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Algorithms and access: How content moderation shapes digital sexuality education

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Background and context

- Adolescents and young people are connected online more than ever
- Globally, 79% of people ages 15 – 24 use the Internet
- Social media is increasingly a go-to source for sexuality education content
- Gaps in school-based sexuality education make online spaces *especially* vital for marginalized youth
- Social media platform policies shape access to quality, inclusive sexuality education content online
- Content moderation can backfire — concerns from content creators



Switched on:
Sexuality education in the digital space

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.

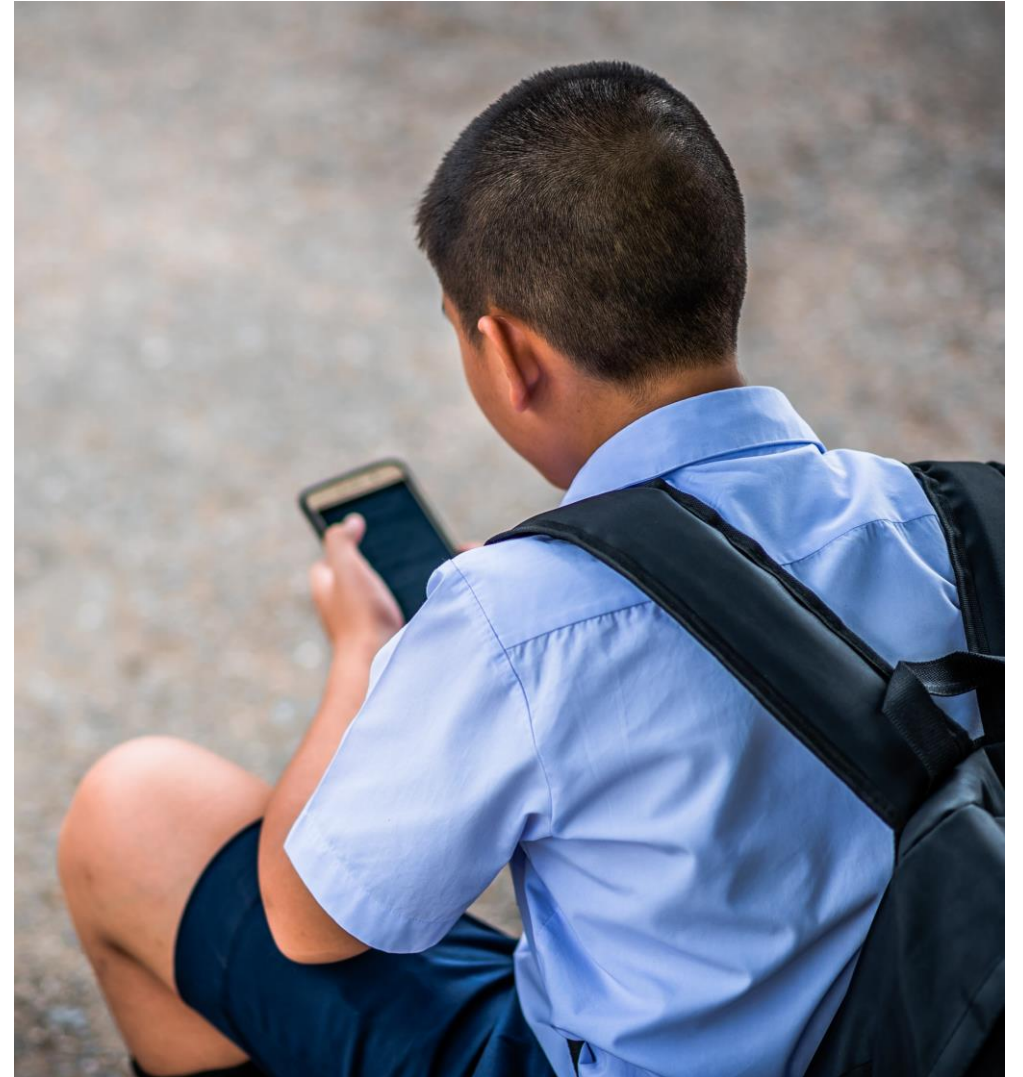
This technical brief summarises the findings of two reviews commissioned by UNESCO in 2019. The first is a desk review of the evidence for the use of digital resources to deliver sexuality education for young people, conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (UK). The review aimed to explore 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).

Objectives of the policy review

1. Assess how social media platform policies affect the visibility, accessibility, and quality of sexuality education content
2. Identify opportunities and challenges in content moderation, governance structures, and enforcement mechanisms
3. Provide recommendations to improve governance frameworks in alignment with human rights and educational goals

Carried out with Dr. Carolina Are, Northumbria University



What we know from previous studies

- **Platform governance:** international regulatory systems and dynamics that define the freedoms, responsibilities and liabilities of platform companies (Tiidenberg, 2020)
- **Content moderation** – human and automated – results in content removal (de-platforming) and visibility restrictions (shadow banning, demotion, etc.)
- Platform governance influenced by **competing priorities:** user safety, brand protection, profit, compliance
- Platform governance is often **shaped by the legal & policy frameworks of countries where major tech companies** are headquartered, with extraterritorial effects on content standards (e.g., FOSTA-SESTA)
- **Sexual and reproductive health content and ads** particularly restricted
- **Dis- and misinformation** persist
- **Marginalised voices** especially affected



Social Media Censorship Survey Updated survey results - May 2025

CensHERship launched an open call for experiences of the censorship of women's health and sexual wellbeing content online on 1st February 2024.

Our initial survey was open for just a few weeks, but we have since left the survey open to collect latest data and we have now had responses from 1,000+ brands, creators, medical professionals.

What is the scale of this issue?

- 95% of respondents have experienced censorship
- 38% of respondents have experienced censorship of women's health in the past year



Why Did Facebook Reject These Ads?

An infographic with a green and yellow background featuring a digital grid pattern. The main title is "THE DIGITAL GAG: SUPPRESSION OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ON META, TIKTOK, AMAZON, AND GOOGLE". Below the title, it reads "A GLOBAL INVESTIGATION EXAMINING HOW HUNDREDS OF NONPROFITS, CONTENT CREATORS, AND BUSINESSES FACE DIGITAL SUPPRESSION ON BIG TECH PLATFORMS". At the bottom, it lists the organization as "CENTER FOR INTIMACY JUSTICE" and "BY CENTER FOR INTIMACY JUSTICE 2025". It also credits "RESEARCH AND WRITING BY JACKIE ROTMAN, CAROL HERSBIE, MNEERA SAUD, JA'LONI OWENS" and includes the website "WWW.INTIMACYJUSTICE.ORG". The infographic also features a small image of a woman and the text "Reclaim Your Freedom".

Methodology

- Seven major platforms popular with young audiences and with public-facing feeds
- Searched publicly available community guidelines, enforcement mechanisms and redress processes
- UN Technical guidance on sexuality education as a thematic framework
- Main policies: nudity, sexual activity; sexual solicitation; news and misinformation; healthcare; violence; and public health misinformation
- Thematic analysis: how policies shape access to content on sexuality, rights and gender expression
- Interviews with experts supplemented the review
- Ethical approval obtained

 Facebook

 Snapchat

 YouTube

 Douyin

 Instagram

 VK.com

 TikTok

Key findings: Analysis of platform policy approaches

Which platform policies affect sexuality education and how?

Three key challenges in platform policies



1. One-size-fits all



2. Juxtaposition



3. Absences

1. One-size-fits all approach:

Diverse content treated through a singular lens

- Language/culture
- Type of content
- Age

2. Juxtaposition of sexuality and harm:

- Fails to recognize the significance of sexuality, gender expression, and education in people's lives
- Pathologizes and automatically sexualizes legitimate educational content

3. Key Absences



Absence of positive and enabling policies : focus on punitive rules at the expense of clear, balanced and positive governance



Absence of distinction: ambiguity leads to broad enforcement where evidence-based, educational and non-exploitative content is treated as an anomaly rather than as legitimate



Absence of pleasure: limited space or ambiguous guidelines around healthy and positive aspects of sexuality, relationships and SRH

Policy language across platforms

- *“We restrict the display of nudity or sexual activity because some people in **our community may be sensitive to this type of content, particularly due to cultural background or age.**”*
- *“We **do not allow nudity.** This includes bare genitalia, buttocks, breasts of women and girls, and sheer clothing.”*
- *“Nudity means being unclothed and showing bare intimate body parts that prevailing cultural practices indicate should be fully covered. **This includes bare breasts of women and girls, but not of men and boys** (including those who are transgender or intersex), or people who are non-binary.”*
- *“Don’t post content on [name of platform] if it shows: The depiction of clothed or unclothed genitals, breasts, or buttocks that are meant for sexual gratification.”*
- *“We understand that nudity can be shared for a variety of reasons, including as a form of protest, to raise awareness about a cause, **or for educational or medical reasons.** Where appropriate and such intent is clear, **we make allowances for the content.**”*

Enforcement Analysis: Policy Frameworks for Implementation

What information about enforcement mechanisms is available? What implications does this have for sexuality education?

Enforcement mechanisms: Implications for sexuality education

Content removal (deplatforming)

Mechanisms

- Content takedowns, account suspensions, permanent bans
- Algorithms & user reports → human moderation
- Strikes system

Implications

- Algorithms lack nuance
- Misclassification of content can trigger false positives
- Malicious user reports and perpetuation of discrimination and gendered bias

Visibility restrictions

- Algorithmic down-ranking or hiding of content
- Shadowbanning, demotion
- Often without notification

- Content hidden from non-followers or Explore pages and excluded from recommendations
- Decreased reach = lower audience trust and engagement
- Limits access to evidence-based content

Appeals & redress

- Appeals directly with platforms
- Oversight Board (Meta)

- Limited recourse to challenge erroneous content removal/restrictions
- Limited feedback
- Risk of (fear of) repeated suppression

Enforcement mechanisms: Summary of main challenges



Transparency gaps



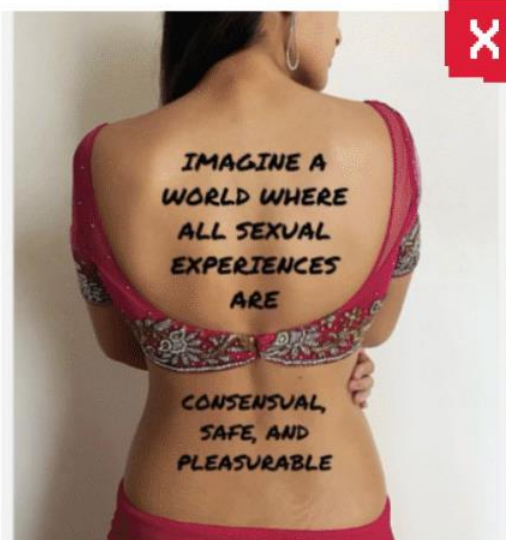
Unclear redress and accountability mechanisms



Limited scope to contribute to policy processes

Rejected vs. accepted

REJECTED

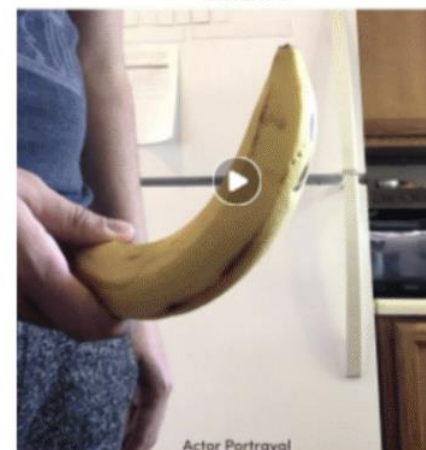
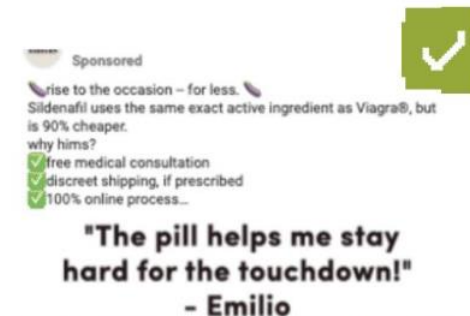
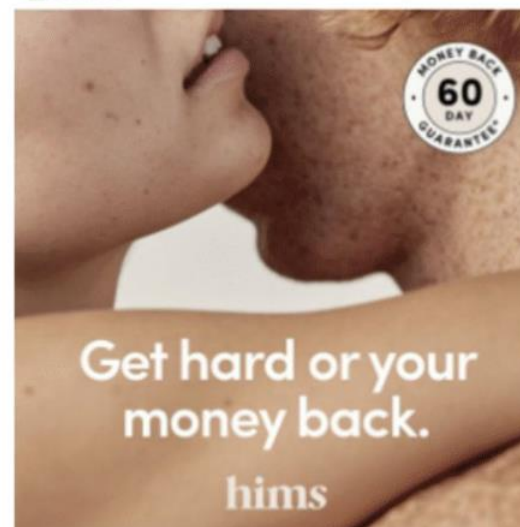
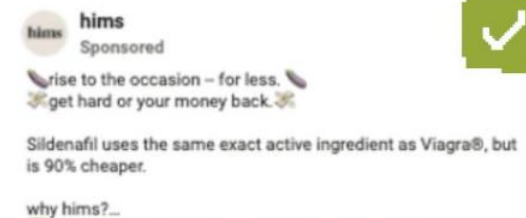


Visit Instagram profile >



leezamangaldas When I started creating sexuality education online almost exactly 5 years ago this is the mission statement I wrote down 🌟

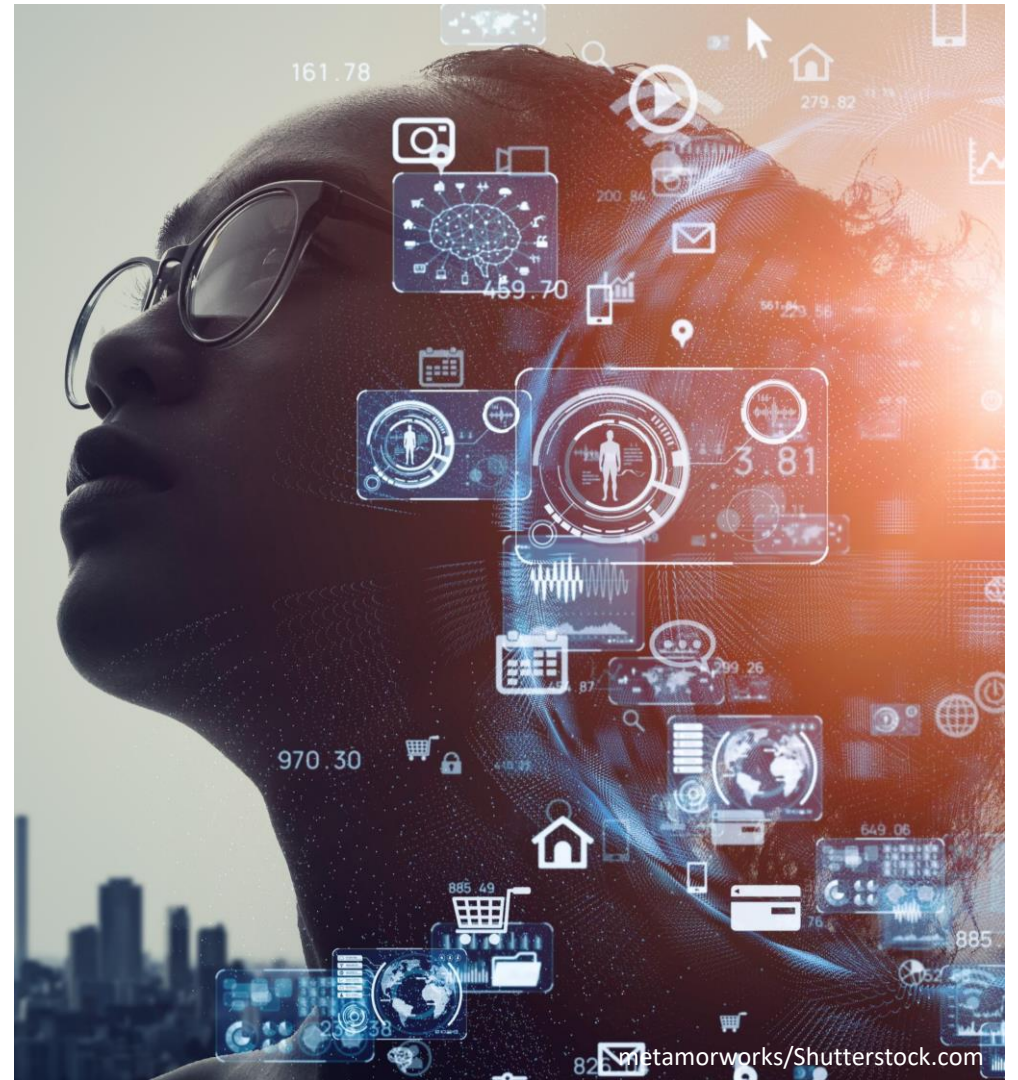
ACCEPTED



Source: Center for Intimacy Justice. 2024. "The Digital Gag: Suppression of Sexual and Reproductive Health on Meta, TikTok, Amazon and Google"

Recommendations

1. Policy refinements: Recognize educational intent
2. Strengthen transparency, oversight, and accountability
3. Adopt inclusive policy development approaches
4. Mitigate algorithmic and moderation biases
5. Expand evidence on the effects of platform policies, specifically on sexuality education content creators, and young users



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