

## **#relationshipgoals: young people's perspectives on digitally mediated relationships**

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### **Background:**

There is a significant body of scholarship detailing concerns about the way young people engage with social media when it comes to relationship and intimacy practices. Less attention has been given to the ways young people *themselves* make sense of digital sexual cultures. This paper presents findings from my PhD research which aimed to move beyond adult-conceived constructions of intimacy and discussions of risk to prioritise young people's perspectives. I explore how everyday digital practices are critical to the ways young people (re)shape their experiences and understandings of relationships, gender and sexuality.

### **Methods:**

I draw upon fieldwork undertaken at a secondary school on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne that engaged with feminist, participatory and arts-based methods. I conducted interviews and repeat group sessions with 14 students aged 14-16 over an eight-month period to explore how young people learn about, experience, anticipate, and regulate intimate relationships.

### **Results:**

Many participants identified their friend's social media feeds as key sites for their learning about dating and relationships. Participants were not necessarily seeking out advice for how to *be* in a relationship but were engaging daily with feeds saturated with 'cute couple posts' and public displays of pleasure, desire and drama. Accounts of digital practices often revealed shifting norms and definitions around intimate relationships, however often in ways that rearticulated traditional gender norms and heterosexual privileges. Participants narratives also revealed ambivalence around authenticity and complex considerations of navigating privacy and risk online.

### **Conclusion:**

Moving away from a focus on risk alone promotes a greater recognition of the agentic and creative ways young people are learning about intimate relationships, genders, and sexualities. Findings highlight the need to better attend to young people's digital expertise (Byron, 2022) and experiences for sexual health promotion and relationship education.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

Nil