0.1.0) provided by iMotions A/S</p> <p>EMOTIONAL ACTIVATION</p> <p>strong 10</p> <p>AVERAGE 4.0</p> <p>95% Confidence 2.6 ; 5.3</p> <p>weak 0</p> |
| Image 3 | |



Image 4

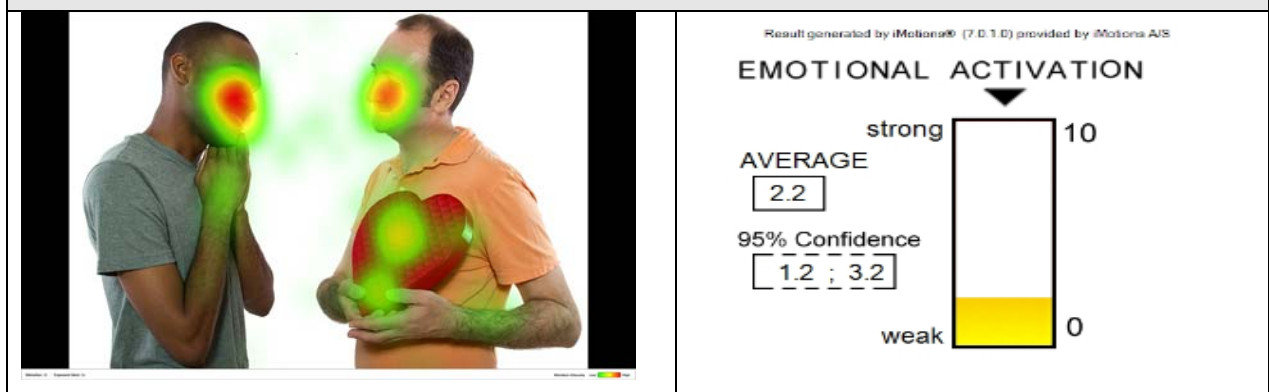
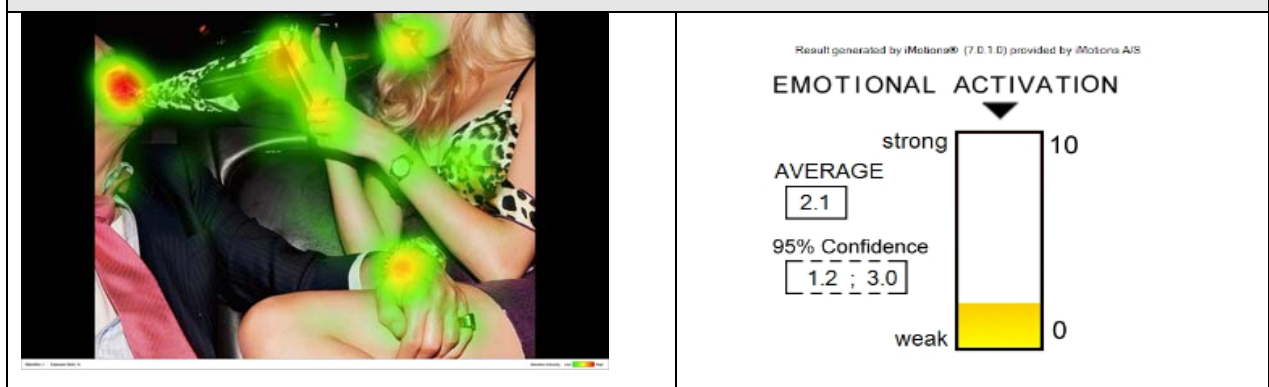


Image 5



The selected images revealed themes associated with the blesser-blessee phenomenon including intimate relationships with older partners, dating and possible consequences of high-risk sexual relationships such as pregnancy. It was clear, based on the biometric results, that participants had an intense emotional response to the images depicting an intimate relationship between an older man and younger women (Image 1 - average 4.9 and Image 4 – average 2.1). This might be ascribed to an underlying disapproval based on values as expressed during the focus group discussions.

The image suggesting a heterosexual dating relationship (Image 2 - average 4.1) resulted in intense emotional activation among the participants. Dating is considered an important activity among most young people (16-22 years), which might have contributed to the more intense emotional activation. Males and females in this age group aspire to have a healthy relationship with a person who makes them feel loved.

It was noteworthy that during the focus group discussions, no significant reference was made to pregnancy because of being involved in a risky sexual relationship. However, the biometric results found that the image had a strong emotional reaction (Image 3 - average 3.1) among participants.

The suggested homosexual blesser-blessee relationship (Image 4 – average 2.2) resulted in intense emotional activation among the participants. This can be ascribed to the fact that most young people (16-22 years) are establishing their own sexual orientation, which might have contributed to the emotional activation during the biometric measurements.

It was surprising that although it came across during the focus group discussions that money and material goods are considered important, images depicting money and shopping for expensive goods did not result in an intense emotional response among the participants.

It should be noted that the inclusion of biometrics in this research study was experimental based on an attempt to gain more insight into the participants underlying emotive reactions towards the blesser-blessee phenomenon. Restricted biometric measurements were applied and it was not the intention of the research team to provide comprehensive neurological evidence. It is suggested that future research studies include more biometric measurements and detailed analysis.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

The blesser-blessee phenomenon has received significant attention recently in South Africa. In many instances, despite being a serious matter impacting on the well-being of young people, it has become a light-hearted matter. The research study conducted by the YRU@BMR identified that the blesser-blessee phenomenon is far more complex than many perceive it to be or portrayed by the media. The study identified that it is a widespread phenomenon occurring especially among young girls (as young as 12 years), involving emotional manipulation, sexual exploitation and other criminal activities such as sex trafficking and substance abuse.

Most young girls are considered to be vulnerable individuals who find themselves in unfavourable situations, without the likelihood to obtain education and acquire a self-sustained middle-class lifestyle. Blessers target these girls for their own benefit and the situation is made easy by social media, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; which has become advertising platforms for finding blessers or blessees. However, based on the research findings presented in this report, addressing issues related to poverty only will not eradicate the problem. The blesser-blessee phenomenon has become a normalised lifestyle adopted by many young girls who need to be taught self-love and build strong characters. Young people need to be given hope for the future and anchor themselves.

No one can justify the blesser-blessee phenomenon for it compromises moral principles in society. The blesser-blessee phenomenon is regarded as a form of prostitution and extremely dangerous for its participants. Mainly, young girls lose their dignity within their communities because they are acting outside the expected societal standards. They practice unsafe sex, run the risk of contracting HIV infection and falling pregnant at a young age.

Without doubt, much more information and reaction is needed with regard to the blesser-blessee phenomenon. Government alone cannot address this problem. There is a need for a comprehensive approach. The issue needs to be addressed at community platforms including schools and religious institutes. It needs to be seen for what it really is. When sex buyers are described as blessers and young girls are described as blessees, community members are manipulated to see young girls as beneficiaries of generous caring men. However, based on the YRU research study, this is not true. These young girls are being sexually exploited and victimized by adults who take advantage of their unfavourable circumstances and personal weaknesses. There are laws in South Africa protecting young people, but it seems like society has created a culture of not abiding by the laws and not reporting crimes involving children.

It can be concluded that there is more research to be done investigating sexual exploitation of children and young people. It is clear that we still have a long way to go in attempting to effectively deal with the sexual exploitation of children in South Africa.

Blessers: A short cut to a short life

Kim Harrisberg

10 April 2017

A production by the national Children's Theatre brings to light the shocking normalisation and risks of the pervasive blesser-blessee phenomenon in South Africa writes Kim Harrisberg.



Nombuso makes excuses about her sex life after being interrogated by her mother. (Credit: Kim Harrisberg / Health-e)

"I couldn't go to school because I had to look after my siblings, and my mother is a domestic worker; so, she doesn't get paid much. That's when I decided that a life of poverty is not a life for me...and that's when I met Tsepo"

These are the lines of actress Fisiwe Kubeka in the show "A shortcut to a short life which put on its final production at the National Children's Theatre this week. It could, however, be the words of many young girls across South Africa who, when facing poverty, turn towards the financial gains that come with having a "blesser" or a "sugar daddy". The prevalence of this phenomenon inspired the play Director, Siphumeze Khundayi to draw attention to the harms of the blesser-blessee phenomenon through performance. The story follows the young and financially-strained Nombuso (played by Kgaogelo Monama) who gets lured into be a blessee by her risqué friend, Banothile (played by Fisiwe Kubeka). The audience watches as she spins herself deeper and deeper into a web of lies to hide the truth from her mother before chaos strikes and the consequences of her actions come crashing down.

Transactional sex

A short cut to a short life has been performed in 30 schools across Gauteng. The urgency of bringing attention to this issue is linked to South Africa's HIV rates, which the researcher advocates is tied to the culture of transactional sex. The precarious economic situation for many females in sub-Saharan Africa means the lure of financial security via sex leaves them in a vulnerable position. But how can South Africa even begin to tackle an issue so multi-faceted?

The crew also expressed their shock when, during many of their performances, the children laughed during the sexually violent scenes, and cheered for the well-dressed, visibly wealthy blesser. It drove home that a show like this is incredibly important in schools across South Africa, especially as most of the shows were followed by discussions dissecting what had been seen and what lessons could be learnt.

"The biggest thing I took from this production as a man in this country is that we have a lot of work to do to fix ourselves" says Gamelihle Bovana, who plays Papa T, the main blesser in the show. "And after fixing ourselves, we need to try and fix society to make it inclusive, in the ways that we can."

Changing the phenomenon

Siphosetu Sihlangu, who plays Big D – the other blesser, believes changing this phenomenon is going to have to be a team effort: "It is the family, the school, the church, all the institutions that frame the thought process of a human being. Men are a product of women and men coming together. Black men in South Africa are predominantly raised by single women. So, saying the father has the main responsibility will lead us nowhere. It is everyone taking part in the situation.

REFERENCES

Hunter, M. 2002. The materiality of everyday sex: Thinking beyond prostitution. *African Studies*, 61(1): 99-120.

Kuate-Defo, B. 2004. Young people's relationships with 'sugar daddies and sugar mummies': What do we know and what do we need to know. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 8(2): 13-37.

Luke, N. 2003. Age and economic asymmetries in the sexual relationships of adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning Volume*. 34(2): 67-86.

Sokanyile, A. 2016. Blesser' trend prompts unsafe sex alert. Retrieved from: <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/blesser-trend-prompts-unsafe-sex-alert-2024550>. '(Assessed 23 October 2017).