

'Recognition of competition' – what can digital sexual health promotion policy and practice learn from commercial digital media producers?

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Background: Recent Australian research has found that the language used in official youth sexual health messaging may be deemed too clinical or 'scientific' by target audiences (Cohn & Richters 2013 and McKee et al 2014), and that earnest slogans and associated sexual health campaign content may be perceived as embarrassing, stigmatising or simply tone-deaf (Byron et al 2014, Evers et al 2013). Young people express a clear preference for sexual health information sources that acknowledge the importance of intimate friendship networks (Byron 2015, McKee 2017), and feature a narrative focus on 'real life stories', and humour (McKee et al 2014, Byron et al 2014, Evers et al 2013) – the same elements that are seen to enhance 'spreadability' in other forms of digital communication (Jenkins et al 2013).

Methods: This paper builds on both participant observation of Australian sexual health promotion policy and practice (Foley and Valenzuela 2005), and the findings of qualitative interviews and workshops with over 100 key stakeholders to suggest strategies that may assist policy-makers and funding bodies, via engagement with case studies of successful (commercial) digital communicators targeting 15-30 year-olds.

Results: Drawing on brief case studies of *Vice* and *Upworthy*, I speculate on how might sexual health promotion practice evolve if young people's digital engagement with sexual health information could be tracked and documented via data analytics that offer both immediate feedback, and incentives for audience-centred communication strategies and techniques.

Conclusion: Both *Vice* and *Upworthy* are built on very different business models to sexual health organisations. These commercial, entertainment-focused platforms have far greater freedom to adopt the 'fail early, fail often' ethos of digital start-up culture, and thus are able to undertake deliberately 'risky' experiments in terms of the crafting and dissemination of content. Consequently, I conclude by reflecting on the risks and opportunities inherent in this alternative vision for youth sexual health promotion policy and practice.

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