

ONLINE SEXUAL HEALTH PLATFORMS – EXPLORING CULTURES OF USE

Authors:

Albury, K¹ and Learmonth, C¹

¹Swinburne University of Technology, ARC Centre for Excellence in Automated Decision-Making and Society

Background:

In Australia (as elsewhere) rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are increasing (King et al., 2023). Public clinical services cannot meet existing demand, and remain culturally, financially and/or geographically inaccessible to many. Private digital testing services may address this gap, but are currently unregulated. Recent research evaluates the “quality, reliability and accessibility” of services, but does not consider service user perspectives (Cardwell et al., 2023). Thus, we seek to better understand how and why Australians are using online testing services for sexual health, via a case study of the *STigmaHealth* platform.

Methods:

Interviews were conducted across two Australian projects exploring digital cultures of use among adults of diverse genders and sexualities. The first investigated the digital health-seeking practices of adults who practice consensual non-monogamy (n=17). The second interviewed LGBTQ+ adult users of sextech (n=15), and sextech/medtech founders and retailers (n=10), seeking insights into everyday experiences and conceptualisations of digital sexual health and wellbeing.

Results:

Participant accounts of *STigma* use demonstrated high levels of economic and social capital, and high levels of health literacy, a finding aligned with recent research (Iyamu et al 2023). *STigma* was preferred because digital test results could be easily copied and shared as part of multi-partner sexual negotiations. Where testing guidelines discourage frequent and comprehensive testing in face-to-face healthcare settings, online testing platforms provided an accessible avenue for regular non-symptomatic testing. This offered significant advantages in complex sexual networks, given that digital access to test results is not common in Australian health services, and the majority of dating apps and platforms in Australia do not easily afford sharing of STI and HIV status.

Conclusion:

This paper argues that the critical evaluation of digital health platforms demands both an attention to health policy and ‘quality indicators’, and a consideration of diverse sexual sub-cultures and communities’ cultures of use.

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