

Sexuality Education in a Digital Environment

With over 71% of the world's youth aged 15-24 online (ITU, 2020), many children, adolescents and young people are turning to digital sources to seek information about health, sex, and relationships. A growing body of evidence shows that young people are extensively using the digital environment as a key source of information about sexuality. Comprehensive sexuality education remains the cornerstone for improving the sexual and reproductive health of young people. Comprehensive sexuality education can be delivered through a range of programming modalities, both in school and in non-formal settings. In the context of the COVID-19 digital transformation, exploring the potential of technology and digital platforms for sexuality education and service delivery has become perhaps more important than ever, with many education systems enabling post-pandemic resilience by complementing traditional classroom pedagogy with digital learning.

Ever-increasing internet penetration and growing time spent online have become natural stimuli for young people around the world to search for digital sources of information on bodies, sexuality, relationships, and love. A 2019 survey, by Restless Development, of more than 3,000 young people aged 15-24, found that social media communities, chat-bots, vlogs, and apps are the second most popular source of information about bodies, sex, and relationships; outnumbered only by 'friends and peers' (UNESCO, 2020). This is echoed by other recent studies of young people's preferences towards sexuality education and information, in both developed (Charest & Kleinplatz, 2021; Fisher et al., 2019a; Fraser et al., 2021; Nikkelen et al., 2020; Scharmanski & Hessling, 2022) and developing countries (Aji et al., 2013; Hampshire, 2015; Narkarat, 2021).

Meanwhile, young people cite diversity of information sources, privacy, and ease of use, as key factors, which make digital spaces appealing and engaging for exploring sexuality, relationships, and safety (Döring, 2021).

Indeed, despite noteworthy progress in recent years, school-based comprehensive sexuality education programmes remain limited in many countries around the world: content might be delivered at an age that is already too late, in formats that learners do not find accessible, by teachers who lack training and support; while covering predominantly fear-based messages about risks and ignoring numerous topics of potential interest for young people, e.g., pleasure, relationships or non-conforming identities (UNESCO, 2021). To fill the gap of missing or insufficient sexuality education, young people increasingly look for information right at their fingertips – in digital spaces (Oosterhoff et al., 2017).

Digital sexuality education helps overcome discomfort and shame that both learners and educators might experience, while discussing sensitive issues in class. Thus, young people report they feel less stressed when asking questions on the internet than face-to-face (Waling et al., 2022). In this vein, personal digital devices provide them with a sense of privacy (though, in some cases, it could be a false sense of privacy), which makes it easier to engage with content, perceived as taboo or embarrassing in specific cultural contexts (Farrugia et al., 2021). While not a silver bullet on its own, digital CSE complements face-to-face CSE (UNFPA, 2020) and cannot replace face-to-face sexuality education, digital tools do have the potential to complement classroom delivery of sexuality education where technology is available, when used well and where issues of equitable access are considered (Jolly et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

To maximise effectiveness, digital platforms and tools and other out-of-school CSE resources need to form part of broader efforts to promote sexual and reproductive health, including the provision of sexual and reproductive health services and commodities. The digital divide needs to be addressed, as digital access and digital literacy differ among the most vulnerable groups and can exacerbate the gender disparities that many young women and girls experience. Therefore, community-based approaches should be undertaken by creatively using the resources available as well as leveraging distance education platforms using traditional media sources such as radio and television alongside community communication channels. (UNFPA, 2020)

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There are also various engagement opportunities, which play a key role in reaching young people through digital. Users of digital spaces can access websites containing formal ‘expert’ information and advice forums, or opt for user-generated content in blogs, social media or video-channels (Nikkelen et al., 2019).

Combining different scenarios helps young people to reflect on, validate and make sense of their own experiences (Waling et al., 2022).

Moreover, digital spaces enable and simplify building communities of people with similar interests or needs, such as young people with disabilities, or those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression (Patterson et al., 2020). In this way, the digital engagement opens diverse and unique opportunities for innovative sexuality education, which goes far beyond a simple ‘search for facts’ and is embedded into their digital lives reflecting young people’s wider interests and curiosities.

While the diversity of online platforms and educational trajectories makes digital spaces truly unique, it nonetheless requires developing and strengthening the digital literacy of learners. Looking for authentic, user-generated content, young people may be exposed to misinformation, pornography, and other types of inappropriate content that can form young people’s misconceptions about sexuality, health, and relationships (Albury, 2014; Litsou, 2021; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021). There is, therefore, a need to build young people’s digital and media literacy as well as provide credible platforms for information and education that they relate to and engage with.

The case studies below highlight recent experiences with sexuality education interventions in digital spaces. Particular emphasis is placed on assessing the effectiveness of digital approaches, the results achieved and impact, which, for the purposes of this brief, is considered as the overall reach, improvements in young people’s knowledge and some other socially acknowledged and desired outcomes.



Examples from the Field (a)

TEENS.KG: Youth-led Digital Media and Advocacy Project on Sexuality Education, Gender Equality and Mental Health in Kyrgyzstan

TEENS.KG (<https://www.instagram.com/teens.kg/?hl=en>)

TEENS.KG is a youth-led digital media in Instagram, TikTok and Telegram, unfolds complex topics related to reproductive health, STIs and HIV prevention, as well as growing up and relationships. A team of youth volunteers develop visual explainers, short texts, and videos to make their audiences, predominantly young women and girls aged 13-24, reflect on the notions of personal boundaries, consent, safety, and sexuality. While employing popular social media trends, TEENS.KG works to fight stigma and discrimination and raise awareness of contraception. For example, its video about female condoms reached 3.7 million views and resulted in 10,000 new followers joining the account.

The project strives to create a safe and inclusive space, where everyone can anonymously share a personal story regarding sexuality, gender identity or violence. Throughout 2022, several hundreds of young people were able to speak out about their traumatic experience of violence, find support and get empowered to stand up for their rights. TEENS.KG's role in combating gender-based violence was acknowledged by the Kyrgyz Ombudsman office, which invited the youth team to advise on reshaping communication on this topic in the country and co-create media content for educational campaigns. TEENS.KG team also joined the civil society advocacy group, led by UN Women, to participate in the parliamentary dialogue on legislative reform in support of girls' and women's empowerment.

In 2022, TEENS.KG's total reach on Instagram was over 1.5 million unique users mostly coming from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (which makes nearly 6% of the cumulative population of the countries). Several TikToks also became viral hits, while receiving over 15 million views cumulatively, complemented by thousands of comments. Notably, the project does not use any funds to buy paid advertisements. In fact, the subscriber base of the project grew organically and has increased during 2022 on all platforms several-fold. For the TEENS.KG team the project also becomes an enabling environment to develop hard and soft skills through a mentorship programme and real-life media experience.

TEENS.KG project was launched in 2021 with the support from UNESCO Institute for ICT in Education

Examples from the Field (b)

Using Digital Platforms to Strengthen School-based Sexuality Education in China

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Increasingly, digital spaces are being harnessed to strengthen sexuality education, including in the classroom. In this vein, with the goal of enabling every child and adolescent in China to have access to quality comprehensive sexuality education, Marie Stopes International China developed the You&Me sexuality education platform. The platform provides free support to interested educators with basic teaching skills to conduct sexuality education. Teachers are supported with lesson plans, presentations, demonstration videos, cartoons, and interactive games. Classes can be livestreamed with one teacher delivering a class online, which is simultaneously live streamed into multiple classrooms and schools.

As of August 2020, nearly 700,000 students in 2,487 schools have received sexuality education conducted by teachers supported by the You&Me platform. They came from 29 provinces across China, with over 40 per cent from rural areas. Over 10,000 teachers are active, registered users.

The You&Me sexuality education package was found to positively affect the sexual knowledge and sexual attitudes among adolescents in a multicentre, cluster-randomised controlled trial, conducted in 29 vocational high schools in Guangdong and Yunnan, China (Hu et al., 2023). Notably, the effect was proved to sustain at least one year after the educational intervention. Through this, the internet-based package addresses the issue of insufficient teachers' capacities and reduces costs. Yet, further research is required to identify the effects of digital-based sexuality education on sexual behaviour.



Examples from the Field (c)

Sense: State-sponsored Sexuality Education Website in Netherlands

Sense platform and corresponding social media accounts (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat) were created in the Netherlands to help young people aged 12-25 know their bodies, discover how sex can be pleasurable, and develop sexual identity with the ultimate goal of preventing STIs, unplanned pregnancies and non-consensual sexual behaviour. The platform is supported and endorsed by the state agencies, and builds up its content based on the national publicly funded longitudinal research on young people's sexualities and preferences.

Sense platform employs several tools and techniques, e.g. interactive characters which help users understand sexual health, or how it feels to be touched on erogenous zones, or how to talk about body, love, sex, relationships.. A particular section of the website raises the issues of sex and the internet, including online flirting, online dating, watching porn, webcam sex, sexting and online grooming. Though young people are predominantly satisfied with the information, games and chatbots they find on the website, the platform also provides an opportunity to connect through a helpline and online consultation services.

With search engine optimization being the key method used to promote the site, most users find the site through organic search. The site is also promoted through Ministry of Health publicity campaigns and collaborations with popular influencers who endorse and spread the word about the website. As a result, the platform sustains consistently high site traffic: a total of 3 million visitors use the website on an annual basis.



Examples from the Field (d)

MAJD: A virtual ambassador for adolescent girls and boys in Palestine

UNFPA, in collaboration with its NGO partners, has developed a virtual character named “Majd”. Majd is a 12-year-old adolescent boy and girl (Majd is a unisex name meaning “glory” in Arabic), and is an ambassador for in- and out-of-school adolescents and an advocate for their issues and rights in Palestine. Majd is designed to be a culturally sensitive tool for comprehensive sexuality education both in and outside schools, providing accurate and relatable information to young people in a way that is sensitive to their cultural and social context.

Majd follows the adolescent journey from the ages of 12 to 18 and faces the common challenges at each age. It conveys positive and healthy behaviours and attitudes to peers, promotes gender equality, and combats gender-based violence. Majd’s journey began in 2018 with the creation of the Brave Student Majd Diary, developed by experts working with young people to raise boys’ and girls’ awareness on gender roles and responsibilities.

In 2022, UNFPA rolled out “Majd – the Brave Male Adolescent” in 20 schools and 10 Ministry of Social Development rehabilitation centres for out-of-school boys. Student parliament members were trained to promote positive masculinity and gender equality. Subsequently, adolescent-led initiatives promoted human rights, engaged parents on non-violence and healthy relationships, established a school radio programme, and distributed pamphlets and banners to combat violence against women, with a focus on girls’ right to education. The school parliaments toured marginalized communities, raising awareness about positive masculinity, gender-based violence and child marriage.

The Majd character has demonstrated a positive impact in providing CSE and promoting gender equality among young people in Palestine. The programme has reached more than 30,000 adolescents, teachers and parents both in and out of school, and has been adopted in 24 schools in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, with 20,000 followers on the Facebook page and 1,000 active users of the Majd mobile app benefiting from CSE through games and challenges. Majd has been identified as one of the nationally adopted tools in the adolescent health teacher and counsellor manual.



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