

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN A DIGITAL AGE



Digital media are increasingly influencing the lives of young people. Around the world, adolescents are using digital media as a platform to learn, experience, and communicate. Across Asia, and increasingly in the Pacific, young people use smartphones, tablets and computers to engage in diverse online activities, such as social networking, instant messaging/texting, and browsing websites/search engines. This connectivity creates both positive opportunities but also challenges on many fronts.

Uses and opportunities of digital media in relation to sexual and reproductive health (SRH)

There are several new ways in which the Internet has changed the way that young people communicate, learn and experience SRH. In particular, the Internet offers increased **access** to information, people, and communities, and increased **anonymity**. These features offer important opportunities for young people's SRH.



HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE DIGITAL MEDIA FOR SRH?

Creating, sharing and accessing SRH information

Building communities and accessing SRH support

Young peoples' use of digital media for SRH

Exploring sexual norms and identity

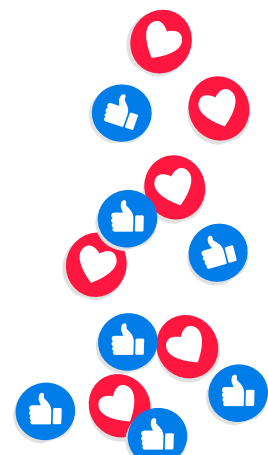
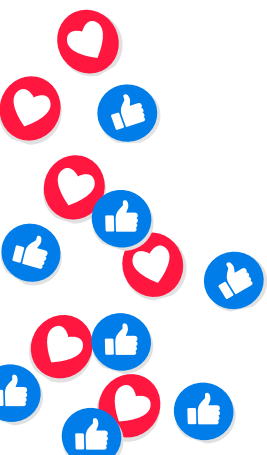
Forming and exploring intimate relationships

Source: UNFPA 2019

Creating, sharing and accessing SRH information

There are many different ways in which young people interact with SRH information online. Social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, have become popular places for sex educators and young people to share information in the form of photos, audio, text and videos. In this region, many websites (Love Matters, Sobat ASK, and Love9) are also present on social media, with dedicated Facebook pages and YouTube channels.¹

¹ See further examples in the main report.



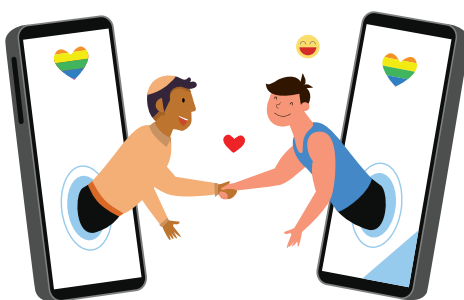
Building communities and accessing SRH support beyond regional boundaries

Social media, like Facebook, allow users to build online communities and stay connected with their friends, peers and family. Through online groups, young people are able to receive support and connect with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (SOGI/E) communities that they may not be able to access in their offline world, particularly in settings where same-sex behaviour is criminalised or highly stigmatised. Through these networks, young people with diverse SOGI/E are able to discuss problems and concerns, openly acknowledge their sexual orientation and identity, and seek information and advice about SRH and other related issues from peers.



Supporting healthy adolescent development by exploring sexual norms and sexual identity

Adolescence is a period of intense social and emotional development during which sexuality, sexual identity, and gender roles are consolidated. Potential harms are discussed on the next page, but digital media can also be a very useful tool for adolescents to develop their sexuality, and explore norms, values and identities, particularly in conservative settings where open discussions of sexuality are restricted.



Young people are increasingly using social media to develop their sense of sexual identity. This can include posting sexually suggestive photos to receive positive feedback from peers. Although the use of social media in this form has sparked intense concern amongst parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers, it is important to consider how these activities (when done safely) can fit within the healthy sexual development of adolescents.

Forming and exploring intimate relationships

Experimenting with relationships, within a safe environment, is a normal part of adolescent development. Like other practices such as dating or flirting, sexting can be part of normal sexual behaviour. For many young people, sexting may be the first expression of sexuality during adolescence. This is particularly true for young people with diverse SOGI/E, for whom sexting may allow private exploration of sexuality and intimacy. Sexting also has the potential to be beneficial as a way of sustaining intimate relationships and is often conducted in the context of a romantic relationship to demonstrate love, trust and commitment. In this way, consensual sexting can have a positive role when done in a safe and mutually respectful context.



Sexting, which means the sending, receiving and sharing of sexually explicit messages, photos or videos, can be a safer alternative to other sexual behaviours, particularly for adolescents who are forming their first romantic relationships but do not feel 'ready' to engage in other sexual activities with a partner.

A 2019 UNFPA online youth survey found that **almost a third of girls**



and **half of boys**



and **half of transgender young people**

had engaged in sexting.



WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL HARMS AND CONSIDERATIONS WHEN BEING ONLINE?

Unfortunately, the very features of the Internet that facilitate new opportunities also create new risks for young people's SRH. Common harms have been organised in the following categories: contact, conduct and content.

CONTACT

- Online sexual grooming
- Online sexual abuse and exploitation

CONDUCT

- Discrimination and cyberbullying
- Non-consensual sharing of sexts
- Revenge porn

CONTENT

- Unwelcome exposure to sexually explicit content
- Inappropriate or harmful content (e.g. violent pornography)
- Misinformation

Contact

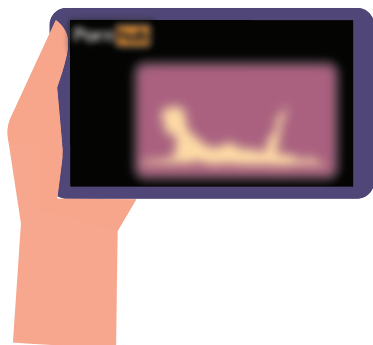
Harmful contact refers to instances where a young person participates in risky communication with another person, particularly where there is a power difference, such as an adult. Within the context of SRH, risky communication often comes in the form of an adult seeking inappropriate online or offline contact with a young person for sexual purposes.

Conduct

There are various ways in which young people engage in conduct online that is potentially harmful to themselves and/or others. In fact, due to the anonymity of online communication, online discrimination and cyberbullying can often be enhanced compared to the non-digital world. A form of harmful conduct is the non-consensual distribution of sexts. A potentially more harmful outcome of sexting is the risk of revenge porn or non-consensual pornography. Revenge porn refers to the online distribution of private sexually-explicit content of an individual by their partner on a social media site or pornography site. These activities can have damaging impacts on victims, such as humiliation, poor mental health, and offline harassment.

Content

Content risks refer to instances where a young person is exposed to unwelcome, inappropriate or potentially harmful online content. This can take different forms, including pornographic content, discriminatory content, and misinformation. Increased accessibility of the Internet has facilitated the dissemination of harmful content to young people. Significant gender differences were also observed, with men consuming more often, for longer periods, and at an earlier age than women. There is good evidence that young people's attitudes, values and norms about sex are affected by exposure to pornography, particularly in the absence of access to comprehensive sexuality education.



In this region,
around half of girls
aged 15-24 years, and
more than 80% of boys and
transgender young people
have used **digital media to**
access pornography.

Another potentially harmful aspect of digital content is misinformation. While there are many comprehensive, reputable and high-quality online SRH resources, there are also many websites and other platforms that provide unreliable, incorrect, or misinformation.



Despite these challenges and concerns, digital platforms present an important opportunity to better understand and address young people's SRH.



For more information, see the full report United Nations Population Fund 2021. 'My Body is My Body, My Life is My Life: Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific.'



United Nations Population Fund
Asia Pacific Regional Office
4th floor UN Service Building, Ratchadamnern Nok Ave
Bangkok 10200, Thailand
www.unfpa.org

UNFPA 2021