



THE DIVERSE BUT COMMON DEFINITIONS OF SEX FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

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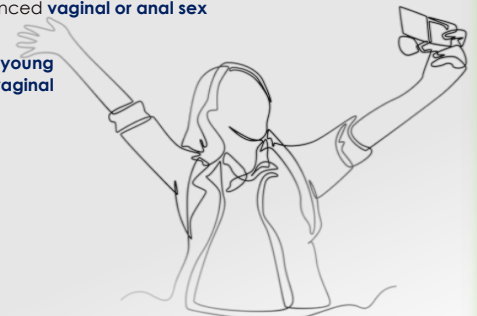
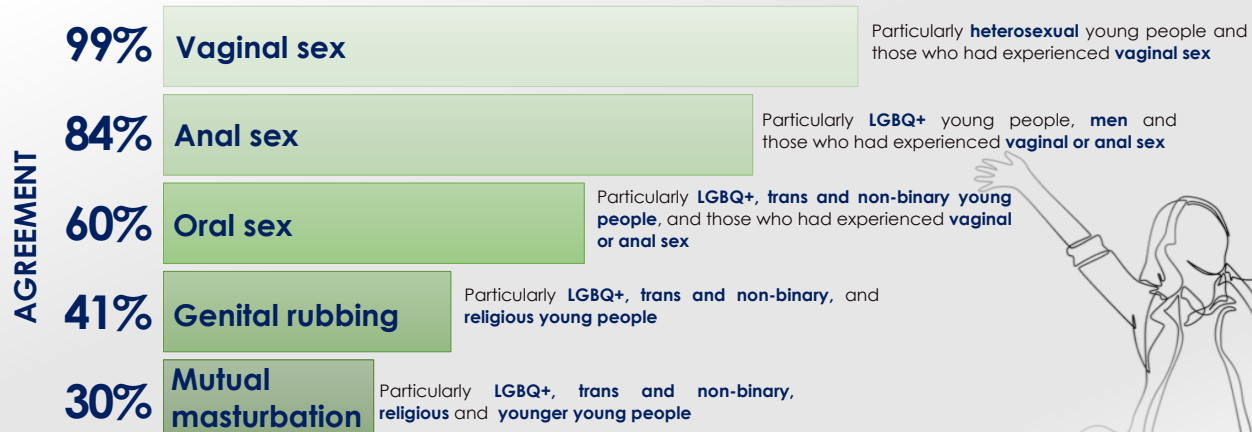
BACKGROUND

Young people define sex in many ways. For some, sex is defined only as vaginal intercourse, or vaginal and anal intercourse, while other definitions allow for more diverse sexual practices including oral sex. Understanding young people's perceptions and definitions of sex can improve communication between health professionals, educators and young people about STIs, consent and sex in general.

METHOD

We analysed data collected in the 2021 Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health, an Australian-wide online survey of 14-18-year-olds. Young people who completed the questions about definitions of sex were included in the sample (n = 6,043). This analysis focused on multiple choice and free text questions about defining the term 'sex'. Multiple logistic regression analyses compared definitions of sex with a variety of characteristics including gender, sexuality (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or other terms that describe non-heterosexual identities [LGBQ+] compared to heterosexual), age, cultural and linguistic diversity (CaLD), religiosity, and sexual practices. Content analysis explored open-ended responses for definitions of sex.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEFINITIONS OF SEX



Note: These definitions were included in young people's definitions of sex but were not their sole definition of sex. Only significant results ($p < .05$) from the multiple logistic regression analyses are listed. Odds ratios, confidence intervals and p values are provided in the supplementary material.

MANY DEFINITIONS OF SEX

Qualitative responses demonstrated the variety of practices included in young people's definitions of sex.

- Sexual acts that involves **orgasm** or **pleasure**
- Sexual acts between **two women**
- Definitions of sex vary **depending on sexuality**
- Sex has **different meaning** for **different people**
- Sex can include the use of **sex toys**
- Sex can be **anything**



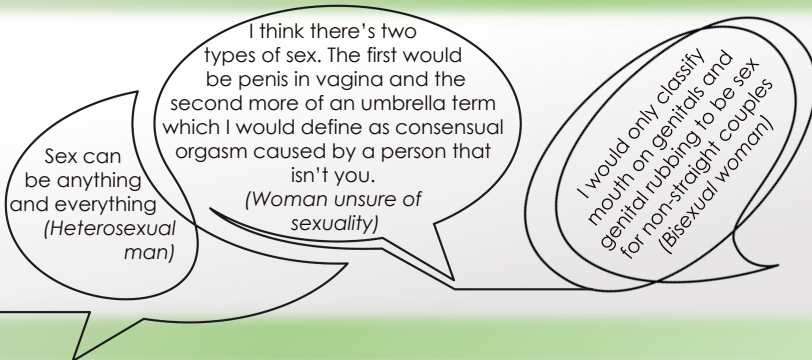
RELEVANT RESEARCH

Power et al. (2022). The 7th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2021.

Bersamin et al. (2007). Defining virginity and abstinence: Adolescents' interpretations of sexual behaviors. *JAH*, 41(2), 182-188.

Bogart et al. (2000). Is it "sex"? College students' interpretations of sexual behavior terminology. *JSR*, 37(2), 108-116.

Carpenter (2001). The ambiguity of "having sex": The subjective experience of virginity loss in the United States. *JSR*, 38(2), 127-139.



CONCLUSION

While penetrative vaginal and anal sex were included in most young people's definition of sex, young people also included a diverse range of sexual practices that do not consistently align with common definitions used in sex education and sexual health services. Young people's definitions varied by gender, sexuality and their sexual practices suggesting that when health professionals and educators discuss sex with young people, care is required to ensure a common understanding.

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