



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education
Sector



Switched  on:

Sexuality education in the digital space

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Technical brief

Introduction

As young people become increasingly engaged with digital spaces – over 70% of the world’s youth aged 15-24 are online¹ – it is not surprising that many are turning to digital sources to seek information about bodies, sex and relationships. This new reality comes with both opportunities and challenges. Digital spaces offer an emerging platform where some elements of sexuality education can be made more accessible, engaging, and interactive for young people. They also offer a potential avenue to complement traditional classroom delivery of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), with resources aimed at supporting educators. At the same time, quality assurance is a challenge, and, in venturing into digital spaces to seek information, young people will come across a range of content, some of which may be incomplete, poorly informed or harmful. Educators, healthcare workers and digital content managers are faced with a delicate balance between leveraging the potential of the digital spaces for delivery of quality

content that reaches a diverse population of young people, and the responsibility to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills to critically engage with the content they encounter.

This technical brief summarises the findings of two reviews commissioned by UNESCO in 2019. The first is a desk review of the evidence for the use of digital resources to deliver sexuality education for young people, conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (UK). The review aimed to explore the extent to which digital content can influence knowledge, attitudes and practices of young people 10-24 years old and the potential for digital spaces to be used to add value to the traditional delivery of CSE. The second review involved primary research with young people around the world led by Restless Development, a youth led international NGO.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms sexuality education or information are generally used instead of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), recognising that education in the digital space may not be able to cover as full a range of content and age ranges or learning approaches as expected by the definition of CSE (as per UN International Technical Guidance).

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this technical brief are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

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How switched on?

While internet use continues to spread, digital divides persist both in access to and use of technologies and this has important implications for the use of digital spaces for education. Depending on one’s age, gender, geographical location, level of education or socio-economic status, the opportunity to ‘get online’ differs, as does the level of familiarity and knowledge of the digital world.

The digital divide remains profound between and within regions. While getting online seems relatively easy in Europe or – to a lesser extent - the Americas, in Asia & the Pacific and in Africa internet access seems to be reserved for a minority (**Figure 1**).

AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL:

- 4.1 billion people use the internet (54% of the world’s population)²
- 57% of the world’s households have internet access³
- Young people all over the world are the most active users of digital technologies. Over 70% of the world’s youth aged 15-24 are online⁴

Figure 1. If there were only 100 people in the world, here’s who would be online



Source: Mozilla, Internet Health Report v.1.0 2018

The same gap between more developed and less developed countries is also observed among young people:

- **While in more developed countries, 94% of young people 15-24 years old use the Internet, 67% of young people in developing countries use internet and only 30% in Least Developed Countries (LDCs).⁵**
- **African youth are the least connected. Around 60% are not online, compared with just 4% in Europe.⁶**

At a global level, figures on children and young people's internet access highlight that:

- **Children and adolescents under 18 account for an estimated one in three internet users around the world.⁷**
- **A growing body of evidence indicates that children are accessing the internet at increasingly younger ages. In some countries, children under 15 are as likely to use the internet as adults over 25.⁸**
- **Young people 15-24 years old are the most connected age group. Worldwide, 71% are online compared with 54% of the total population.⁹**

The use of social media has grown considerably over the last decades, with a marked dominance of a small number of highly influential "mega" platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Young people are undeniably more familiar with these tools than their parents' generation, and are often their main users:

- **3.196 billion people actively use social media - that's 42% of the world's population.¹⁰**
- **Facebook reports 1.59 billion daily active users on average for June 2019.¹¹**
- **More than 2.1 billion people use Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, or Messenger every day on average.¹²**
- **71% of the billion monthly active users on the Instagram app are under 35 years old.¹³**

Mobile phones are emerging as one of the most widespread tools for accessing the internet with 67% of the world's population identified as mobile phone users in 2018¹⁴:

The digital gender gap is also growing. In all regions of the world, more men than women are using the internet. The gap is smaller in developed countries and larger in developing countries, especially LDCs. The proportion of women using the internet globally is 48%, compared to 58% of men. This means that the global internet user gap is 17%.¹⁵

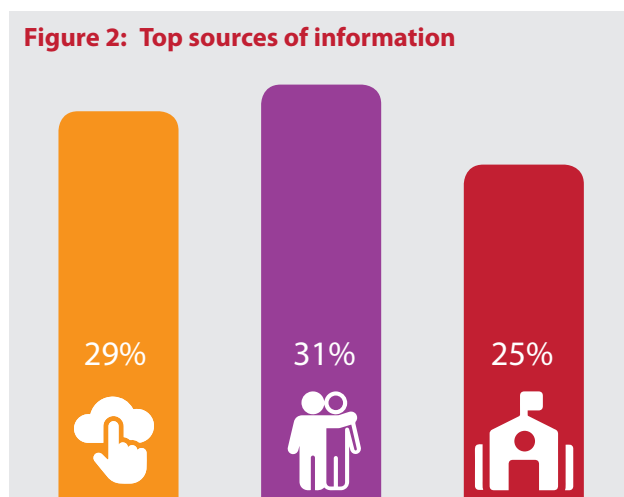
This gender divide with regard to internet access is even more glaring as it reinforces inequalities in the level of education between men and women; there is a strong link between gender parity in the enrollment ratio in tertiary education and gender parity in internet use.

- **While the gender gap has narrowed in most regions since 2013, it has widened in the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and Africa, the gender gap has been growing, with more men and boys having access to the internet and the digital world than women and girls.¹⁶**
- **The global gender gap has increased owing to the rapid growth in the number of male internet users in developing countries.¹⁷**

The digital landscape for sexuality education

With the emergence of an increasing number of apps, web pages, chat groups, social media sites and social media influencers, the sexuality education landscape is changing. However, it is clear that young people are engaging with a range of online platforms to seek information or entertainment about sex and relationships, puberty and bodily changes, and other important personal issues.

In a recent survey¹⁸, young people were asked “Which source they had received the most information / education about the body, sex and relationships from?”. 29% of respondents ranked digital spaces as the top source, with friends and peers (31%) and school based education (25%) as the other two top ranked sources (**Figure 2**).



Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)

Digital spaces can be formal or explicitly labelled as being sites or pathways for sexuality education. For example, a number of websites, apps and chatrooms have emerged with the explicit intention of educating young people about sexuality. Young people also engage with information about bodies, sex and relationships through influencers, chat forums or apps, which may be packaged with a range of other content (including commercial content) and may or may not explicitly aim to educate.

Although social-media influencers are diverse and their followers fluctuate, they offer combinations of education and information with entertainment which is perceived as reliable and relatable to many young people – with some of them having as many as 1.5 million subscribers, and views in the millions.

Young people are not just passive consumers but are themselves thinking in sophisticated ways about the positive and negative implications of digital technology¹⁹ and are at the forefront of creating and curating online content for their own communities.

Increasing access to the internet worldwide means that a large amount of sex-related information or education is received through watching erotic and explicit content²⁰. One major pornography website reported 42 billion visits to their site in 2019, with over 115 million visits per day worldwide²¹. Young people 18-24 years old were the second highest consumers (although data for consumers under the age of 18 is not provided). Explicit content rarely shows safer sex practices and exists within a broader sociocultural context in which stereotypes about gender, sexism, sexual objectification and violence-supportive attitudes are widespread. With many children and young people either being exposed to pornography, or seeking it out, the content is inevitably contributing to shape attitudes, norms and expectations about sex, bodies and relationships, as well as influencing sexual behaviour²².

There are some intersections between pornography and learning about sex with some research suggesting that young people use pornography to learn about sex²³ and some porn sites are also providing educational content.

Important questions are being raised around quality assurance and safeguarding measures on the internet, specifically whether young people are encountering unwanted information and the potential risks of engaging with online platforms. Access to sexually explicit material or harmful content is a concern for many parents and educators, particularly as internet connectivity on mobile phones grow and algorithms become more targeted to reproduce prior searches or areas of interest. A 2019 survey conducted in 11 emerging and developing countries across four regions showed that 79% of adults say people should be very concerned about children being exposed to harmful content when using mobile phones²⁴. Conversely, strict regulations concerning the sharing of explicit images means that, in some cases, educational materials published online to support learning about the body, or sexual relationships, may be mistaken by moderators for inappropriate, explicit content and therefore removed from generic web platforms.

Digital spaces are managed and created by organizations that are based within and across national borders. They have to comply with national policies but the digital spaces are transnational and bounded through cultural and linguistic barriers. At the same time, this radical new space of democratic information sharing is subject to 'the immense power of new supranational commercial digital gatekeepers such as Facebook and Google'²⁵ and their equivalents

in countries where they or their affiliates are blocked (eg. China and the Islamic Republic of Iran). Among questions being explored are particular concerns about the role of commercial internet platforms in promoting online safety and addressing violence. The digital safety policies of these commercial internet platforms that reach billions are increasingly being criticized for their inability to prevent attacks on women and minorities²⁶.

Young people's perspectives

Young people's engagement in 'digital spaces' is diverse, changes continuously, and is gender- and context-specific. There is increasing interest in how young people themselves use, perceive and respond to online content. An improved understanding of the user's motivations and experience — from initial point of access to potential implementation of knowledge and skills — would allow educators, health promoters, and content developers to better tailor content to fit young people's needs.

A recent survey with young people commissioned by UNESCO fills some gaps in our understanding of how young people are engaging with digital spaces, and what they want.

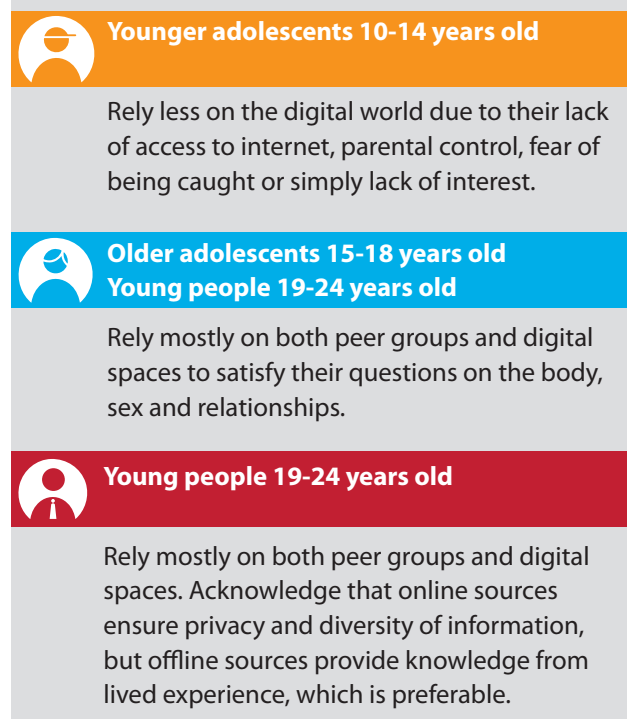
A global online survey was developed by Restless Development with input and guidance from UNESCO, youth researchers and the Youth Panel Members. A total of 3,895 respondents responded to the survey across 112 countries, with a large majority coming from China, India, Russian Federation and the Ukraine. For ethical reasons related to the content, the survey was restricted to 15-24 year olds. Focus group discussions in six countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Ecuador, Uganda, South Africa and Zambia) complemented the survey and were conducted with 293 young people 10-24 year olds.

Young people across the age groups (10-24) report that they rely both on digital and traditional ways of accessing information on the body, sex and relationships - **71% of respondents to the online survey have used digital spaces in the past 12 months**. However, differences in interests and needs can be observed between early-adolescents (aged 10-14), middle adolescents 15-18 years old and young adults 19-24 years old, as well as between young men, young women and those who define themselves otherwise (**Figure 3**).

Of the 3,895 respondents, 45 % of the respondents identify as female and 41% as male with 14%

preferring not to say, or self-identifying in another way (eg. transgender or non-binary).

Figure 3: Preferences for information sources, by age



Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)

The significant majority of respondents had regular access to internet on a device that was only used by them (85%) with only 11% sharing with family or people they live with and 2% using a public accessed device.

Early adolescents report feeling quite guilty and afraid to bring up these topics in conversations with their peers or their family or to seek information online. They mentioned however being more interested to learn more about the changes in their bodies rather than learning more about sex and relationships:

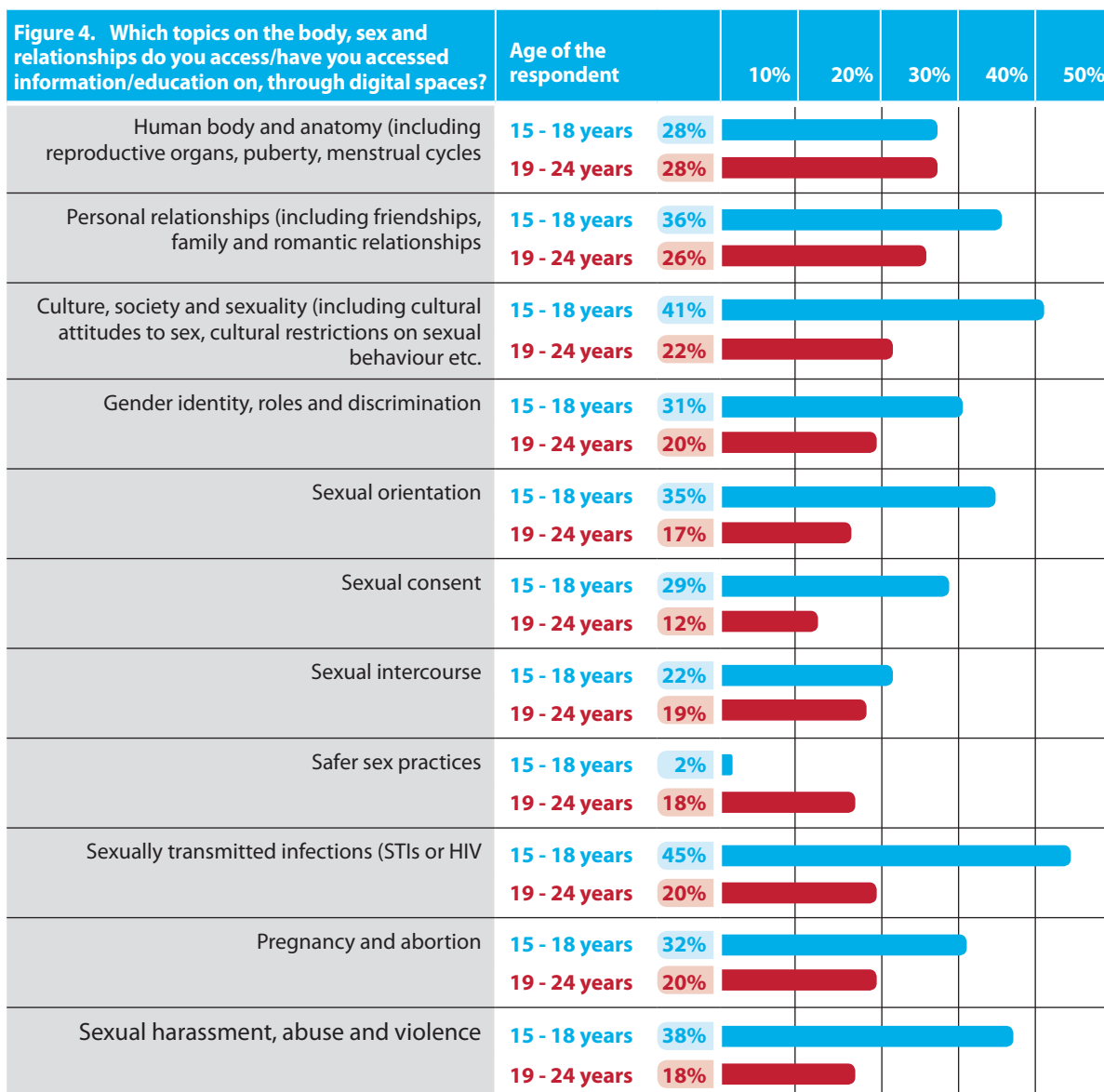
“I was shocked when I saw hair growing on my private part. I was afraid to ask anyone because I thought I would be blamed for what was happening to my body.”

Female, 11, South Africa

Older youth reported going online to seek information on topics that they felt their parents were not sufficiently familiar with or that they perceived as being too sensitive and taboo to ask openly about to anyone. This is particularly true for issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity:

“My pastor preached and admonished me for two hours after going through my phone history and seeing searches on transgender and sex. I was so embarrassed that day.”

Male, 20, Ghana



Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)

Overall, the topics most accessed by survey respondent, regardless of age, are:

1. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV
2. Culture, society and sexuality (including cultural attitudes to sex, cultural restrictions on sexual behaviours etc)
3. Sexual harassment, abuse and violence
4. Personal relationships (including friendships, family and romantic relationships)

However, differences between age groups are also reflected in the topics young people look up online (Figure 4).

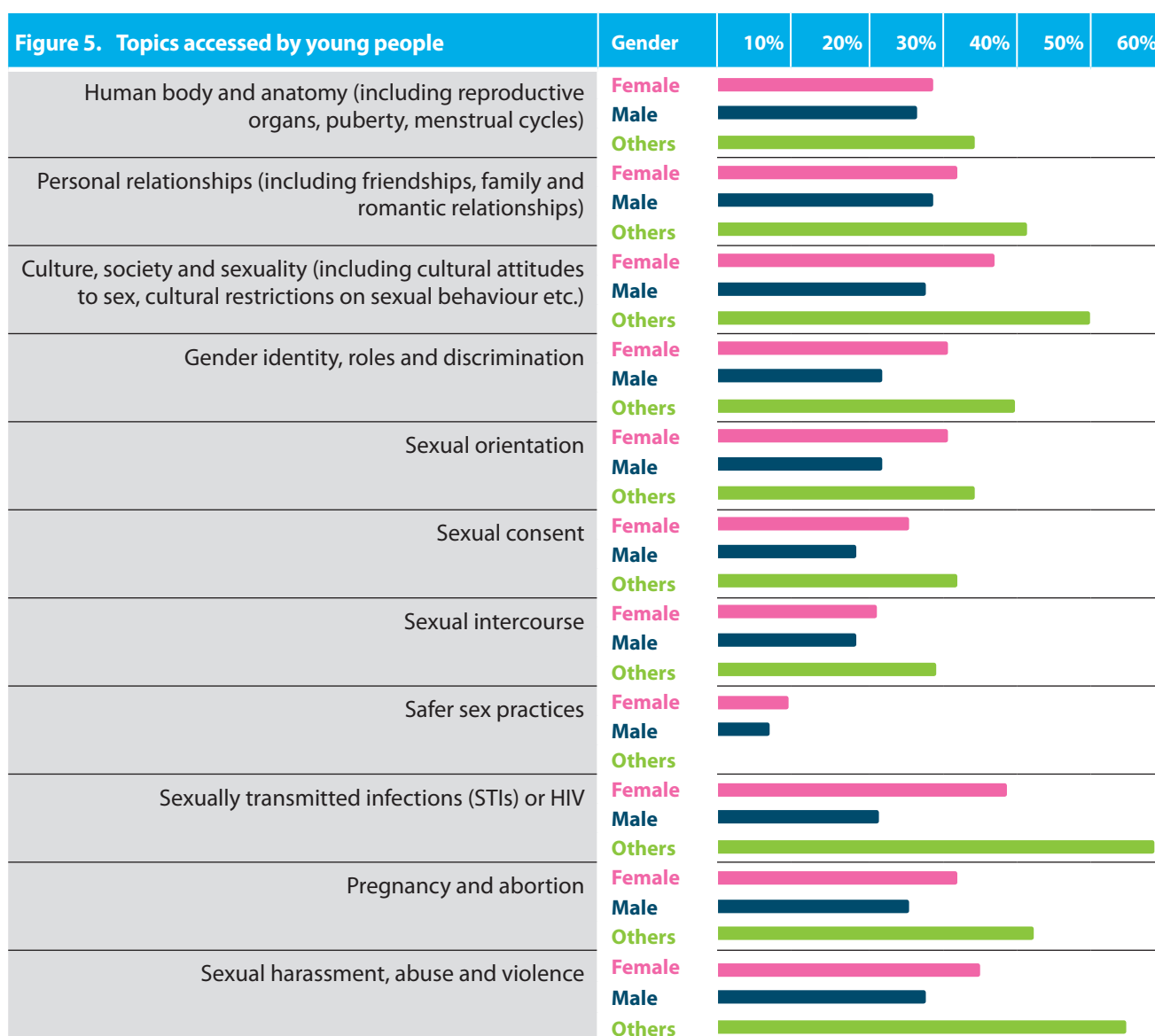
In general, the results show that 15-18 year olds are generally more likely than their older peers to have accessed information on a range of topics, with more than one in three responding positively to more than nine different topics.

This table shows that middle adolescents have sought the most information on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV (45%), closely followed by culture, society and sexuality (41%).

Older youth have reported a similar preference for topics such as sexual intercourse, gender identity, roles

and discrimination and culture, society and sexuality. The most information they have sought has been on human body and anatomy (28%).

The same data can be disaggregated by sex or gender (Figure 5). Female respondents are overall more likely than their male peers to have looked up information on all topics. Perhaps surprisingly, for young men, personal relationships is the second most popular topic searched for, after STIs & HIV. Notably, the survey findings show is that people who do not (or prefer not to) identify with the female or male gender categories seem to look more frequently online for content related to the body, sex and relationships. These data confirm that for LGBTQI+ people, the digital space can be a valuable source of information.



Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)
 'Others' includes, prefer not to say, gender non binary and transgender

Figure 6. The most commonly searched for terms online

The result of primary research with young people, commissioned by UNESCO in 2019



Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)

Current uses and preferences for young people accessing information on the body, sex and relationships

Figure 7. Sources	How often are they used?	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Websites	Occasionally	89%									
	Regularly	11%									
Blogs	Occasionally	96%									
	Regularly	4%									
Video platforms	Occasionally	91%									
	Regularly	9%									
Social media	Occasionally	7%									
	Regularly	93%									
Messaging services	Occasionally	11%									
	Regularly	89%									
App on mobile device	Occasionally	10%									
	Regularly	90%									
Chat forums	Occasionally	12%									
	Regularly	88%									

Source: Restless Development, Studies on sexuality education in the digital space, © UNESCO, 2019 (unpublished)

Figure 7 shows that sources that have been accessed by young people in the past 12 months to gather information on bodies, sex and relationships. An overwhelming majority of young people have used mobile applications regularly, with the younger and older age groups showing strong preference for chat forums, messaging services and social media.

On the contrary, video platforms and websites are used only occasionally for 9 out of 10 young people.

However, when asked about the digital format that they prefer for accessing information about bodies,

sex and relationships, survey respondents identified 'articles / blogs' (33%) followed by 'erotic content' (32%). This suggests that information providers need to take into account the interest and preference for both

traditionally educational content in written format, as well as erotic content.

Focus group discussions highlighted further preferences. Adolescents 10-19 years old expressed a greater trust in the information that was available offline or from trusted resources such as parents, peers or health care providers. A similar pattern was observed in older youth, but they also felt they were able to identify trusted resources online.

The most common way that youth 10-24 years old find information online is through Google searches. They do not report a specific trusted platform for information, but do report using YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Vidmate.

Young people appreciate both online and offline information

All age groups value the privacy and anonymity of digital sources, and in some cases also enjoy the diversity of information available online. For younger adolescents, there is an expressed preference for written information over having face-to-face conversations about bodies, sex and relationships; their discomfort in asking others is likely to lead them online. As they grow older, it seems that many young people also appreciate offline interactions, noting that they may be more verifiable.

Respondents across all age groups reported being positively influenced by the content they access online and felt that it had a positive effect on their behaviour.

The impact of digital spaces delivering sexuality education

Despite the rapid expansion in digital information and education, little is known about the effectiveness of online provision of information or education around sex, relationships and sexuality or its appropriateness for different age-groups²⁷. Equally, the relationship between face-to-face sexuality education (including school-based curricula) and digital delivery has not been fully interrogated, including the potential opportunities for educators to use digital spaces to complement their teaching.

Evidence shows that digital sexuality education can have positive effects on knowledge, attitudes and behaviours and that those demonstrating results are worth replicating and continuing to evaluate. However, few interventions are developed on the basis of a specific theory of change, nor with the intention of monitoring impact. Those that do have diverse content, goals and indicators that are measured at different times, which makes it hard to compare impacts or reach generalisable conclusions about the overall efficacy and impact of digital interventions.

However, there are significant gaps in the evidence base, both in terms of number of studies, comparability of outcomes and a dearth of studies in the global South.

Holstrom recommends building consensus on 'what is a successful outcome, how to measure it, or what theoretical foundations should be used to build interventions'²⁸. The efforts to build international consensus on these issues must be balanced with a focus on quality and content, within each context, so that local specificities can be taken into account and can ground any transferable learning.

Digital sexuality education can be enjoyable and is widely found to be appealing to young people. Digital resources can offer portability, anonymity and (increasingly with responsive and artificially intelligent systems), personalised responses. Creating opportunities for young people to help design initiatives can make them more responsive to their own needs, as well as help young people develop valuable digital knowledge skills they need and desire.

What we have learnt from the use of digital technologies in education?

Digital technologies can be used to strengthen education systems, knowledge dissemination, and information access, and can impact on the quality and effectiveness of learning. New technologies have allowed children to access a wide range of educational content that was unavailable to previous generations and can enable students to learn at their own pace and develop important digital skills. However, *The World Bank Report on Digital Dividends* warns that challenges in delivering education effectively cannot be overcome simply through bringing in technology²⁹. Digital divides persist both in access to and use of technologies and this has important implications for the use of digital technologies in education.

Insights from developing country contexts show the importance of focusing on educational outcomes, and then identifying the technologies best suited to help deliver these outcomes; with the implication that 'older' technologies such as radio should not be ignored³⁰.

What have we learned from mHealth?

The rapid increase in access to and use of digital technologies has led to an explosion of interest in the potential of mobile health ('mHealth') to open up opportunities for health education and information, but there is much less documentation of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) mHealth interventions specifically designed for young people in lower and middle income countries than in higher income countries.

Some evidence exists to support the use of mobile or digital technologies to support adolescent sexual and reproductive health in particular. One systematic review found support for a range of uses of mobile phones to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health (largely in higher income settings). These include SMS-based health promotion campaigns that led to improved SRH knowledge, less unprotected sex, and more STI testing.³¹

A global landscape analysis of interventions in lower and middle-income countries found that mobile phones were used to encourage youth to seek health services and to transmit SRH information to them to increase their knowledge and promote positive health behaviours. This review showed that these approaches were particularly valuable for young people living in traditionally conservative societies where sexuality and reproductive health remain highly stigmatised subjects.

Whilst mHealth approaches appear to offer a cost-effective way to deliver SRH information, the gaps in access to mobile technology, including shared phone

use, mean that it may not be appropriate, safe or effective to deliver sensitive information through these means.

The digital divide, and inequality in access to technology, have an impact on programme design and impact of interventions

The extent to which digital sexuality education intervention reaches people of different genders and those who are marginalised including young people living with disabilities is also not clear. It is not always possible to know the sex of a user, although some platforms do track this information and have reported higher female use and engagement, or, in other cases, higher male use, without exploring the reasons for this. Research on mobile usage in lower income countries demonstrates that access to technology is not a binary case of 'have' or 'have not'³², but is often transient, changeable and with diverse ownership, borrowship and sharing practices.

Sometimes young women's access to mobile technology is mediated by male gatekeepers, making it challenging for them to access SRH information. In some settings, girls might be reluctant to access such services for fear of being perceived as being sexually active. In some cases, preserving the anonymity of young people using these services should be prioritised over collecting demographic information, which might serve as a deterrent to service uptake. Significant challenges remain in overcoming the socio-cultural barriers that prevent young women gaining unsupervised access to technology.

Digital interventions can reach populations missed by other forms of education and online solutions may be particularly important to reach marginalised youth including LGBTI, people of colour or migrant populations. Holstrom notes that "Young people who may feel marginalised in their home towns can find a safe space online for information sharing."

Opportunities and challenges

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Wide-scale and potentially cost-effective approach</p> <p>The internet and digital spaces offer the opportunity to reach large numbers of adolescents and young people, potentially more than face-to-face interaction.</p>	<p>Insufficient evidence to measure impact or real cost</p> <p>Whilst millions of young people are regularly online, and accessing information about their bodies, sex and relationships, it is not clear whether people’s learning is intentional or unintentional through online spaces, making difficult to compare the reach and effectiveness of digital sexuality education compared to other channels.</p> <p>Equally, it is not possible to determine whether digital sexuality education is more cost-effective than the alternatives. Digital interventions may be easily replicable but also depend on infrastructure and the development of programmes that focus on impact, not just on numbers of young people reached. Costs also vary widely between digital modalities (e.g. static website vs. interactive and moderated discussion fora).</p>
<p>Compensating for gaps, and complementing school-based education</p> <p>Digital interventions and tools are justified in some areas of the world as compensating for gaps in school-based sexuality education. In Romania for example, research shows that students ask more questions online than in the classroom, because online spaces can offer anonymity and can circumvent conservative attitudes.</p> <p>Several interventions also situate digital sexuality education as complementing school-based education. These platforms have notably the potential to tailor and target interventions at specific at-risk populations, provide ‘personalized’ responses and the ability to interact with peers who are not local or part of in-person networks. For some young people, such as out-of-school or LGBTI young people who may not be adequately reached with mainstream, curriculum-based approaches, it may be the only information source available.</p>	<p>The challenges of resource constraints in a computer-based sexuality education intervention</p> <p>Technical challenges and cost of equipment may hinder implementation of digital-based programs in schools. In Uganda, the implementation of CyberSanga, a promising internet-based HIV prevention programme for adolescents was constrained by multiple technical challenges and the lack of familiarity of young people with the digital world.</p>

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Digital fora as spaces to respond to and mobilize against sexual and gender-based violence, including other forms of violence</p> <p>Several examples exist throughout the world: R.AGE in Malaysia is piloting a chatbot for Facebook Messenger, which will offer young people guidance on how to reduce risks such as grooming. In Mumbai, India, the NGO Breakthrough lead a digital video campaign to encourage people to act against domestic violence and sexual harassment.</p>	<p>Sexual and gender-based violence and other harms in digital spaces</p> <p>Digital fora can provide space for gendered, racialized, homophobic and other forms of violence. Women and girls, women who experience violence offline, racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTI, human rights defenders and activists, and people in the public sphere may be particularly vulnerable to cyber bullying.</p> <p>The digital safety policies of gigantesque commercial internet platforms such as Google or Facebook are increasingly criticized for their inability to prevent attacks on women and minorities.</p> <p>UNICEF categorizes risks to children in digital spaces as either content risks :‘exposure to inappropriate content such as sexual, pornographic or violent images, , discriminatory or hate speech; contact risks ; ‘inappropriate contact notably between adults and children; or conduct risks e.g. where young people might be aggressive or abusive towards others.’³³</p>
<p>Anonymity and the creation of safe spaces</p> <p>Creation of safe spaces is an important element of how to tackle the risks of harm in digital spaces. Online moderators have notably an important role to play, as they can “create a community atmosphere that enables friendships to grow, and to establish some form of digital accountability for users</p> <p>Anonymity is hugely important to young people’s potential for learning about sexuality from the internet, and also a tool to protect against violence.</p>	<p>What is really private? How to assess the degree of safety of online spaces?</p> <p>Part of the risk can be that online spaces feel safe and private, even if they are not. In some platforms, participants’ messages may be visible to a large and unknown network. Even with anonymity, users can be trackable. Few users are fully aware of how their data is being used, or of their digital footprint.</p>
<p>Content, standards and guidelines</p> <p>Many digital spaces have developed in response to locally specific needs and interests of young people, with content developers or moderators already experience and knowledgeable about SRH issues.</p> <p>The dynamic nature of many platforms mean that new issues can quickly be addressed by moderators who are familiar with global standards or guidance on sexuality education and sexual health and wellbeing among young people.</p>	<p>Content, standards and guidelines</p> <p>Digital sexuality education currently includes a rich diversity of goals, content and audiences, and a range of accurate and inaccurate information. No single digital space can cover all of the range of information that one person may need. No guidelines have been developed specifically for digital online sexuality education.</p> <p>As with much offline sexuality education, content often focuses on risk prevention, not pleasure or wellbeing.</p>

Conclusions

Digital spaces offer a huge opportunity for young people to learn about sexuality, both from content intended to educate and that which aims primarily to entertain. There has been a proliferation of diverse digital spaces for and by young people in recent years, addressing a range of issues from menstruation, sex, relationships and safety. Young people are increasingly using digital spaces and continue to be interested in the privacy and anonymity this can offer.

However, **there is limited research on qualitative experiences of how young people engage online**, for example who is engaging, their pathways for accessing these sites, why are they looking, why online instead of offline, how do they look, and how do they use the information?

With the rich diversity of platforms, content and intended audiences, **there is a lack of attention to the quality of information and education available – notably in terms of the range, accurateness and purpose of content**. A limited number of platforms are created with an explicit education approach, or a theory of change, which provides a stronger framework for young people's active learning.

The impact of digital sexuality education on young people's knowledge or behaviour is difficult to quantify. There are significant gaps in research on the use and impact of digital sexuality education and information in global South contexts. Current studies do not sufficiently exploit qualitative approaches to complement the quantitative research.

Digital spaces offer new possibilities for young people, including marginalised groups, to be reached and to take leadership the creation and sharing of knowledge. At the same time, just as in offline spaces, stigmatization, bullying and coercion can take place, including sexual and gender-based violence.

Structures of power such as government, religion and corporations continue to play out their diverse roles of enabling and constraining sexuality education online, just as in the offline world. However, understanding and holding to account the institutions of power in online spaces has its own particular challenges, as the regulation, accountability mechanisms, and advocacy around digital spaces struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing technological landscape.

“In this complex and changing digital landscape, what remains constant is the important role that supportive parents and educators can play in equipping young people with the knowledge and awareness to have positive understandings of sexuality and health relationships.”

UNICEF, 2019

Recommendations - looking ahead

Make digital sexuality education a safer, more accessible and empowering space for young people

Seek to empower young people with evidence-based, gender-transformative and positive digital sexuality education that deploys the digital modalities young people want. The research shows that many young people want information on pleasure as well as other kinds of information. It shows that digital sexuality education initiatives and other kinds of sexuality information influence and impact on young people; however, the existing research is limited in terms of understanding what kind of impact, and in exploring how different content and mediums relate to different impacts.

Enable young people themselves, including marginalised groups, to lead, advise on and influence content and provision. On average, young people use digital spaces more frequently than older age groups. Their familiarity and skills in engaging with these digital spaces put them in a good position to take advantage of the social and technical possibilities which make possible new forms of knowledge creation and sharing.

Tackle the risks of cyberbullying and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, in digital spaces. This includes understanding the inequalities and risks faced by young people of different genders in different contexts, and designing interventions appropriately. In some contexts, this means recognising (for example) that girls may not feel comfortable accessing public-facing SRH content through social media platforms. It requires challenging the gender stereotyping in sexuality education content and beyond, and working to make online spaces more inclusive of LGBTI people and other marginalised groups. It means creating safer spaces online through moderation and safeguarding, and capitalising on the opportunities digital spaces present to mobilise against violence.

Design digital and non digital sexuality education initiatives that complement each other. Digital sexuality education, including initiatives run as part of school based programmes, is generally reported to be enjoyable. Young people do not necessarily distinguish between the material and virtual worlds, and live their relationships across both. Education in both spaces can address this integration. Formal education also offers the opportunity to strengthen young people's digital literacy skills to better engage critically with the information they find online. By teaching young people to develop their critical skills, we ensure that

they are better equipped to discern good and reliable educational sources in the digital world from harmful and exaggerated ones.

Invest in understanding the impact of digital platforms and effective ways of reaching audiences

Design interventions around the everyday technology practices of audiences in the particular context and prioritise the digital privacy of users.

For example, in contexts where young women are using shared devices that they can only access through gatekeepers such as male relatives, it may not be appropriate to target them with sensitive information.

Develop theories of change and invest in research to understand the potential impact and effectiveness of digital spaces. Using existing theories of behaviour change can help make platforms more effective, and improve the way that difference user-groups are engaged. With extensive guidance available for off-line sexuality education, digital spaces can benefit from greater attention to quality and comprehensive content that is delivered in a manner that can educate, not only inform.

Understand the politics and power structures of the digital world

Navigate changing global and local political contexts. Online sexuality education is situated in transnational spaces – sharing languages, identities, and accessibility from diverse geographies, although the sexuality educators themselves may largely function within national sovereign territories. Sexuality educators are directly affected by the global political context of rising populist nationalism and neo-colonialism in global North and South. Sexuality educators need to strategise carefully to navigate these forces.

Seek to understand and hold to account the power structures of the digital world, such as the state, religious authorities, and relatively new players such as Google, Facebook, Baidu and WeChat, is important. At some moments and in some spaces, these institutions can enable and become partners, while at other times they need to be challenged or resisted. Sexuality educators need to critically examine their own position in relation to these structures, and to work out how they can contribute to a more accountable digital space and a more empowering youth-led digital sexuality education, without putting themselves or users at risk.

