

Andrea Waling
Alexandra James
Gene Lim
Jennifer Power

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Australian Research Centre
in Sex, Health and Society

Building young people's sexual literacy in digital spaces

Copies of this report or any other publications from this project may be obtained by contacting:

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS)
Building NR6
La Trobe University, Victoria 3086
Australia

T (03) 9479 8700

E arcschs@latrobe.edu.au

W latrobe.edu.au/arcschs

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Expert peer reviewers of findings and recommendations:

Brandon Friedman (Elephant Ed)

Dr Natalie Hendry (University of Melbourne)

Amy Harvison (Top Blokes Foundation)

Design and layout: Elinor McDonald

Copy editing: Vanessa Winter

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Contents

4	About this report
4	Funding
4	Acknowledgements
5	Terminology
6	Executive summary
6	Young people and sexual literacy
6	Ability to seek support
6	About the current study
6	Findings
8	Key recommendations
9	Background
9	A note about language and digital media
9	Sexual literacy
10	Supporting school-based relationships and sexuality education with online resources
10	Sexual literacy education using digital media
11	Young people's use of online resources to support sexual literacy
11	Young people's use of digital resource to learn about sex and relationships
11	Form and format of online resources
12	Young people as critical consumers of online sexual health information
13	Conclusion
13	Study aims
14	Method
14	Interviews with young people (participants)
14	Interviews with key informants
15	Findings
16	1. Sexual literacy and the digital environment
16	Online not distinct from offline
16	Sexual literacy development in online spaces
18	Building sexual literacy is about assurance, validation and personal meaning
19	Privacy enables meaningful engagement with sexual health
20	Conclusion
20	Key recommendations based on these findings
21	2. How do online environments support young people to navigate sexual relationships and sexual consent?
21	Limitations and gaps in classroom-based RSE
21	Digital sources addressing gaps
22	Relating to pornography
23	Conclusion
23	Key recommendations based on these findings

24	3. Supporting, encouraging and resourcing sexual literacy development online
24	Digital sexual health promotion is about engagement and interaction
24	The digital environment provides opportunities for prompting learning
25	Respect for young people and their digital cultures
25	Peer-led sexual health promotion
26	Supporting digital sexual literacy for parents
27	Conclusion
27	Key recommendations based on these findings
28	Conclusion and recommendations: Building effective online sexual literacy for young people
30	Understanding the needs and capacity of young people
30	Filling the gaps
31	Developing and promoting effective RSE
32	References
35	Appendix A: Interview schedule – Young people
37	Appendix B: Recruitment advertisement
38	Appendix C: Eligibility survey
39	Appendix D: Demographic characteristics – Young people
41	Appendix E: Interview schedule – Key informants
42	Appendix F: Demographic characteristics – Key informants



About this report

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Terminology

LGBTQA+: Stands for lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), trans (T), queer (Q), asexual (A) plus (+). Within this report we use the term LGBTQA+ to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or asexual. The '+' reflects our engagement with others who identify as same-gender attracted or multigender attracted or gender diverse but who use a wide range of different identity terms. For a comprehensive list of terminology, please visit: <https://www.prideinsport.com.au/terminology/>

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE): Refers to school-based education designed to improved sexual health outcomes among school students. This includes classroom activities but is supported by a range of resources, including booklets and other resources including online resources. These resources may be used in the classroom or independently accessed by young people outside of the classroom.

Sexual agency: Refers to a person's capacity to make conscious and informed decisions about their engagement with sexual practices.

Sexual communication: Refers to the broad suite of practices that constitute communication about sexual wants, needs and desires, as well as conversations about sexual health and

contraceptive and/or barrier method use. This includes both verbal forms of communication (i.e. talking or texting) and non-verbal forms of communication (i.e. body language).

Sexual consent: Sexual consent is a form of communication that describes whether a person has agreed to a sexual activity. Sexual consent can be determined through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, and it forms part of a broader suite of forms of sexual communication.

Sexual health: We understand sexual health in accordance with the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition, which defines this as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity (WHO, 2006).

Sexual health promotion: Refers a range of strategies or interventions used to improve sexual health outcomes or enhance sexual literacy.

Sexual literacy: Refers to people's ability to understand information about sexual health, sex and relationships and their capacity to apply this knowledge in the context of their own life (WHO, 2006).

Sexual rights: We understand sexual rights in accordance with the WHO

definition, which notes that sexual rights refers to 'people's rights to fulfil and express their sexuality and enjoy sexual health, with due regard for the rights of others and within a framework of protection against discrimination' (Gruskin et al., 2019, p. 30). This includes the rights to equality and non-discrimination, on the basis of factors such as sexual orientation; the right to be free from torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment (such as sexual violence); the right to privacy; the rights to the highest attainable standard of health (including sexual health) and social security; the right to marry and to found a family and enter into marriage with the free and full consent of the intending spouses, and to equality in and at the dissolution of marriage; the right to decide the number and spacing of one's children; the rights to sexual health information, as well as RSE; the rights to freedom of opinion and expression; and the right to an effective remedy for violations of fundamental rights.

Sexually transmissible infections

(STIs): Refers to infections that can be transmitted through sexual encounters, including vaginal–penile intercourse, anal intercourse, and digital penetration or oral intercourse.

Executive summary

This report presents findings from a study that explored effective approaches to digital sexual health promotion with young people. We were interested in how young people engage in online environments with topics of sex, sexuality, sexual health, relationships and bodies. We also aimed to identify innovative approaches to online sexual literacy education and sexual health promotion, and to explore ways to maximise the potential of the internet to support classroom-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

Young people and sexual literacy

An important aim of school-based RSE is to work with young people to develop sexual literacy. Sexual literacy refers to an individual's:

- Capacity to access and understand information about sexual health, sexual rights, sexuality, sex and relationships
- Skills to critically assess the relevance and quality of sexual health information
- Confidence in taking relevant action in response to information to support or advocate for one's sexual health and sexual rights
- Ability to seek support

In this study, we were interested in how young people's engagement with the digital environment supports sexual literacy. In what ways do online environments, including digital content and the interactive and social forums available, help to enhance young people's understanding of sexual health and sexual rights?

About the current study

In this report we present findings from a study involving interviews with young people and with key stakeholders working in the fields of sexuality education, sexual health promotion and online content development. The aims of this study were to:

- Improve understanding of the ways in which young people engage with online environments to build sexual literacy.
- Improve understanding of the ways in which digital engagement can support young people's sexual health, including

supporting young people to build confidence in sexual communication and the negotiation of consent and pleasure in sexual relationships.

- Identifying promising and innovative approaches to online delivery of sexual literacy interventions.

In-depth interviews with 22 young people across Australia and 22 key informants working in the fields of sexual health promotion, education, research or digital content production were undertaken. The interviews explored young people's engagement with the digital environment in relation to sexual literacy development and approaches to effective digital sexual health promotion with young people.

Recruitment for interviews with young people was done using social media, while key informants were personally invited to take part by organisations and private consultants from a curated database.

Findings

Sexual literacy and the digital environment

Young people noted that they regularly go online to learn about sex, sexuality, sexual health, relationships, pleasure, sexual communication and sexual consent. This was confirmed by key informants working with young people. For young people, learning about sex and relationships online is not a simple process of searching and finding a neat package of information. Rather, young people explore various topics using an assortment of media and forums, both informational and interactive. The structure of the internet allows young people to follow lines of questioning or topics that spark their curiosity, as well as seek further resources or networks. The nature of content and interaction available online

helps young people to reflect on their own sex and relationship experiences or better understand their body or identity. In this way, the internet is an important space in which young people build sexual literacy, since it supports learning about sex, sexual health, bodies and relationships, while also offering a means through which young people can better understand how this applies to their own lived experience. Key points noted in these findings are that:

- What distinguishes the internet from other sources of information, according to participants in this study, is the wide variety of resources and forums that are available online – which are significantly broader than what is readily available offline – and the extent to which this allows young people to explore issues and topics that are specific to their needs and personal experiences.
- Young people draw from a patchwork of sources and forums to learn about sex, sexual health and relationships. This might include clinically derived information along with websites, podcasts, videos or forums in which they can gather advice or stories from other people that help them reflect on, or make sense of, their own experiences. Formal, informational sexual health resources, as well as informal, user-developed and interactive content, is valued by young people when it comes to learning about sex, sexual health and relationships.
- Engaging with peers and friends (either actively or as a passive observer in online spaces) allows young people to explore their own sexual and gender identities, gain insight into specific questions around sex and relationships, and have their experiences and feelings validated. This has an impact on

how they feel about themselves and encourages reflection and action.

- The relative privacy of digital devices enables meaningful engagement with sexual health because young people can ask questions and find information they would not feel comfortable to seek offline.

How do online environments support young people to navigate sexual relationships and sexual consent?

Key informants and young people saw the digital environment as supporting sexual literacy and sexual health beyond the classroom, and augmenting RSE. Similarly to previous research, participants in this study noted gaps in school-based RSE when it came to topics such as pleasure, sexual communication and sexual consent, diversity and the mechanics of sex, and they noted that online resources played a role in filling these gaps. With respect to the ways online environments support learning about relationships, sexual communication and sexual consent, participants and key informants noted the following:

- In accordance with existing research, key informants reinforced the importance of taking a pleasure-based approach to RSE, particularly in relation to sexual consent and relationships. This approach should also extend to digital sexual health promotion.
- Young people felt that the internet provided access to more detailed and relevant information about sexual practices, sexual pleasure and the negotiation of sexual encounters than is usually offered in school-based RSE regarding sex and pleasure. For this reason, the internet is an important place for young people to learn about sex and relationships.
- Pornography formed one part of the patchwork that young people use to build their knowledge about sex. However, young people had a critical take on pornography, questioning the accuracy of sexual representation in pornography and pointing to the importance of open conversations about pornography with educators, parents and friends.

- Although young people were critical of the accuracy of sexual representations in pornography, the findings also suggested that simply dismissing pornography as inaccurate or not real does not help to build the broader language about sex that young people are looking for, including how sex is initiated and negotiated. Key informants emphasised the need to shift the discussion away from restricting access to pornography, to teaching young people the critical skills to engage with pornography in a way that allows for reflection on aspects of sexual and gender representation in pornography.

Supporting, encouraging and resourcing sexual literacy development online

The dynamic nature of online environments means that there will never be one simple mechanism or medium for delivery of digital sexual health promotion. Findings from this study point to general approaches that begin with centring respect for young people and developing a nuanced understanding of their digital cultures. This includes appreciating young people's expertise in creating, and engaging with, digital content. It is also important to think of online environments as spaces where people connect and gather, as this can shift digital sexual health promotion from being an exercise in creating information resources to an exercise in two-way communication, interpersonal engagement and interactive education. This interactive approach further underscores the importance of peer-led digital sexual health promotion. Important points were raised by participants and key informants as follows:

- Social media and online community spaces were discussed by stakeholders as key digital sites where young people could passively consume information about sex, relationships and sexuality. This means that young people may be learning about sex, sexual health and relationships online even if they are not actively searching for resources or information.
- Key informants suggested that educators and digital sexual health

promotion more broadly could focus on raising ideas or asking questions which encourage young people to search for more detailed information online. Similarly, young people spoke about the importance digital content or discussions that prompt their thinking, generate awareness and facilitate further information gathering about sex, sexual health or relationships.

- There was a strong consensus among participants and key informants that young people needed to be involved in the process of developing and providing digital sexual health promotion for their peers. This ensures authenticity and relevance of engagement and messaging.
- Educators can learn from young people who possess specific knowledge in relation to digital communities and cultures, as well as knowledge about the ways sexual information is, or should be, communicated online.
- Key informants spoke about the importance of respecting young people's digital cultures and emphasised the need for educators and health promoters (ideally peer educators) to build a presence in digital spaces where young people gather. This could then provide appropriate support, share information or raise important topics or questions.
- Key informants and young people recommended providing online resources for parents to assist in developing skills in communicating with their children about sex and relationships and, in turn, help their children (and themselves) develop critical sexual literacy. Parents are also likely to need support to talk to their children about pornography and other sexually explicit digital content.

Key recommendations

1. Build young people's skills and capacity to engage with digital environments to learn about sex, sexuality, sexual health and relationships.
2. Address gaps in RSE as part of responding to concerns about young people's access to sexually explicit digital content.
3. Support teachers to build digital engagement into classroom-based RSE.
4. Fund research to improve understanding of how digital engagement and digital sexual health promotion can have a positive impact on young people's sex and relationship experiences.
5. Support educators and parents to initiate open and shame-free conversations about pornography and other forms of sexually explicit material.
6. Resource the development of digital sexual health promotion that supports diverse bodies and identities.
7. Continue to invest in digital content that provides authoritative and reliable information about STIs and other sexual health concerns.
8. Fund and resource creative and interactive digital sexual health promotion, led by young people.
9. Fund wide-scale distribution of resources for parents to support conversations with their children about sexually explicit online content and other aspects of RSE.





Background

This report presents findings from a study that explored effective approaches to digital sexual health promotion with young people. We were interested in the ways in which young people engage with topics of sex, sexuality and sexual health in online environments. We also aimed to identify innovative approaches to online sexual literacy education and sexual health promotion, and to explore ways to maximise the potential of the internet to support and augment classroom-based RSE.

A note about language and digital media

Often when we talk about the digital environment we are referring to digital media or digital content, such as websites, apps, videos, social media and other forums. However, online environments are also a medium or a forum through which people engage in discussion, conversation and interactive learning. In this report we have this breadth of engagement in mind when we refer to online or digital engagement. Young people may be reading information on websites or viewing videos; they may be initiating conversations, or lurking and observing conversations; or building campaigns, seeking networks, sharing content or producing their own content. Where relevant, we specifically name a type of content or platform. However, at other times we speak broadly about online or digital engagement. In this study we were interested in the ways that digital engagement – both the content itself as well as possibilities for interactive learning, knowledge building and other forms of engagement – can support sexual literacy and sexual health.

Sexual literacy

WHO defines sexual health as being more than just the absence of disease. Sexual health requires:

A positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.
(WHO, 2006)

Sexual rights are core to the realisation of sexual health. Aligned with basic human rights, such as the rights to equality and non-discrimination, freedom of opinion and expression, privacy, safety, information and education, WHO states that:

Sexual rights protect all people's rights to fulfil and express their sexuality and enjoy sexual health, with due regard for the rights of others and within a framework of protection against discrimination.
(WHO, 2006)

Based in these definitions of sexual health and sexual rights, the concept of sexual literacy refers to people's ability to understand information about sexual health, sexual rights, sexuality, and sex and relationships, and their capacity to apply this knowledge to their own life (Kickbusch, 2001; McDaid et al., 2021; Nutbeam, 2008). More specifically, sexual literacy refers to an individual's:

- Capacity to access and understand information about sexual health, sexual rights, sexuality, and sex and relationships
- Skills and ability to critically assess the relevance and quality of sexual health information
- Capacity to take relevant action in response to information in order to support or advocate for one's sexual health and sexual rights
- Capacity to access resources and seek further information and support

Drawing from a holistic approach to sexual health, the aim of sexual

literacy education is not simply to build knowledge of medical or biological aspects of sex, sexual health or safe sex practice. Rather, it is about developing people's critical literacy, which includes skills and confidence to seek information and ask critical questions about sexual health, sexuality and sex and relationships. This may also include questions relating to gender, sexual consent and the cultural setting in which sex and relationships occur (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Scull et al., 2014). For example, knowledge about STIs and blood-borne virus (BBV) screening may not translate into a young person having the confidence or capacity to access a screening service or negotiate condom use with their sexual partner or partners. To be effective, sexual health literacy interventions need to engage with issues such as barriers to STI screening, and this might involve challenging stigma around STIs and building young people's capacity to speak with sexual partners about safe sex.

To this end, sexual literacy programs for young people may include strategies such as encouraging young people to reflect on their relationships or broader issues such as gender dynamics in sexual relationships. This sits alongside the goals of helping people to build knowledge and skills to seek relevant, meaningful and trustworthy information about sexual health, sexual rights, sexuality, and sex and relationships.

Sexual literacy education using digital media

The above definition of sexual literacy frames our approach to understanding effective online sexual literacy education. Sexual literacy education is not simply about providing access to knowledge or 'fact-based' information, although this may be part of it. Rather, effective online sexual literacy education is likely to involve multiple interventions that engage young people in seeking information, developing understanding of their sexual health needs, and developing insight, skills and strategies to be advocates for their own sexual health and sexual rights via engagement with other people, digital spaces and digital content.

The accessibility and ubiquity of the internet, and smart devices, creates an important opportunity for sexual literacy education. Young people can search online for information in a way that is self-directed and private, and online environments enable people to engage in forums and discussions about sex, relationships and sexual health. They can access advice forums, watch videos or seek out stories, blogs or other sources in which people talk, or write, about their experiences of sex and relationships. In this way, digital engagement opens diverse and unique opportunities for innovative and effective sexual literacy

education with young people (Albury, 2019; Albury & Byron, 2018; Albury et al., 2017; Molnar & Hendry, 2022).

At present, there is only limited research demonstrating the effectiveness of digital content and online environments in supporting sexual literacy. Most existing research on the impact of online sexual health promotion or sexual literacy education aims to measure the effectiveness of websites or apps in increasing young people's knowledge of STIs/BBVs or contraception or their adoption of safer sex practices or STI screening (Albury, 2019; Döring, 2021).

Supporting school-based relationships and sexuality education with online resources

Comprehensive school-based RSE aims to ensure that young people have skills, knowledge and insight to pursue safe and consensual sexual relationships (Miedema et al., 2020). Educators emphasise that the best means to achieve this is through interactive and dynamic education that encourages young people to ask questions, speak candidly and engage with their peers and teachers to develop ideas, knowledge and critical thinking (Kantor & Lindberg, 2020; Miedema et al., 2020). Within this comprehensive approach to RSE, information about risks (such as STIs or unwanted pregnancy) and issues concerning sexual violence and consent are discussed in the context of sexual relationships more broadly, accounting for the ways young people seek sexual pleasure and connection while also navigating risks and challenges (Allen et al., 2013b). Young people are encouraged to talk openly about pleasure, risk and safety in sexual relationships in ways that recognise young people's sexual agency and encourage critical thinking about sexual messaging delivered through various mediums including the media and pornography.

While the importance of comprehensive RSE is now widely accepted in Australia, it is not mandated at a national level and not always applied in practice (Ezer et al., 2022). The most recent Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health survey found that young people felt school-based RSE did not adequately engage with topics such as managing sexual relationships, feelings or sexual pleasure, despite these topics being something young people wanted to learn about (Fisher et al., 2019; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020; Waling, Fisher et al., 2020). RSE content also often lacks attention to diverse sexualities or genders and assumes young people will only engage in heterosexual intercourse (Grant & Nash, 2019; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020).

Many young people go online to augment RSE and seek information and resources that are more relevant to their needs, identity and experiences (Fraser et al., 2021). In this study, we were mindful of exploring the ways that young people talk about online engagement in relation to school-based RSE and identifying ways that online engagement can, or does, augment and support school-based RSE.

While these topics are clearly important, evaluation research which adopts a more holistic definition of sexual health and sexual literacy (incorporating themes of sexual agency, pleasure, respect, sexual consent and critical engagement) is more limited.

In this report, we present findings from a study in which we sought to understand ways in which the internet supports young people in Australia to be critical consumers of sexual health information, build awareness or engagement with sexual rights, build understanding of sexual health needs, including opportunities to reflect on relationships and sexual cultures, seek support for sexual health concerns, and develop a sense of sexual agency. We also aimed to identify creative and effective approaches to digital sexual literacy education, especially digital media and forums produced or led by young people and peer-based sexual literacy education. It is hoped that this research will support more innovative approaches to online sexual literacy education with young people, and support evaluation of online sexual health literacy interventions by contributing to a clearer framework for identifying outcomes.

Young people's use of online resources to support sexual literacy

Young people increasingly turn to the internet to find information on sexual health or other personal or sensitive aspects of sex, sexuality and intimate relationships (Döring, 2021; Fisher et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2021; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020). In general, the ease of access, relative privacy and diversity of informational sources are cited as factors that make the internet an engaging space for exploring these issues (Döring, 2021). The range of resources that young people engage with online varies from websites containing formal 'expert' information through to social media and other user-generated content (McKellar & Silience, 2020; Nikkelen et al., 2019). Importantly, the digital environment makes available resources or networks that facilitates engagement with topics, experiences or identities that may be too niche or, in some cases, too explicit,

for inclusion in traditional school-based RSE. For example, the digital environment plays an important role in supporting sexual literacy education for young LGBTQA+ people who often feel that school-based RSE does not attend to their sexual experiences or attractions or who are seeking connection with other LGBTQA+ young people and communities (Grant & Nash, 2019; Patterson et al., 2020). Similarly, young people with either physical and/or intellectual disabilities often turn to the internet to seek information about sex or to find representations of sex and sexuality that apply to people with disabilities (Botfield et al., 2021; McCann et al., 2019).

Young people's use of digital resource to learn about sex and relationships

There are multiple reasons why the internet is an appealing space for young people to learn about sex and relationships. There is a wealth of online resources engaged with topics related to sex, relationships and health (Marques et al., 2015) and young people tend to be confident users of new digital technologies to seek information, including information about sex, sexuality and sexual health (Gabarron & Wynn, 2016; Park & Kwon, 2018; Simon & Daneback, 2013).

In previous research, young people report going online to learn about aspects of sex not routinely covered in school-based RSE, such as the mechanics of sex (what to do), sexual pleasure, navigating the complexities of relationships, and issues to do with body image or appearance (Flowers-Coulson et al., 2000; Levine et al., 2008; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020; Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022). An Australian study that involved a content analysis of search terms entered into online sexual health forums for young people showed that young people are often seeking information they may be uncomfortable asking about in person, such as whether their body is 'normal', concerns about possible STI symptoms or modes of transmission, signs of pregnancy, and masturbation (Cohn & Richters, 2013).

Personal digital devices (smartphones and tablets or personal computers) allow young people private space to research and absorb knowledge (Flanders et al., 2017). This likely makes it easier for many young people to engage with content related to sex or sexuality which they feel will be seen as taboo, shameful or embarrassing (Farrugia et al., 2021; Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022). These advantages are of particular relevance to sexually diverse and/or gender diverse young people who may be in a school or home environment where they are not supported to talk, or seek information about, non-heterosexual sex and relationships or gender diversity (Flanders et al., 2017). The internet also plays an important role for young LGBTQA+ people in seeking support via peer networks or services (Robards et al., 2018).

There are, of course, limits to this. For instance, many young people avoid seeking sex or sexual health information on social media where they have concerns about privacy and want to distance their public social media profile from stigma associated with STIs or other sexual health issues (Lim et al., 2014). While websites or apps may be a more effective way to deliver information than social media or other forums, they are less interactive and require people to search for information (and therefore know what to search for) (Lim et al., 2014). As the digital environment evolves, and new platforms and media are continually being developed, there is an ongoing need for research that offers detailed and nuanced understanding of the most effective ways to utilise online technologies to support sexual literacy education.

Form and format of online resources

Online sexual health resources are available in a range of forums and formats including social media (e.g. TikTok posts about female anatomy and sexual pleasure; Fowler et al., 2021), YouTube (e.g. talks by sex therapists, or couples sharing tips for sexual intimacy; Döring, 2021), podcasts (e.g. sex advice programs; Porter et al., 2021) or anonymous forums (e.g. where peers may offer advice; Yeo & Chu, 2017). The benefits of these resources are

that young people can find content specifically relevant to them. It also allows them to delve more deeply into personal aspects of sex and relationships than would generally be the case in classroom-based RSE (Döring, 2021). Online forums may also help young people access advice about specific concerns, such as how to raise sensitive topics with healthcare providers, or how to be a source of emotional support for sexual relationships or affirming sexual or gender identity (Basinger et al., 2021; Döring, 2021). Often young people seek this type of content as it provides reassurance or validation of their body, sexual experiences, sexual identity or relationship experiences (Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022; Waling, Fisher et al., 2020).

The role of online ‘influencers’ (or social media stars) in attracting the interests of young people online and shaping young people’s identities, choices and practices is the focus of an emerging field of health promotion research. This builds on previous research about the effectiveness of role models in influencing young people’s health-related practices (Bird et al., 2012) but looks more widely at potential negative effects as well as benefits. For example, the negative impact of social media influencers on young people’s body image and mental health has been a particular area of concern (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019).

Research on the effectiveness of social media influencers for health promotion, or encouraging other forms of practice change or identity development, focuses on the nature of the relationship between influencers and their ‘followers’. To connect with audiences and followers, social media influencers draw on a combination of authenticity and relatability (having the quality of being an ordinary person) and also hold a particular form of expertise (such as knowledge of wellness, experience of living with an illness or condition, or a particular identity) (Hendry et al., 2021; van Eldik et al., 2019). Some health experts, such as medical doctors, have achieved widespread following on social media forums such as TikTok by creating a persona that offers medical credibility alongside humour and relatability – the personality and presence of the

influencer is at the centre of the post or video rather than health information (Stein et al., 2022). While there is only limited research on the effectiveness of influencers in supporting young people’s sexual health or developing sexual literacy (Bauermeister et al., 2019; Döring, 2021; Manduley et al., 2018), research does point to opportunities this form of communication presents. For example, a study based in China indicated social media influencers can help promote HIV and syphilis testing among men who have sex with men, using a targeted social network-based approach to sexual health messaging (Wu et al., 2019).

One element that is important for effective digital health promotion or sexual literacy education is recognition that, in digital spaces, young people are generally not passive consumers of content. It is a different medium to television or text, and young people are consumers, producers and promoters of digital content. Young people create social media posts, videos and other content. They also share content and often comment or augment the content in this process (Albury, 2018, 2019). Consuming content can also often connect young people with a network of friends or followers (Albury, 2018).

In a recent study, Johnston (2017) traced the development and widespread popularity of two individuals who have built a large following for their YouTube videos, which focus on matters of sex, sexuality and sexual health. Findings from this study suggest that the combination of self-made stardom (which is seen as more authentic than fame reached through commercially produced television or film) and community-building enables successful influence and reach in the digital environment. The subscriber function of YouTube and the nature of YouTube videos – which may include a ‘shout out’ to new subscribers, responsiveness to viewer questions and low-tech, intimate-style videos – helps to create a ‘community’ of followers that generates loyalty and a network effect. Young people are engaged with the content and inspired to promote videos to other young people, especially when videos engage with recent events or political issues. The author writes:

The audience’s decision to circulate video producers’ content also reveals that they have a stake in the producers’ message. In this regard, it is important that sex education on YouTube ensures that video content connects with audiences not only in a formal and entertaining way but also in a manner that represents and accommodates the changing attitudes young people have toward sex and sexuality. Adapting to the culture of Internet stardom among YouTube’s most successful users also becomes necessary for sex educators hoping to spur discussions on legislative change for sex education programs. (Johnson, 2017, p. 89)

Feeling part of a network or community, and being in a position to share sexual health content or take action in response to information or messages, may be an important part of the appeal and effectiveness of digital sexual health content. Social media, for example, provides a forum for young people to take action in relation to sexual rights or sexual health, which may in turn generate inquisitiveness about sexual health or enhance young people’s sense of sexual agency. For example, social media campaigns against gender-based sexual violence, notably the #MeToo movement, raised awareness of these issues while also providing a mechanism for young people to be actively engaged in advocacy for their health and rights (Albury, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018).

Young people as critical consumers of online sexual health information

Online sexual health information resources are provided by a range of organisations and individuals, including large health organisations and government, professional sexual health educators, non-professionals with an interest in issues to do with sex or sexual health, and young people creating peer-based content. The quality of content varies and cannot be guaranteed. Some content also espouses homophobic or transphobic content or conservative messages about young people’s or

women's sexuality; this may undermine sexual rights and does not accord with comprehensive approaches to RSE (Döring, 2021). However, a growing body of evidence suggests that young people are discerning consumers of online health information, including sexual health-related information (Farrugia et al., 2021), and have skills to appraise the validity of health information (Freeman et al., 2018). Young people are accustomed to cross-referencing sources and evaluating the validity of websites based on the images and advertising that appear alongside articles or on webpages. For example, sexual health information sites that include explicit imagery or advertisements for pornography websites were unlikely to be considered legitimate by young people (Freeman et al., 2018).

Conclusion

There is a tendency to dismiss social media or online resources not produced by health 'experts' as lacking credibility or authority, or risking young people's sexual health by potentially providing misinformation (Döring, 2021; Farrugia et al., 2021). However, research increasingly points to the importance of engaging these resources alongside more traditional forms of RSE, recognising the value of digital content that is produced or endorsed by young people and trusting their capacity as critical consumers of sexual health information (Albury, 2018; Farrugia et al., 2021). It is widely recognised that young people seek out information about sex and relationships online and that there are benefits to this in terms of information being accessible and the online forum offering young people privacy and capacity to tailor their information searching to their specific needs and identities. For these reasons, sexual health promotion in online spaces will be most effective if it is based on recognition of the unique culture of the digital environment, the ways that young people engage with personalities online, and the sense of community and belonging that people build online.

Study aims

In this report we present findings from a study involving interviews with young people and with key stakeholders working in the fields of sexuality education, sexual health promotion and online content development. The aims of this study were to:

1. Improve understanding of the ways in which young people currently engage with online environments to build sexual health literacy
2. Improve understanding of the ways in which digital engagement can support young people's sexual health, including supporting young people to build confidence in sexual communication and the negotiation of consent and pleasure in sexual relationships
3. Identify promising and innovative approaches to online delivery of sexual health literacy interventions

Method

This qualitative study comprised two parts:

1. In-depth interviews with young people in Australia about their perspectives on digital sexual health promotion and education
2. In-depth interviews with sexual health educators and digital content specialists in Australia about approaches to effective digital sexual health promotion and education

This study obtained ethics approval from La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC21223), ACON Foundation (NSW, 202130) and Thorne Harbour Health (VIC, THH/CREP 21-012).

Interviews with young people (participants)

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews with young people aged between 18 and 25 years and living in Australia were conducted in 2021. All interviews were conducted via Zoom (audio and/or video, or via the instant messaging chat function). **Appendix A: Interview schedule – Young people** highlights the range of questions participants were asked. These included questions concerning their experiences of RSE and how they seek or engage in online spaces in relation to sex, relationships, sexual consent and pleasure. Young people were also asked to comment on what they considered to be effective approaches to building sexual literacy and supporting sexual rights using digital media.

Recruitment method

Almost all young people were recruited via a social media advertisement on Facebook, which invited young people to complete a short eligibility survey to register their interest (see **Appendix B: Recruitment advertisement** and **Appendix C: Eligibility survey**). One additional participant was referred to the study by a young person who had earlier participated. Many young people applied to participate, and potential participants were contacted based on selecting a range of demographics to allow for inclusion of a diverse range of opinions and experiences. Attempts were made to represent different states and territories, genders and sexualities, ages and cultural backgrounds.

Young people who registered their interest via the eligibility survey were contacted and provided with a participant information statement and consent form and invited to participate based on their preferred interview mode. Potential participants were also provided with the option to participate with a friend; however, none choose to do so, and as a result, all participated in single-person interviews.

Time frame (months) and COVID-19 considerations

Recruitment and interviewing spanned a 2-month period during late 2021. Given the COVID-19 outbreaks happening across Australia at that time, all interviewing was conducted online to ensure the safety of researchers and participants.

Compensation

Participants were compensated with a \$25 Coles Gift Card for their time and contribution to the research study.

Debriefing considerations

Given the sensitive and potentially triggering nature of discussion, all participants were offered the opportunity to debrief after the interview. The interviewer routinely checked on young people throughout the interview, and at the end of interviews, again checked on their welfare and offered options for additional support. In two instances, the interviewer sent follow-up emails to confirm the participants' welfare the day after the interview. None of the participants requested further debriefing or assistance in linking with support services.

Demographics

Appendix D: Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants (young people). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old, with the majority aged 20 (5) or 24 (5). Most participants were based in Victoria (8), followed by New South Wales (5). None identified as an Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. Most participants identified as either heterosexual (7), gay or lesbian (7) or bisexual (8). Most participants identified as a man (9), woman (8) or non-binary (6). However, we note that several participants articulated more than one sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Most participants

resided in a suburban area (13) or capital city and/or inner suburban area (5), and more than 18 participants were born in Australia. Six participants indicated that they were experiencing a long-term chronic illness, were neurodivergent or had disability. Ten participants identified as Anglo-Celtic Australian, with several others indicated diverse and mixed backgrounds including East Asian (4), Western European and Southeast Asian (2) among others. Ten participants did not indicate that they held a spiritual or religious belief, while five indicated they were atheist and three agnostic. Overall, 11 participants had previously attended a religious secondary school.

Interviews with key informants

Twenty-two key informant interviews were conducted with sexual health educators, RSE providers, researchers, clinical practitioners and digital content specialists who work with young people. These were all conducted via Zoom or telephone. **Appendix E: Interview schedule – Key informants** shows the range of questions asked. Interviews explored best practices for engaging with young people about sex, sexuality and sexual health in online spaces or using digital media. Participants were asked to speak about holistic approaches to sexuality education and sexual rights rather than addressing provision of didactic health information.

Recruitment method

Key informants were identified through a comprehensive search of key organisations and individuals involved in providing RSE (both in school-based settings and through online organisations) including in the areas of marketing and communications, activism, and digital communications and/or sexual health. Identified key informants were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. They were provided a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form prior to the interview.

Time frame (months) and COVID-19 considerations

Recruitment and interviewing spanned a

4-month period during late 2021. Given the COVID-19 outbreaks happening across Australia at that time, all interviewing was conducted online to ensure the safety of researchers and participants.

Compensation

Key informants did not receive any compensation for their contribution to the study.

Demographics

Appendix F: Table 2 provides a breakdown of key informant demographics. Key informants were drawn from a range of sectors and industries including marketing, psychology, clinical sexual health, and sex therapy services; and community organisations, research and academia, gendered violence prevention, health promotion, clinical sexual health practice, and education (specifically sexual and relationships education). Individual key informants often had overlapping expertise in a range of relevant topics including sexual health, relationships education, young people, and digital content delivery. The greatest number of key informants' organisations were based in Victoria (11), followed by New South Wales (7).

Data analysis

Interviews from both datasets were transcribed using a professional transcription service. A data coding frame was developed with reference to the research questions and review of relevant literature. One researcher undertook the first round of data coding utilising the coding frame. The frame was revised and redeveloped throughout this process to include codes that had been previously unidentified. A second round of coding was undertaken using the revised coding frame with the researcher paying attention to repetition and emphasis in participants' narratives to further identify emergent codes. Themes were identified through a process of grouping and refining codes. This was undertaken via multiple discussions involving the whole research team. Findings and key recommendations were also peer reviewed by experts in the fields of sexual health and wellbeing, digital content creation, and young people.

Presentation of Findings

The following sections discuss the study's key findings and recommendations. They are organised under the headings below. In each theme, young people's experiences and key informant perspectives have been combined to provide a comprehensive account, including where there may be stark differences.

- Sexual literacy and the digital environment
- How do online environments support young people to navigate sexual relationships and sexual consent?
- Supporting, encouraging and resourcing sexual literacy development online

A note about language

Throughout this report we refer to young people who took part in the study as participants and expert stakeholders as key informants.

1. Sexual literacy and the digital environment

This chapter addresses aim one of the study, which was focussed on improving our understanding of the ways in which young people currently engage with online environments to build sexual literacy. It concentrates on how young people seek information online and the unique ways in which online environments help young people build critical insight or skills for making sense of sex, relationships and sexual health.

Participants noted that they regularly engaged with online sources, networks and forums to learn about sexual health, relationships, pleasure, sexual communication and sexual consent, and this was confirmed by key informants working with young people. This is not a simple process of searching and finding a neat package of information. Rather, young people tend to follow links and trains of thought to explore and critically appraise content, concepts and ideas in ways that suggest the digital environment supports young people to develop skills in critical sexual literacy.

Online not distinct from offline

Findings from this study show that the distinction between 'online' and 'offline' lives is blurred for most young people. Young people and key informants described the ways young people regularly, and in some cases, continually, interact online with friends who they also spend time with offline. It is common to share online content with offline networks (such as showing photos or talking about memes or jokes), for conversations to be held via a combination of online and offline interaction, and for young people to engage with, and feel part of, digital communities in ways that do not feel distinct from offline communities or friendship groups. As one key informant said:

Online is a first port of call for that audience and [they] almost have come of age in a time or they don't know a life without that really, so interaction is second nature and they don't see life as online-offline, that's just a part of everything ... online interaction is as real as physical,

in-life, in-person interaction for this audience. (Jake, private sector, marketing)

Young people engage in online spaces to collate and share information among their online and offline networks. Young people are also often drawn to digital resources through friends or others in their communities:

I have one friend who is having a particular issue, and I knew there was, like, one podcast about it. It was really quite educational, and so I was like, 'Here, watch this', and she was like, 'Oh, thank you so much', and then she started following them too. (Summer, 21 years old, female, bisexual)

The structure of online environments enable young people to easily follow suggestions or ideas for resources or information (by clicking on links or searching), or engaging with networks – expanding their thinking and focus as they go:

People kind of see others from their community sharing that and they're, 'Oh, that's something that maybe I should know about' ... and you go and follow it up and kind of look into it yourself. And I think that's really the beauty of online spaces, is that you can jump through those hoops so quickly and learn all of these little branches of information that are out there from different people. (Isabel, community sector, sexual health and wellbeing/health promotion/LGBTIQ+ needs)

I think I just get information about those issues from family and friends, or if I read from blogs or forums online from whoever. Sometimes I would get a bit of info from those

topics from like emails or social media pages from my university pages too. (Mark, 22 years old, male, heterosexual)

The continual and seamless shift between online and offline spaces speaks to the significance of integrating digital engagement into classroom-based RSE. Young people are continually, and concurrently, drawing online content into social and educational interactions. The comfort with which young people seek to draw from digital resources to research or explore ideas is consistent with student-led, discovery-based learning, which is part of various school curricula. Questions or ideas generated online can also be followed up in classrooms or conversations with friends or families, while topics or issues discussed in classrooms can be followed up by young people online. Given the volume of resources available online to facilitate learning about sex, relationships and sexual health – and young people's capacity to navigate online spaces – the internet is a resource for sexual literacy education that could be drawn on to support face-to-face education. The ongoing challenge for educators or health promotion professionals may not necessarily be to develop new digital content, but rather to find creative ways to engage with young people on topics or conversations they have been following online.

Sexual literacy development in online spaces

Findings from this study show that young people rely heavily on the internet to develop their sexual knowledge and often draw content from multiple sources to explore concepts or practices, or to develop their understanding

of a topic. Often the internet is the first port of call for young people who want to know more about sex, relationship or sexual health issues or who have concerns or worries or changes happening in these areas. For example, young people may search for information about changes in their body:

When they notice something on their body, they're probably going on the internet before going to someone else ... they'll Google them before they even ask someone, because of just the nature of their learning and their interactions with the internet. (Jendayi, community sector, clinical sexual health/health promotion)

What distinguishes the internet from other sources of information, according to participants in this study, is the wide variety of information – broader than what is readily available offline – and the extent to which people can readily tailor their searches to their own needs and personal experiences:

They [young people] just want something that's personal and kind of like matches their current situation ... Like, you can type anything, put Reddit at the end of it and then some guy, like, 10 years ago has the exact same situation as you. (Kaleb, 20 years old, male, heterosexual)

Participants described sifting through multiple sources of content when researching sex, relationships or sexual health topics online. This could involve,

for example, finding information from websites, or engaging with forums, videos or social media. The process is not about identifying a neat 'answer' to a query but to explore issues and follow up different thoughts and ideas that emerge as they search. In other words, the internet facilitates an exploratory approach to learning about sexuality, relationships, sex and sexual health:

Definitely different rabbit holes for, like, relationship advice I find. You could go to, like, a random Reddit forum, you could go to, like, a Facebook page, like, dedicated to that kind of stuff, and there's probably like TikTok accounts dedicated towards that. Yeah, any little rabbit hole to ask, like, really niche questions. (Kaleb, 20 years old, male, heterosexual)

Participants and key informants described the ways that young people assess the quality and value of online information by engaging and cross-checking a variety of sources. This is not necessarily a process of deciding whether the information is likely to be factually accurate, although this is part of it. Rather, it is about weighing up whether content is likely to be untrustworthy – because it is produced by someone with a political or social agenda, or someone likely to be misinformed – alongside assessment of authenticity and relatability. For our participants, this was in part about assessing 'what feels right' and what was relevant to them personally, while paying attention to the source

of links, the ways information is presented, and checking testimonials or reviews where available:

When I was looking I, like I said, I did, I did prioritise a lot of those, like, queer-based organisations that I've defined, just, and making sure they had lots of resources and going down those rabbit holes to check those resources, I guess. And also seeing what other queer people thought about those organisations too. So, it was a bit of everything, I guess ... checking reviews, going on other forums, and like, write-ups and stuff to see whether people had made comments elsewhere about it. (Wren, 23 years old, charagender, omnisequal, demisequal)

One key informant summarised the complex searching processes many young people follow as a process of 'curating knowledge'. It is a personal and strategic process of pulling together information from multiple sources so that it is relevant and meaningful for that person:

You might research something, but you won't just take your first answer. So you'll go to research, and you'll open 20 tabs and you'll read ... But it's finding the information that feels right and re-reading things again, or trying, you know, is this herpes or is it, you know, ingrown hair? And that kind of curating of knowledge across multiple things, and that it's not as simple as what's the source, where is it coming from, when was

I find sometimes you learn a lot from social media platforms about, like, what the norms are, especially regarding sex. It's like, 'Oh, you didn't understand that either.' It's like, 'Oh, you only learnt that as well now' ...

(KALEB, 20 YEARS OLD, MALE, HETEROSEXUAL)

it published? But is that information, the word that keeps coming, does it resonate with people? Is it relatable? (Victoria, public sector, research)

This was echoed by participants who explained the ways that online environments provide a medium for checking beliefs and ideas about sexual practices, sexual identities and sexual norms:

I find sometimes you learn a lot from social media platforms about, like, what the norms are, especially regarding sex. It's like, 'Oh, you didn't understand that either.' It's like, 'Oh, you only learnt that as well now' ... Like people sharing their experiences in, like, a random tweet, it's like, did you think this was this up until that age? Or like, are you normal? And then the tweet has, like, 300,000 likes and people resonate with it. (Kaleb, 20 years old, male, heterosexual)

This sophistication and complexity of young people's approach to developing knowledge using online resources was affirmed by stakeholders, who felt it was important to see young people's skills in navigating online content as a resource for sexual health, not something that presents a risk:

We undersell, and we don't respect, the depth that the young people have in being discerning around those kinds of things ... The milkshake consent videos, despite the media outrage and all the rest of it, have very low Google analytics click rates ... but I would suggest that, I think, the complexity with which young people are exploring and thinking and wondering about these things is more sophisticated than we say. (John, community sector, health promotion)

Previous research has shown that young people are critical consumers of online health information and employ multiple strategies for cross-checking credibility of sources and attending to trustworthiness (Farrugia et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2019). The findings from this study affirm this, showing that young people are skilled and critical navigators of online content and they use these skills to develop sexual literacy.

The internet encourages young people to ask questions, research information and develop their knowledge and thinking about sexual health. If a young person seeks information about a particular topic or comes across information on social media or via other sources, this is likely to lead them to follow links, ideas or questions. The fact that young people are able to find resources, forums or networks that are specific, personal and tailored to their needs encourages this deep level of engagement. Moreover, the structure of the internet, where one resource will provide links to another and so forth, facilitates lateral searching and a broad approach to knowledge building.

With respect to sexual health education or health promotion, the findings from this study suggest that a salient question is not what digital information do young people need to build sexual literacy, but how can we encourage and support young people to use digital resources to be curious, to research questions and to build their knowledge? These findings point to a reading of sexual literacy as not necessarily a level of knowledge or understanding, but a skillset or resourcefulness that supports someone to develop a personal and meaningful engagement with their learning about sex, sexuality, sexual health and relationships.

Building sexual literacy is about assurance, validation and personal meaning

The definition of sexual literacy that frames our approach to this study emphasises sexual literacy as not just a level of knowledge about sexual health but also a capacity to critically engage with knowledge and use it to support sexual health. Sexual literacy is a combination of having information about sex, health and the body combined with the skills to make sense of information in a way that has meaning to the person's life. These skills are the resources that enable action to support sexual health.

As described in the above section, the findings from this study indicate that nature of young people's engagement the digital environment enables them to curate content that is personally

meaningful to them. Young people draw from a patchwork of sources – which might include clinically derived information, anecdotes, stories from other people, podcasts, images, discussions or advice – to find stories that reflect their own experiences. This is not simply about building knowledge or understanding. Rather, it is about working out how this information relates to their lives:

I definitely think stats and physical/ medical info would be very useful for broad topics (e.g. sexual health issues, types of contraception and STIs etc.) but personal stories/ experiences would be great for connecting with the reader and making them feel comfortable with engaging with the info further. (Ashton, 20 years old, male, bisexual)

Finding reassurance, validation or 'normalisation' of experiences of sex and relationships or identity via digital spaces is an important part of developing sexual literacy. Young people are engaging with ideas, people and information in a way that has an impact on how they feel about themselves, or that encourages reflection and action.

Sexual health promotion has often been critiqued for using clinically derived risk-based information, such as warning of the dangers of STIs, to inspire safe sex practice or behaviour change. Research has shown that young people find it hard to connect with this information as it tends not to relate to their personal experiences and immediate concerns or worries about sex and relationships (Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the internet provides space and resources that help young people make sense of their experiences or explore and understand their sexual or gender identity. To this end, seeking online content as a means to find reassurance or validation relating to sex, sexuality, relationships or sexual health is a profound example of the way in which the digital environment can support sexual literacy – not just through acquisition of knowledge but also through provision of resources or networks that help young people to make sense of their own experiences or feelings:



Just having someone else that they can identify with is enough to feel validated and good, and all of this stuff. So just seeing other people on TikTok, for example, dealing with these struggles is enough for them to feel a sense of okayness about them. (Victoria, public sector, research)

This is not to say that young people's needs were always easily met through online resources; participants pointed to several gaps that made it difficult to source information relevant to their experience:

I find it hard to find disability-related content. And then, you know, it's really hard to find queer-related stuff. So, then it's even a nightmare to find ones that actually include both that intersect. (Ira, 18 years old, male/trans man/trans/gender diverse, queer)

Despite these challenges, online resources and networks were important for young people seeking to connect with others who had similar experiences or identities. Engaging (either actively or passively) with peers allowed participants to explore their own sexual identities, gain insight into specific questions around sex and relationships, and have their experiences and feelings normalised:

But, like, if you grow up in an environment in which you don't have something kind of similar to you, everything is very disillusioning, and so finding ways to kind of create that

sense of – like, a very generalised sense of 'I am that person' or 'I could be like that person' is very, very helpful, and that's very hard to implement in an official way instead of people just being like themselves on the internet. (Diana, 25 years old, trans woman/trans feminine, gay or lesbian/bisexual/queer)

There is no doubt that social media and other online content can work against young people developing a sense of reassurance or validation in their sexuality, bodies or relationships. Social media, for example, can create pressure for young people to present themselves and their bodies online in ways that can be stressful or lead to criticism or bullying that can be devastating (Pennell et al., 2021). The findings here do not undermine or detract from this. It is well established that online spaces present potential risks. However, the findings here suggest that online environments can also support young people to find a sense of reassurance and validation with regards to sexuality, sex, relationships or sexual health and that this can be important in developing sexual literacy. Perhaps a task for health promotion or educators is to find ways to resource young people to develop online content or create networks to reach out and connect with, or support, other young people.

Findings from this study show that the types of resources or networks that young people are seeking online are sexual health information that facilitates reflection on sexual experiences or

identity – which assists young people to develop understanding or comfort in their identity or body – and spaces that allow young people to reach out for advice and support. The types of resources young people accessed in relation to sex, sexual health or relationships contained elements of clinical health information, but also contained content related to personal advice, communication with like-minded others, and reflection on the nature of sex and relationships. This is the type of learning that young people are already finding, creating and sharing through their online and offline networks. Recognising, supporting and resourcing young people to do this is likely to be an important approach to supporting young people's sexual literacy and sexual health.

Privacy enables meaningful engagement with sexual health

The significance of the internet being a private space for exploring sex, sexuality and relationships has been recognised in previous research (Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022) and was echoed by stakeholders and young people in this study:

There's the safety in being able to ask really taboo questions, and that's what the internet does beautifully. It's like, you pick an identity, or you pick a topic, and someone else out there has [had] that same experience. But not only that, the more cloaked in anonymity you are

It's less confronting when it's online. Because it's online, you don't have to have a conversation with a person you know.

(IRA, 18 YEARS OLD, MALE/TRANS MAN/TRANS/GENDER DIVERSE, QUEER)

by virtue of being sort of online, and no-one knows who you are. And, you know, because they can't really work out who you are, then you can ask really sort of challenging questions and have them answered by people, because people don't feel the same degree of shame that they do offline. (Jorge, community sector, young people and mental health)

The importance of privacy should not be understated. Classroom-based RSE, or conversations with parents or, in some cases, peers do not allow young people to easily explore questions or concerns without fear of exposure or embarrassment. While books or other offline material may offer this to some extent, the internet provides a much broader network of resources that young people can explore at their own pace:

It's less confronting when it's online. Because it's online, you don't have to have a conversation with a person you know. So, I can definitely appreciate that aspect of it, as well as you can do it at your own time whenever you want. So, there's a lot more control. (Ira, 18 years old, male/trans man/trans/gender diverse, queer)

But I think there's also ... in my work with young people there's also this whole thing of wanting not to look stupid, and it seems my observation is that a lot of young people don't want to look stupid when it comes to things about sex, so they would rather pretend like they know rather than come out and say I actually need additional information. (Jendayi, community sector, clinical sexual health/health promotion)

As stated above, sexual literacy is not simply a level of knowledge or understanding of sex or sexual health; it is also an ability to source and explore ideas and information in a way that is personally meaningful and relevant to one's life, thus enabling reflection and action. The digital environment creates space for young people to build sexual literacy, in part because it offers privacy and control over how young people gain

knowledge, what issues they explore, and how they engage with content.

As noted previously, there are potential risks associated with online environments and concerns have been raised that allowing young people private or unsupervised access to online sexual content risks them accessing inappropriate or ill-informed content, or that making connections via social media may expose them to cyberbullying or other dangers (Quadara et al., 2017). It is important to address these issues through digital safety education. However, findings from this report suggest that private access to the internet may also facilitate development of sexual literacy. Bringing this understanding to education about sexual safety in online spaces could be a task for educators, particularly when working with parents.

Conclusion

If we think of sexual literacy as having access to the basic understanding, resources, confidence and capacity to seek knowledge, engage in self-reflection, and take action to support sexual health, then we can see from the findings of this study that online environments support this. These findings show that the internet facilitates young people's inquiry and knowledge building in topics related to sex, relationships and sexual health, and that young people are skilled and critical consumers of online content. For young people, exploring online content often involves a patchwork approach, drawing from multiple sources through a process of following links and lines of inquiry. Young people are not finding neatly packaged answers to sexual health questions on a website or app. Rather they are engaging with online environments to explore their experiences or concerns about sex, relationships and sexual health, or to find reassurance and validation through multiple sources of information and different types of content, forums and networks. This could be viewed as sexual literacy development in action. Young people are not passively consuming information but seeking knowledge and finding resources that are personally meaningful and influence how they feel about themselves or others. This

can support young people's sexual health, either through helping them to feel more comfortable with their experiences or identities, or through supporting them to take positive action.

The message here is not that sexual health educators should stand back and let the internet do the job of building young people's sexual literacy. Rather, it is that educators should recognise what the internet offers for young people and draw from this. Ideas, questions or queries raised in educational spaces (either online or offline) may encourage young people to follow lines of inquiry online, with privacy and control over how they explore these ideas. Young people may be able to find resources or content and share this with other young people or bring it back to the classroom or educational workshops. Similarly, rather than being about the production of detailed information resources, digital sexual health promotion can be about finding ways to be part of the patchwork of information that young people draw from, or provision of encouragement to explore ideas or topics.

Key recommendations based on these findings

Recommendation 1: Build young people's skills and capacity to engage with digital environments to learn about sex, sexuality, sexual health and relationships.

Recommendation 2: Address gaps in RSE as part of responding to concerns about young people's access to sexually explicit digital content.

Recommendation 3: Support teachers to build digital engagement into classroom-based RSE.

2. How do online environments support young people to navigate sexual relationships and sexual consent?

This chapter addresses aim two of the study, which is investigating the ways in which online resources can support young people's sexual health, including supporting young people to build confidence in sexual communication and the negotiation of sexual consent and pleasure in sexual relationships.

The previous chapter explored how young people build sexual literacy in digital spaces, highlighting a 'patchwork' approach to curating ideas, knowledge and resources that are personally meaningful. This chapter looks carefully at the gaps and challenges in delivery of school-based RSE and explores how participants and stakeholders see the digital environment as supporting sexual literacy and sexual health education beyond the classroom.

Limitations and gaps in classroom-based RSE

Like other research (Fisher et al., 2019; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020; Waling, Fisher et al., 2020), participants in this study noted important gaps in their formal, school-based RSE when it comes to topics such as pleasure, sexual consent, diversity, communication and the mechanics of sex:

I feel like a lot of sex ed content is quite abstract and theoretical. So [it does not include] more practical [information]: how to have conversations, how to do certain things. (Matt, 24 years old, male, gay)

So, I did find some, I did find a lot of the sex education and awareness a bit too physically orientated in that way. And I would have liked to have seen a bit more emphasis on, like, the emotional building blocks of that and how that can influence sex and in that way, I suppose. (Wren, 23 years old, charagender, omniseual, demiseual)

In accordance with existing research (Allen, 2004), key informants reinforced the importance of taking a pleasure-based approach to RSE, particularly in relation to sexual consent and relationships. This does not necessarily refer to teaching young people how to have pleasurable sexual relationships (or the mechanics of sex), but starts from the premise that sex should be pleasurable and that young people have a right to expect this in their lives:

If you look at sexual health information, it's all boring stuff, and there is nothing in there about pleasurable sexual experiences, but I think it would be good to have it as part of the information, part of their body awareness. (Jendayi, community sector, clinical sexual health/health promotion)

Key informants also spoke about the need to provide young people with communication skills so they can negotiate consensual and pleasurable sexual experiences:

Because you don't want to hurt someone's feelings, and it's not that they're deliberately doing the wrong thing, but to say to someone, you know, 'Don't touch me like that. I don't like it', [it] is again a really hard conversation to have, when you like someone or you're trying to build a relationship. So I think pleasure comes down to, again, talking about communication, understanding that sex is meant to be pleasurable. (Hollie, private sector, sexual education)

Multiple studies have identified the limitations of RSE that is drawn from overly medicalised or risk-focussed approaches to sex. Most studies show that young people are seeking sexual health information that is relevant to their lives and that supports them to develop mutually satisfying, consensual sexual relationships. However, this is not always easy to enact in a classroom environment due to gaps in teacher training, limited space in the curriculum and contested beliefs about what is appropriate in classroom-based education (Ezer et al., 2019, 2022; Gibson, 2007; Grant & Nash, 2019; Shannon, 2022). In the following section, we look at the ways online resources augment formal RSE to support young people's sexual health.

Digital sources addressing gaps

Learning about the mechanics of sex, and what sex looks like, including safe sex and how to ensure sex is pleasurable, is often something young people want to learn about in RSE (Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020). However, this is not something that can easily be taught in classrooms:

I feel like that's probably where the boundary really goes; like, they wouldn't show an actual penis entering vagina or something like that, you know. I think that's just way too confronting in Australian school system to have that. Which then means that the educators have to come up with all sorts of



metaphors, which then convolutes the message, which then means that that direct communication you're trying to achieve is lost, because you're coming up with metaphors ... You know, kids from 10 years up that are exposed to porn, so you know, to have an animation of a penis entering vagina actually would be extremely mild compared to what they're actually seeing a lot of them, right. (Alice, public sector, research)

Increasingly, however, young people are turning to the internet to explore what sex looks like:

But if you went online and they could look at, you know, pleasurable sex, my God, I think that would be number one thing hit, because they're human and they want to have pleasurable sex, and they want to have good sex, and they want to please their partner. So I think it would be amazing to have something that was really helpful for young people. We're a bit, you know, it is, it's hard in schools for teachers to talk about this stuff, because the last thing they want is a parent ringing them complaining, so they're treading a really fine line. (Hollie, private sector, sexual education)

I think people Google ... I think that most people still struggle to get actual information about kind of what love and relationships should look like, unless they see a therapist

or something. (Eliza, private sector, gendered violence prevention)

Along with sex itself, participants also went online to better understand the emotional dynamics of sex and relationships and ways to talk to a partner about sex. Participants felt that the internet provided a broader and deeper range of insights into sex and relationships than can be addressed in RSE:

I think people know about, you know, wanting healthy relationships, consent, they want to practise things safely or that kind of thing. They know the broader concepts, because those terms have been thrown at them in, say for example, sex ed in high school. But it's never been elaborated in depth; like, how do you have a healthy relationship, what are things that you should do? (Zoe, 20 years old, female, heterosexual)

Key informants affirmed this, noting that young people are already exposed to a range of information about sex through schooling, media and popular culture, but the internet enabled young people to 'fill the gaps' on topics about pleasure, sexual consent and healthy relationships:

But you know what I think has been missing all along is, I mean, lots of stuff, right? Like women and girls enjoying themselves, but that idea of how to emotionally relate to people

and how to be safe in a relationship ... there's still none of that, and a website or an online thing can do that where kids are going to be at school learning that condoms don't work and abortions give you breast cancer because that's what some schools still teach regardless of what the curriculum ... there is a huge opportunity to fill those spaces. (Mia, private sector, sexual education)

Online learning outside school was viewed by participants and stakeholders as filling gaps or complementing classroom-based RSE or other formal sexuality education, because young people can search online for more explicit sexual content or more detailed information about the experience or sex, both physically and emotionally. This discussion, of course, raises the issue of the role that pornography plays in young people's exploration of sex and relationships online, a topic we discuss below.

Relating to pornography

Online pornography is often cited as an issue of concern when it comes to young people's use of the internet, due to its accessibility and capacity to present potentially harmful depictions of sexual violence and unrealistic expectations about sexual intercourse (Green et al., 2020; Quadara et al., 2017). The aim of this report is not to determine whether pornography is detrimental to young

people, but rather, to highlight how pornography is used by young people to learn about sex and sexual pleasure. Pornography formed one part of the patchwork that young people use to build their knowledge about sex:

And I found a lot of people my age, we learnt ... a lot about sex through, like, porn websites, that was kind of our first exposure to it. (Kaleb, 20 years old, male, heterosexual)

Some participants described a critical take on pornography, questioning the accuracy of sexual representation in pornography, and pointing to the importance of open conversations about pornography:

I think it really is, because what them kids who don't have that information turn to is pornography, which we all know is not an accurate representation, which then becomes even worse for that person. So, I think it's kind of even more, so essential. While that exists, that doesn't give people an accurate understanding on what it is like. (Ira, 18 years old, male/trans man/trans/gender diverse, queer)

Open conversations about pornography are particularly important as the dominant critique of pornography is that it does not represent 'real' sex (Byron et al., 2021), yet for some young people porn does reflect elements of their sexual desires or experiences, and it can form a useful source of information given there are limited depictions of sexual mechanics available elsewhere. The findings from this study showed that young people are looking to build a broad knowledge about sex, including how sex is initiated and negotiated, along with sex itself. Talking about pornography, building from what young people may see in pornography, may be a better way to build this knowledge than dismissing pornography as 'not real':

Absolutely, because there's been, you know, a lot of talk around porn and a lot of young people will access that and, for a lot of porn, it can be quite instructive just in watching sort of the mechanics of sex, but what often it fails to convey is what

happens beforehand. How people meet, how they consent to things, how they want to withdraw that consent during a sexual activity – and the messy bits, the stuff that's not talked about. (Riley, community sector, sexual health and wellbeing/health promotion/LGBTIQA+ needs)

Key informants encouraged education around pornography and healthy sexual relationships as part of RSE and other sexual health forums. One key informant spoke about the importance of teaching young people a critical awareness about pornography as a preventative action before they are exposed to the content without the appropriate skills:

I think it's, with pornography, it's a preventative thing. It's like putting sunscreen on, teaching them how to cross the road; you just teach them what to do when they see [it]. If you don't want to say the word pornography, don't say it, but just say naked pictures. It's a preventative thing for that. (Katie, private sector, sexual education)

Key informants emphasised the need to shift the discussion away from restricting access to pornography to teaching young people the critical skills to engage with pornography in a way that allows for reflection on aspects of sexual representation in pornography, such as gender relations, or whether the sexual representations align with their identities or desire, as well as the broader aspects of sexual and relationship negotiation.

Conclusion

Participants in this study pointed to significant gaps in formal RSE in addressing topics like pleasure, sexual communication and the mechanics of sex, echoing a large body of work that has also noted the complexities of introducing these topics into school-based RSE (Allen et al., 2013a; Fisher et al., 2019; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020). According to participants in this study, the digital environment creates space for young people to learn about sex, including the use of pornography to find relatable information regarding the mechanics of sex. As above, this

conclusion does not suggest that we should rely on the internet to provide all sexuality and relationships education for young people, or that pornography should be uncritically viewed as 'educational'. Rather, the findings suggest that pornography and other sexually explicit material provide part of the knowledge about sex and relationships that young people are looking for when they go online. Young people's access to learning could be reduced by restricting access to sexually explicit material without addressing the recognised gaps in RSE for material that teaches about sex and pleasure.

More research is needed to better understand the ways in which young people view pornography in the context of the broader ecosystem of digital resources and materials they engage with to learn about sex and relationships. Such research would augment existing studies that seek to understand whether access to online pornography is harmful to young people's sexual health or relationships to better understand if or how it plays a role in supporting sexual literacy.

Key recommendations based on these findings

Recommendation 4:

Fund research to improve understanding of how digital engagement and digital sexual health promotion can have a positive impact on young people's sex and relationship experiences.

Recommendation 5: Support educators and parents to initiate open and shame-free conversations about pornography and other forms of sexually explicit material.

Recommendation 6: Resource the development of digital sexual health promotion that supports diverse bodies and identities.

3. Supporting, encouraging and resourcing sexual literacy development online

This chapter addresses aim three, that is, what participants and key informants indicate are effective ways to use digital resources to support young people's sexual literacy.

It is well established in existing research that engaging with young people in online environments is not simply about provision of information via one website or app (Albury, 2019; McKee et al., 2018). As Chapter 1 highlighted, young people seek information through complex processes of searching and patching together thoughts, ideas and insights from multiple sources. Chapter 2 noted that young people primarily seek information to fill gaps left in knowledge or understanding by education provided within formal settings such as schools. This information included difficult-to-discuss topics such as pleasure, sexual communication, and the mechanics of sex. In this chapter, both young people and key informants discuss effective strategies to utilise online environments to support young people's sexual literacy.

Digital sexual health promotion is about engagement and interaction

Participants and stakeholders described digital sexual health promotion as a process of engaging with young people. It was not about creating content for young people to consume, but about thinking of online spaces as interactive forums or places for gathering and interpersonal communication:

We are aware of people using other forms of social media, so you know we know that there's groups, like on Facebook, like closed groups, and different ways that people connect on things, like, in communities on Instagram and that sort of thing. We've picked up that there's a lot of activity on places like Reddit and Discord as well, and we'll quite often hear about different community groups that exist there where people might be asking

questions and there'll be, like, a whole thread of responses from community members that we come across. (Isabel, community sector, sexual health and wellbeing/health promotion/LGBTIQA+ needs)

Part of digital sexual health promotion involves building a presence online, over a period of time. Digital sexual health interventions may not be discrete campaigns or messages. Rather, they may be about building a presence in online spaces to offer support or direct young people to resources:

I guess in terms of, like, traditional health promotion, or even kind of like the standard campaigns that we do, I think they are definitely still really relevant, but maybe, you know, we know that it's not always accessible by the community. So I think actually having those direct, and those, like, personal links where you're saying, well there's these videos or there's this campaign or there's this website, and creating that extra link to it is really important. Because otherwise people might just have no idea that it's out there and that it exists. (Isabel, community sector, sexual health and wellbeing/health promotion/LGBTIQA+ needs)

Building an online presence creates opportunities for health promoters or educators to promote sexual health messages or questions that encourage young people to seek more information, as we discuss below.

The digital environment provides opportunities for prompting learning

Participants described the ways that

young people consume messages and information about sex and relationships through non-active searching, including through participation in online communities that disseminate messages, social media posting, and the sharing of advice and information among friendship groups. Social media and online community spaces were discussed by stakeholders as key digital sites where young people could passively consume information about sex, relationships and sexuality. Interaction in these spaces was described to involve 'lurking' (the observing of content), and in some instances, asking questions or posting content themselves. For some young people, engaging passively with information in these spaces encouraged them to undertake active searching for further information about sex and relationships:

I mean, sometimes if something really interesting comes up on TikTok, then I'll probably go look up further stuff in relationship to it. (Ira, 18 years old, male/trans man/trans/ gender diverse, queer)

A lot of it would be passive, yeah, a lot of it, but I probably actively searched it and then I see it now passively, so it was I guess a bit of both. (Summer, 21 years old, female, bisexual)

Key informants suggested school-based RSE could play an important role in raising ideas and asking questions to encourage young people to search for more detailed information online, but also that a key strategy for digital sexual health promotion is creating content that reaches people 'passively' and prompts thinking and searching for more information. Content which raises

So parents are desperate for information, they're desperate for links, they're desperate for an internet source, they're constantly asking me. It's absolutely paramount that we develop some stuff.

(SONIA, PRIVATE SECTOR, COMMUNITY ORGANISER)

questions, states a position, mounts an argument, or provides a snippet of information all encourages searching and knowledge building:

It would probably be a combination of TikTok. Because some people say, 'Hey, if you want to learn more about this, here's a resource. Here's a link, here's a website to go look at' ... I think maybe having, like, a link instead to, say, if you, let's say there's a term that's used that you don't know, or there's this item thing that you don't know, then having, like, a link to that information. (Ira, 18 years old, male/trans man/trans/gender diverse, queer)

In this sense, the aim of sexual health promotion may not be to provide detailed information, or provide 'answers' about sexual health, but to encourage curiosity and learning about sex, relationships and sexual health or to encourage young people to research particular topics:

It seems more that younger, young people, so the tween group ... they don't have, they're not as experienced with searching for things online and they're not getting the right answers. And it's not just flowing through the networks. That seems to be the age group that are, you know, asking really weird questions online. (Victoria, public sector, research)

Encouraging online learning about sexuality, sex and relationships is an important role for health promoters and educators working in the digital environment. This may involve posing questions, engaging in debate, suggesting links or resources to follow or other strategies designed to encourage young people to think about their sexual health in positive terms. Often the most difficult thing when it comes to online resources is knowing how to cut through the 'noise' of online environments to draw attention to a campaign or resource. We do not

have capacity in this study to attend to this question in great depth; effective online marketing is a major professional discipline in itself. Rather, we turn to approaches likely to be appealing to young people when it comes to creating online resources to support sexual literacy.

Respect for young people and their digital cultures

Respect for young people is crucial for people working in the areas of sexuality education or health promotion, and this was affirmed by participants in this study:

We need to assume our audience are as intelligent as we were at that age and we can't, kind of just because someone's younger, we can't be talking down or stating an issue as being something that is insignificant to them. They've never been older, so the age they're at is ... it is the most significant thing they've dealt with in their life, so it's real important. (Jake, private sector, marketing)

However, participants also spoke about the importance of respecting young people's digital cultures and emphasised the need to engage with the platforms and spaces where young people are gathered. In part, this is about understanding the cultural nuances and communication modes appropriate to particular platforms:

I think definitely for me it would be based on YouTube and stuff, but also have Instagram accounts, like maybe where the Instagram focuses more on the activism and stuff like that, but then the YouTube channel's more real-life experiences and more information-type stuff. (Hannah, 20 years old, female/prefer not to have a label, gay or lesbian/bisexual)

Importantly, however, respect for digital cultures was also about creating a presence in these spaces:

There's also a lot of value in being in the spaces where young people already are, so like, those existing platforms and, yeah, I guess, creating a recognisable presence. (Isabel, community sector, sexual health and wellbeing/health promotion/LGBTIQA+ needs)

Creating a presence in online spaces can be a very different process to launching a discrete advertisement or campaign to promote sexual health. Creating a presence is about being part of existing networks and cultures, building recognition online, and participating in the online community. For instance, online peer support is likely to involve a process of peer educators or counsellors being present over a period of time in particular online spaces. Presence may be built via regular engagement in discussions, posting to forums and sharing other people's content. This is similar to approaches to community engagement that have always been an important part of health promotion (Switzer et al., 2021). Good community engagement is about building long-term connections and trust with communities. This is true in online environments as it always has been in the offline world.

Peer-led sexual health promotion

Previous research has emphasised that young people are already playing an important role in the design and delivery and dissemination of online content (Albury, 2019; Chau, 2010) and that young people have a sophisticated understanding of online cultures – how to engage with others and how to create content that appeals to others (Farrugia, 2017; Fraser et al., 2021). This was affirmed in this study and there was a strong consensus among participants and stakeholders that young people needed to be involved in the process of developing and promoting online resources in relation to sex,



sexuality, relationships and pleasure. Key informants explained:

In health promotion or in any kind of education when you're working with young people, you need to be translators, because the power structure in a participatory approach is that you have so much more knowledge and expertise than these young people have, in the content, but what you're trying to get from these young people is their expertise and knowledge is that they are 16- or 17-year-old young people, now in the world in which we live today, and that is their expertise, and that is just as valuable [...] And so they have to be part of you translating what they're saying and then allowing them to translate what you're saying. (John, community sector, health promotion)

Young people are an important resource in both advising health promoters on content development as well as being important content producers themselves. Young people's online networks are also central to sharing health messaging and communication that is relevant to their peer groups.

This is important when thinking about how to build 'presence' for sexual literacy education or health promotion online. Authenticity is needed for building engagement and trust in online spaces,

and young people are best placed to ensure authenticity:

They have to be authentic [...] People do like the authentic story that's in a supposedly authentic space. So the content creator who has their own channel, YouTube, whatever, that does the story, that works better than 'I'm the government; Let's get all these different random stories.' [...] People expect some sort of disclosure to be, for people to be trustworthy, yeah. (Victoria, public sector, research)

Young people further explained the way that inauthentic resources will have the unintended effect of reducing trust:

Bad sources give everything a bad name. Yeah the milkshake thing [referring to a recent advertisement about sexual consent], I think that was a very bad idea for everyone involved, and I think ... stuff like that kind of poisons the well for young people, because not only are people getting the wrong idea but also people feel like then they can't trust certain representations, and then you have to start going to other sources, which is not the worst thing – there are good other sources. (Diana, 25 years old, trans woman/trans feminine, gay or lesbian/bisexual/queer)

The importance of resourcing young people to lead sexual health promotion campaigns or develop sexual literacy content online is affirmed by these findings. This is not just about co-designing sexual health resources with young people but also about trusting young people's insights into the type of messaging or content likely to cut through and be read as authentic.

Supporting digital sexual literacy for parents

Key informants and young people recommended providing online resources for parents to assist them to develop skills in communicating with their children about sex and relationships and, in turn, help their children (and themselves) develop critical sexual literacy:

I think it's really important to acknowledge that a lot of the stuff about sex and consent and everything does start in the household and what people observe from their upbringing, I suppose. (Wren, 23 years old, charagender, omnisexual, demisexual)

This same young person later discussed the potential to have online resources and supports targeted to multiple important family members:



I think it is really important that parents have that. But also, not even just parents, I think, just like, immediate family in general. Like siblings, if it's appropriate. Aunties, aunts, grandparents, whatever's, whatever's clickable, because not everybody feels comfortable and open with their parents to be able to do that. So, I think there should be resources, I think it'd be a really good idea to have resources directed at helping other types of family members to help other people, if that makes sense. (Wren, 23 years old, charagender, omnisequal, demisequal)

Key informants spoke about the current lack of resources available to help parents who are, according to this stakeholder, interested in accessing additional information to support their children:

So parents are desperate for information, they're desperate for links, they're desperate for an internet source, they're constantly asking me. It's absolutely paramount that we develop some stuff. (Sonia, private sector, community organiser)

Indeed, key informants emphasised the significance of parents as a resource to help their children, who, when equipped with the right skills, could be a primary source of support for young people:

If we can have parents learning how to sort of be curious rather than interrogate, you know, just show an interest, try and be neutral – you don't have to be excited about sex ed but you can just be kind of calm and neutral – then young people will go to them. Because young people want to hear from their parents about what their values are, what their ideas about things are; we know that. But parents are often conflicted about how to talk about this stuff. (Hollie, private sector, sexual education)

Just as there are various gaps in information for young people, key informants discussed how for supporting parents there is a lack of online resources that provide a positive framing of sex and relationships. Key informants emphasised the need for parents to be provided with practical skills in communicating with and supporting their children over the course of children's development:

I think it's about that whole sex positivity thing because if a parent knows that their child is sexually active, they're not going to find supports easily online on how to have a conversation with their child about safe sex ... I know that one of the other websites that's really useful for new mums... but it would be so nice to have the equivalent of that, where people can go through things and read through all the continuum of sexual development and stuff and then a forum that's moderated where you can post questions and have that interactive, whether it's for the parent or the child. (Jendayi, community sector, clinical sexual health/health promotion)

In addition to this, key informants discussed the importance of answering common questions that parents have in relation to managing the changes associated with their children's sexual development and providing reassurance to help parents learn to speak with their children about sex-related topics. Importantly, online resources were discussed, to allow parents the flexibility to choose their mode of interaction

and the most appropriate types of sources and content, and to work around their schedules.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified several strategies for effective digital sexual health promotion with young people. Both key informants and young people note the importance of storytelling and speaking to lived experience in digital sexual health resources. This must, however, draw from young people's expertise and knowledge in order to be appropriately targeted and authentic. The involvement of parents was also noted, through the sourcing of or development of resources that can assist them in talking to their children about sex and relationships. Importantly, young people and key informants stressed the need to recognise young people's right to comprehensive RSE.

Key recommendations based on these findings

Recommendation 7: Continue to invest in digital content that provides authoritative and reliable information about STIs and other sexual health concerns.

Recommendation 8: Fund and resource creative and interactive digital sexual health promotion, led by young people.

Recommendation 9: Fund wide-scale distribution of resources for parents to support conversations with their children about sexually explicit online content and other aspects of RSE.

Conclusion and recommendations:

Building effective online sexual literacy for young people

This report presents findings from a study in which we aimed to identify innovative approaches to online sexual literacy education and sexual health promotion and to explore ways to maximise the potential of the internet to support and augment classroom-based RSE.

The study was designed to inform the Australian approach to sexual health promotion and STI prevention, including the current Fourth National Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy 2018–2022 and future strategies, by focussing on the priority group of young people (18 to 25 years old), who are significantly impacted by increased rates of STIs and experiences of sexual violence and consent violations. This included supporting comprehensive RSE and other sexual health promotion initiatives designed to support young people to develop healthy and respectful sexual relationships.

This study aimed to improve the understanding of how young people currently engage with digital environments to build their sexual health literacy. It also aimed to improve understanding of the ways in which online resources can be utilised to support young people's sexual health, including building confidence in sexual communication, negotiation of consent, and understanding of pleasure in sexual relationships. It sought to identify potential promising and innovative approaches that could be engaged to

support future digital delivery of sexual health literacy interventions.

As noted in this study, and in previous research, young people have strong capacity to search for and critically evaluate digital content and are skilled in drawing from multiple sources of information and networks to research or explore a topic or issue online. As well as general information about sex, sexual health or relationships, young people often go online to develop understanding of their own experiences or to explore personal questions and concerns about sex, relationship, bodies or sexual health. Finding reassurance, validation or solidarity with others is an important part of this. The digital environment facilitates this approach to learning by allowing young people to draw from formal sexual health content but also move beyond this to explore the personal relevance of information or to better understand their own circumstances or identity. This is significant for building sexual literacy. Online environments facilitate a type of learning that is not just about understanding facts or issues, but also reflecting on what this means for one's life, identity, sexuality and relationships.

Digital content has potential to support and augment classroom-based RSE. There is a vast amount of content related to sex, relationships and sexual health available online. Facilitation of online, discovery-based inquiry, as part of face-to-face RSE, could aid learning and be a means for young people to explore and share content in an environment that also involves discussions about digital safety.

In this study, both young people and key informants noted several gaps in formal RSE when it came to topics like sexual communication, pleasure and the mechanics of sexual practices. As a result, this was the type of information, knowledge or understanding that young people were routinely seeking online. In some cases, this would include explicit content, including pornography, that would not be appropriate in the classroom environment. While there are concerns that pornography or sexually explicit content may be harmful for some young people, restricting access to sexually explicit online content, when young people may be seeking this to learn about sex and relationships, needs careful consideration. There is a need for



RSE and other sexual health promotion to build young people's capacity to engage critically with sexually explicit sexual content, but also to support young people to develop a broader knowledge about sexual practices.

The dynamic nature of online environments means that there will never be one simple mechanism or medium for delivery of digital sexual health promotion. Findings from this study point to general approaches that begin with centring respect for young people and developing a nuanced understanding of digital cultures. This includes appreciating young people's expertise in creating, and engaging with, digital content.

Peer-led initiatives have always been an important part of sexual health promotion, and this continues to be the case in digital environments, as affirmed in this study. What constitutes an effective model for peer-led digital sexual health promotion, however, is less clear, and more research on this would be welcome. This study suggests that working with young people to create a presence in online spaces over a period of time is important. This may involve various strategies, but it is ultimately about being part of digital communities and networks and being visible online to build recognition and trust. Authenticity is key to this and so content developed and led by young people is important.

Thinking of online environments as spaces where people connect and gather is also important, as this can shift digital sexual health promotion from being an exercise in creating information resources to an exercise in two-way communication, interpersonal engagement and interactive education. This interaction is not exclusive to online spaces, but often merges across online and offline environments. Young people's offline friendship groups and networks overlap with their online networks. This presents opportunities for sexual health promotion and classroom-based RSE to integrate online resources and digital engagement into face-to-face learning. It also provides opportunities for talking about digital sexual content in RSE, not just with respect to risks but also with a view to encouraging young people to draw from these resources and networks to support their learning.

Digital sexual health promotion may involve content that sparks ideas, raises questions or states opinions – all of which may encourage others to engage in discussions or networks or to explore a topic further or ask more questions. The resources required are not necessarily those which provide comprehensive information about sexual health, but they may be a short video, a text-based social media post or an advocacy campaign using various forums. The aim is to encourage young people to explore available resources online. Again, young

people play an important role in leading this and engaging other young people in issues relating to sexual identity, sexuality and sexual rights (including issues of sexual consent).

As noted in this study, the internet also provides opportunities to support parents to learn about sex, sexuality, sexual health and relationships, and to communicate with their children about these issues. There are already resources for parents available. However, opportunities to promote these more widely are needed. Parents may also be seeking information about online sexual content, including advice on how to speak to their children about pornography. There is a lot of fear and uncertainty among parents about the risks posed by social media and digital content, and there are many resources that help parent learn how to manage online risks and safety with their children. To augment this, resources that teach parents about the ways digital engagement may support sexual literacy and sexual health, and encouraging parents to support their children to engage positively with online resources to aid their learning about these issues, could be of value.

On the following page we outline recommendations from these findings for supporting digital sexual literacy development for young people.

Understanding the needs and capacity of young people

1. Build young people's skills and capacity to engage with digital environments to learn about sex, sexuality, sexual health and relationships.

It is well established that online environments poses some risks to young people, such as cyberbullying or unwanted exposure of private images or information (Quadara et al., 2017). However, online environments also offer important opportunities for young people to learn about sex, sexuality, relationships and sexual health – issues and experiences that may be challenging, embarrassing or difficult to discuss with parents or learn about in class. For this reason, young people should be encouraged to go online to explore these topics and learn about their bodies, sex and relationships. This should be supported by education about online safety and critical evaluation of online content, including pornography.

2. Address gaps in RSE as part of responding to concerns about young people's access to sexually explicit digital content.

It is common for young people to engage with online content to learn about sex and relationships in ways that supplement RSE (Farrugia et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2019). Many young people look online for content that offers detailed information about sexual practices, sexual communication and pleasure, and some of this content may not be taught in classrooms or may not be appropriate for classrooms (Brewster & Wylie, 2008; Pound et al., 2016; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020). As part of this process, young people will likely encounter, or engage with, sexually explicit material. While efforts to restrict young people's access to sexually explicit online content are intended to reduce potential harms (Quadara et al., 2017), it is important to recognise the reasons why many young people seek this content, including young people's desire to learn more about 'how to do' sex, what sex looks like, and how to negotiate sexual encounters. Restricting digital content does not attend to this

gap in learning, and this should be an important consideration in policy or legislative action relating to online safety.

3. Support teachers to build digital engagement into classroom-based RSE.

Online resources can play an important role in providing content that young people are looking for regarding sexual practices, sexual communication and sexual pleasure, all of which are important for building sexual agency and understanding sexual consent (Burns et al., 2019). Rather than positioning online sexual content as inherently problematic, in order to manage risks, RSE educators should be trained to better understand the content young people are seeking online, so they can encourage critical assessment of this content, promote positive sources of information and encourage young people to use online resources to learn.

Filling the gaps

4. Fund research to improve understanding of how digital engagement and digital sexual health promotion can have a positive impact on young people's sex and relationship experiences.

Evaluation of sexual health promotion resources has tended to focus on measurement of knowledge-based outcomes or changes in practice, such as increased condom use. Digital sexual health promotion is often evaluated using impact measures, such as the number of views or clicks on a post or website. Research that explores the role of sexual health promotion in supporting young people to build a sense of sexual agency, greater confidence in navigating sexual encounters and negotiating sexual consent, or more positive sexual encounters is more complex to administer and so relatively limited (Kantor & Lindberg, 2020).

We therefore know little about the ways in which digital sexual health promotion – particularly peer-led, interactive and interpersonal approaches to digital sexual health promotion – supports young people in areas such as development of sexual agency,

confidence in communication, or navigation of safe and pleasurable sexual relationships. More research is needed to develop more nuanced and holistic approaches to measuring the impact and effectiveness of digital sexual health promotion, including better understanding of the ways that young people translate complicated and nuanced information into their practices of sex and relationships.

5. Support educators and parents to initiate open and shame-free conversations about pornography and other forms of sexually explicit material.

Young people are likely to encounter sexually explicit material online whether they actively search for it, come across it inadvertently, or are sent it by others (Quadara et al., 2017). As such, it is important that educators and parents are equipped to initiate conversations with young people about pornography and other sexually explicit material. These conversations should aim to build awareness of the context and nature of pornography (commercial or otherwise), critical insight into how sex and gender are often represented in pornography, and skills to reflect on how the representation of sex in pornography may or may not be relevant to them.

Previous research has shown that dismissing pornography, or instructing young people not to view it, can create a barrier for young people when it comes to asking questions or talking about what are viewing (Waling, James et al., 2022). Discussions about pornography and other sexually explicit material found in online spaces should be a vital component of RSE (Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

6. Resource the development of digital sexual health promotion that supports diverse bodies and identities.

Despite the breadth and diversity of information available online, stakeholders and young people in this study noted that it can be difficult to find content or networks that are relevant to some people's experiences, identities or bodies. A longstanding criticism across countless research studies is that there

are significant oversights and omissions in school-based RSE, and in online spaces, regarding diversity of bodies, identities and experiences (Frawley & O'Shea, 2020; Grant & Nash, 2019; Waling, Bellamy et al., 2020). Disability is one such gap, often due to problematic assumptions that people with disabilities are inherently asexual and do not want or need sex and intimacy (Alexander & Taylor Gomez, 2017). Funding that targets these gaps, such as the development of resources that can address unique needs and circumstances, would be highly beneficial in supporting comprehensive RSE. Diversity in representation within resources would ensure a wide range of young people could relate to the content or engage with peers or educators delivering content.

Developing and promoting effective RSE

7. Continue to invest in digital content that provides authoritative and reliable information about STIs and other sexual health concerns.

Previous research has noted that young people value authoritative resources when it comes to actively searching for information about sexual health (Farrugia et al., 2021), and this is echoed in the findings of this study. This is particularly the case for information about STI symptoms, treatment, testing and prevention, as well as any concerns or questions about bodily functions and appearance. Even though young people search for informal, anecdotal, discussion and story-based online content (Flanders et al., 2017; Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022), they still value and respect authoritative and reliable sources of information about STIs, sexual health services, sex, relationships and bodies. This may include websites produced by high-profile health organisations or government agencies. Investing in resources and content that addresses clinical issues related to STIs and contraception, and authoritative advice on sex and relationships, is an important and valued part of the mix of resources young people access online. While young people are likely to turn to informal online content, and interactive encounters, as

part of learning about sex, bodies and relationships, there is still benefit from investing in the development of more formal and clinical information resources.

8. Fund and resource creative and interactive digital sexual health promotion, led by young people.

Young people are sophisticated users of online environments. They are likely to understand effective ways to engage with other young people with regards to issues of sex and relationships (Albury, 2018; Albury & Byron, 2018; Farrugia et al., 2021). Given young people go online to explore sex and relationships in ways that are personal and relevant to their lives, it is important that young people play a leadership role in development of content. Sexual health promotion initiatives should actively work to resource young people's role in the development of content or interactive/interpersonal engagement and recognise them as leaders in the development and curation of relevant content that can speak to their lived experiences of young people.

Online environments offer a diverse range of content, forms of information, mediums through which people engage with others, and platforms where people gather. Traditional, information-based health resources delivered via apps or websites play a role in the delivery of sexual health information online, but this is by no means the only approach to digital sexual health promotion. It is beyond the scope of this report to provide a list of media or content approaches likely to be effective for digital sexual health promotion. This would likely be a reductive approach anyway, given the constantly changing environment of the internet. What this report does show, however, is that young people seek content via multiple channels and platforms, and that digital sexual health promotion is often about interaction and interpersonal engagement. This is an important point. Digital sexual health promotion is often not about text or image-based content. It may not even be about content. Rather, it may be about findings ways to build peer education or peer support into existing networks or finding ways to engage with young people online. For this reason, peer-led sexual health promotion is

extremely important in digital spaces.

As noted above, young people often go online to explore provocative or sensitive topics, such as sexual practices and pleasure. Health educators are aware of this and there are already many online resources that aim to build sexually explicit or pleasure-based content that is appropriate for young people to learn about sex and the negotiation of relationships (van Clief & Anemaat, 2020).

Additionally, as new issues emerge relating to sex, gender and sexual consent, there is a continual need for new content. Sexual health promotion, and youth workers or educators engaged in this space, should attend to current gaps in school-based RSE when developing online sexual health resources, recognising the extent to which online environments may be an appropriate space to provide information on more controversial or difficult content in some circumstances.

9. Fund wide-scale distribution of resources for parents to support conversations with their children about sexually explicit online content and other aspects of RSE.

Research has found that parents, overall, do want comprehensive RSE for their children, and are keen to play a role in supporting this at home (Robinson et al., 2017). However, many struggle to find resources to support them to have difficult, sensitive or embarrassing conversations about sex with their children/teenagers. Previous research has also noted that young people often feel uncomfortable approaching their parents with questions related to sex or relationships (Waling, Farrugia et al., 2022). This is important, as many parents themselves may not have had adequate RSE, and thus may struggle to know what to say or discuss with their children. Parents may also not be aware of what sort of sexual content their child is accessing online, or understand what material they engage with or why. To reach all parents, there is a need for wide dissemination of resources through schools to support parents to engage actively with RSE when it is being taught and to extend conversation about sex and relationships, and online sexual content, as appropriate, at home.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule

– Young people

Question

Tell me a bit about yourself, what made you want to take part today?
What did you first think about when you saw the research flyer?

What does sexual health mean to you? What terms or words would you look up to find sexual health advice?
Do you include relationships, consent, or sexual desire? What term do you think encapsulates all of those things?

When it comes to sex and relationships, what do you think are the big issues at the moment?

How do you know this? Are these issues that you speak about with friends? Read about? Hear about elsewhere?

Do you talk with your friends about sex and relationships? What sorts of issues do you talk about?

Do you feel like there are any issues that are off limits or taboo when it comes to talking about sex and relationships with friends?

Do you talk about sex and relationships with your parents? (Or did you when you were younger?) Did your parents ever give you information about sex, relationships or sexual health (including recommending a website or online resources)? Was this helpful?

Do you talk with anyone else about sex, relationships or sexual health? Who do you speak with?

Thinking back to when you were younger, and first started having relationships, did you feel confident about talking about what you wanted to do and didn't want to do? And how about now? When/why did that change?

What is unique about online environments? What sex and relationships information is best delivered online and in what formats?

What information do you think should be online for young people? What would be helpful? What format and forms of interaction or platforms should it take? Where should they find it?

Prompts:

-
- What would be the sort of thing that would prompt you to look up info about sex and relationships?
 - What would you search for?
 - Where would you search? (e.g. Google, or do you search for a hashtag, follow a 'rabbit hole' etc.)
 - What are where are the messages you are currently seeing/noticing?
 - Are there any people or 'brands' you follow/pay attention to or are aware of that are speaking about issues to do with sex, relationships or sexual health?
 - What do you think about information you have read online? Is it helpful? Is it trustworthy?
 - How comfortable do you feel looking up sex and relationships online? What are the benefits of this being online?
 - How confident are you finding information, or engaging with conversations, about sex and relationships online? Do you know where to go? Do you feel confident assessing what information is helpful?
 - Other barriers? (e.g. internet, private internet, privacy more generally).
 - Do you find stuff that speaks to your experience? Reassurance? Age appropriate (e.g. when you were younger did you find things online that spoke to what you wanted to know about sex or relationships? Did you have to sort through a lot of info or sites to find information that was relevant and helpful?)
 - Format of information – what is important? Is it stories/relatability/facts/activism/awareness raising?
 - Do you know who is producing this? Is it young people? Companies? Government etc.?
 - What do you remember seeing about sex and relationships online when you were young? What did you think of it (including porn)? Were you searching for it? And why/in what circumstances?

Advice about content

Is there anything that you experience that makes it hard for you to access information that's relevant for you and your situation?

If you could design an online resource for your younger self, what do you think it would look like/involve/what topics?

Within your friendship group, what are the sorts of information about sex and relationships are they looking for online?
Do you think they find it?

How you ever looked for particular information or advice about sex, sexuality or relationships and not been able to find it?
Can you tell us more?

How do you think young people can be more involved in producing online content about sexual health, sex or relationships?

Do you think there is a role for some sort of 'peer education' in online spaces?

Do you think it is important that young people are involved in producing this content? Can you say more about this?

Is there anything we haven't discussed you think is important for this study?

Appendix B:

Recruitment advertisement



Do you ever look for relationship advice online?

Researchers at La Trobe University are seeking volunteer research participants to be involved in a study about how young people navigate consent, pleasure, sexual health, and relationships.

If you live in Australia and are between 18-25, we want to interview you.
Participants will be reimbursed with a \$25 Coles Gift Voucher for their time.
Do the interview one-on-one over Zoom, or bring a friend!
For more information, click here [LINK] or email alexandra.james@latrobe.edu.au

Do you ever go online to find info about health, relationships or consent?

Do you use the internet to help you with healthy relationships and figuring out consent?

The advertisement features illustrations of diverse young people. On the left, a person with curly hair and a rainbow face sticker holds a smartphone. On the right, three young women in swimwear stand together. At the bottom, four young people are shown using smartphones, with speech bubbles containing thumbs-up and thumbs-down icons around them.

Appendix C: Eligibility survey

Demographics information

Please take a few moments to fill out this questionnaire. We may not be able to contact everyone. Please be assured that all information you give below will be stored in a private and secure location and/or deleted on completion of the study. If you have any questions, please email our Research Officer at alexandra.james@latrobe.edu.au

1. Do you currently reside in Australia?

☐ No ☐ Yes

2. What is your age?

☐ 18 ☐ 19 ☐ 20 ☐ 21
☐ 22 ☐ 23 ☐ 24 ☐ 25

3. How would you describe your gender (please check all that apply):

☐ Man or male ☐ Woman or female
☐ Non-binary ☐ Trans woman
☐ Trans man ☐ Trans feminine
☐ Trans masc ☐ Trans
☐ Genderqueer ☐ Gender diverse
☐ Gender fluid ☐ Sistergirl
☐ Brotherboy ☐ Agender
☐ Prefer not to have a label
☐ Prefer not to answer
☐ Don't know
☐ Something different (please describe): _____

4. At birth you were recorded as:

☐ Male ☐ Female
☐ Another term (please specify)
☐ Prefer not to answer

5. How would you describe your sexual orientation (please check all that apply):

☐ Straight (heterosexual)
☐ Gay or lesbian ☐ Bisexual
☐ Pansexual ☐ Asexual
☐ Queer ☐ Don't know
☐ Prefer not to answer
☐ Prefer not to have a label
☐ I use a different term (please specify)

6. Were you born with a variation of sex characteristics?

☐ Yes ☐ No
☐ Don't know
☐ Prefer not to answer

7. Which state do you live in?

☐ ACT ☐ QLD ☐ NSW ☐ NT
☐ SA ☐ TAS ☐ VIC ☐ WA

8. Do you identify as an Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?

☐ Yes ☐ No

8.1 [If Yes] (If known) which Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander group(s) do you identify with? [text entry]

9. How would you describe your cultural background?

10. Apart from English, in which language(s) could you have a conversation about a lot of everyday things?

11. Apart from English, in which language(s) can you read everyday materials, such as newspapers?

12. Which country were you born in?

12.1. [If country other than Australia] If you were born overseas, when did you first come to Australia to live for six months or more?

13. What is your religion?

14. Have you lived and/or worked in any country other than Australia for more than six months?

15. How would you describe the area in which you live?

☐ Capital city or inner suburban
☐ Suburban
☐ Regional (pop. 5,000 or more)
☐ Rural ☐ Remote

16. Please indicate your availability for interviews

☐ Monday morning/afternoon
☐ Tuesday morning/afternoon
☐ Wednesday morning/afternoon
☐ Thursday morning/afternoon
☐ Friday morning/afternoon
☐ Other (please specify)

Name/pseudonym: _____

Email: _____

Thank you for your time and filling out this form. If you are selected for an interview you will receive an email from alexandra.james@latrobe.edu.au.

Appendix D: Demographic characteristics – Young people

Table 1 Characteristics of participants (N = 22)

	n	%
Self-identified sexual orientation*		
Bisexual	8	36%
Gay or lesbian	7	32%
Heterosexual or straight	7	32%
Queer	3	14%
Pansexual	2	9%
Asexual	1	5%
Demisexual	1	5%
Omnisexual	1	5%
Self-identified gender identity*		
Man	9	41%
Woman	8	36%
Genderqueer	2	9%
Non-binary	6	27%
Trans man	1	5%
Trans feminine	2	9%
Trans	2	9%
Gender diverse	4	18%
Gender fluid	1	5%
Charagender**	1	5%
Prefer not to have a label	1	5%
Assigned sex at birth		
Female	12	55%
Male	9	41%
Prefer not to say	1	5%
Age		
18	3	14%
19	1	5%
20	5	23%
21	2	9%
22	2	9%
23	3	14%

	n	%
24	5	23%
25	1	5%
Disability/chronic illnesses		
Yes	6	27%
No	5	23%
Undisclosed	11	50%
State/territory		
Australia Capital Territory (ACT)	1	5%
New South Wales (NSW)	5	23%
Queensland (Qld)	2	9%
South Australia (SA)	2	9%
Tasmania (Tas)	2	9%
Victoria (Vic)	8	36%
Western Australia (WA)	2	9%
Residential location		
Capital city/inner suburban	5	23%
Outer suburban	13	59%
Regional	2	9%
Rural	2	9%
Country of birth		
Australia	18	82%
England	1	5%
Malaysia	1	5%
Singapore	1	5%
United Kingdom	1	5%
Ethnicity***		
Anglo-Celtic Australian	10	45%
Asian (region undisclosed)	1	5%
Central and Eastern European	1	5%
East Asian	3	14%
European (region undisclosed)	1	5%
Northern European	5	23%

	n	%
Southeast Asian	2	9%
Southwest Asian	1	5%
Southern African	1	5%
Western Europe	1	5%
Religion		
Agonistic	3	14%
Atheist	5	23%
Catholic	2	9%
Christian	1	5%
Not religious	10	45%
Pagan	1	5%
Secondary school type (when attended school)****		
Government schools	6	27%
Religious-based schools	11	50%
Other private schools	2	9%
Undisclosed	3	14%
Interview type		
Zoom video and audio	6	27%
Zoom audio only	7	32%
Instant messaging only	5	23%
Phone	4	18%

* Gender identity and sexual orientation are reported based on participants' preferred identity and description. These do not add up to 100% as some participants indicated more than one sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For a list of these identities, please visit <https://www.prideinsport.com.au/terminology/>.

** Charagender has two opposing definitions and is not currently well recognised in common LGBTIQ+ lexicon. One definition describes charagender as 'a fictigender strongly connected to one or more fictional characters'. Another describes charagender as a 'term for a gender which is so personal to someone that they can only describe it as 'me'-gender'.

*** Ethnicity is reported following the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups, developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Percentages add to more than 100% as participants indicate more than one cultural and ethnic background.

**** School types reported are based on participant self-descriptions of the secondary school they attended, noting that not all participants were in school at the time of the interview. School type was relevant as participants were asked to reflect on the RSE they received at school.

Appendix E: Interview schedule – Key informants

Questions

Can you tell us about the work you do with young people with respect to sexuality and relationships education or sexual health? And/or with respect to engaging young people using digital media or online spaces?

Apart from reducing rates of STIs and unwanted pregnancy, what do you consider to be the core aim/s of relationships and sexuality education for young people?

Young people are often navigating complex situations with respect to relationships and sex. Do you think they are searching for information or advice about this online? What sort of websites or apps or forums do you think they are looking to for this?

If we think about what young people are doing online – dating apps, TikTok, Snapchat, Messenger, texting, Houseparty etc. – then maybe the question is about how we engage with young people online in a way that young people will find relevant, accessible and trustworthy?

What does it mean in practice to teach young people about pleasure? What would this look like in an online context?

Do you think the internet is a place where young people to have difficult conversations about sex and relationships, and ask controversial questions that address taboo topics? How can educators or health promoters best engage with this or create space for this to happen online?

How do we best create engaging and non-didactic resources or spaces to support? (In terms of tone, who should write the content, where can young people find it?) What should this interaction look like? What's best in these spaces for young people?

Do you think there are ways we can use digital media (websites, social media, apps, videos) to build young people's skills in critical assessment of online information, imagery or pornography?

What are the barriers to young people accessing information online?

Who should be responsible for creating, moderating and hosting online sexual health promotion/education for young people? What factors do we need to consider?

What do you think we can learn from commercially driven media (apps, social media, online journalism or magazines, video content) about the ways young people engage with information or with other people online? How can we apply this to health promotion?

What do you think might be effective strategies for involving young people in online sexuality and relationships education (as consultants or peer educators)?

Is there anything else you would like to say or anything you expected me to ask you that I didn't raise?

Appendix F: Demographic characteristics – Key informants

Table 2 Characteristics of participants (N = 22)

	n	%
Organisation type		
Community organisation	8	36%
Private business/private sector organisation	10	45%
Public institution or publicly funded organisation	4	18%
Organisation or consultant sector or role*		
Academia/research	4	18%
Clinical sexual health	1	5%
Community organiser	1	5%
(Dis)ability community service organisation	2	9%
Gendered violence prevention role	2	9%
Health promotion role	4	18%
LGBTIQA+ health and wellbeing organisation	2	9%
Marketing role	1	5%
Multicultural and multifaith role	1	5%
Psychologist	2	9%
Sex education role	5	23%
Sex therapy	2	9%
Sexual health and wellbeing community role	2	9%
Young people and mental health	1	5%
Area(s) of expertise**		
Advocacy	1	5%
Content creation (digital)	1	5%
Digital cultures	1	5%
HIV	1	5%
LGBTIQA+ needs	1	5%
Medicine	1	5%
Psychological treatment	3	14%
Relationships and sexuality education	8	36%
Sexology	4	18%

	n	%
Sexual communication	6	27%
Sexual health promotion and information	4	18%
Sexual wellness communication	1	5%
Social media	1	5%
State/territory		
New South Wales (NSW)	7	32%
Queensland (Qld)	1	5%
Victoria (Vic)	11	50%
Western Australia (WA)	3	14%
Interview type		
Zoom video and audio	21	95%
Phone	1	5%

* Organisations and consultants had overlapping sectors and areas of expertise, often branching across numerous categories. As such, numbers may add up to more than 100%. Percentages have been rounded to their nearest whole number.



La Trobe University proudly acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where its campuses are located in Victoria and New South Wales. We recognise that Indigenous Australians have an ongoing connection to the land and value their unique contribution, both to the University and the wider Australian society.

La Trobe University is committed to providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, both as individuals and communities, through teaching and learning, research and community partnerships across all of our campuses.

The wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*) is one of the world's largest.

The Wurundjeri people – traditional owners of the land where ARCSHS is located and where our work is conducted – know the wedge-tailed eagle as Bunjil, the creator spirit of the Kulin Nations.

There is a special synergy between Bunjil and the La Trobe logo of an eagle. The symbolism and significance for both La Trobe and for Aboriginal people challenges us all to 'gamagoen yarrbat' – to soar.

Contact


ARCSHS


Australian Research Centre
in Sex, Health and Society
Building NR6
Bundoora VIC 3086
Australia

General enquiries

T +61 3 9479 8700
E arcschs@latrobe.edu.au

latrobe.edu.au/arcschs

 facebook.com/latrobe.arcschs

 twitter.com/LTU_Sex_Health