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Social Media and Sex Education

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Internet in general and
social media in particular (Aichner et al., 2021)
have become increasingly important spaces for
sex education (short: sex ed.; Döring 2009, Flinn
et al. 2023; Gabarron & Wynn 2016). Various
characteristics of social media platforms make
them attractive for the dissemination of sex edu-
cation from the perspective of both sex informa-
tion seekers and sex educators.

Sex information seekers value online sex edu-
cation because they can access educational mate-
rial or sexual advice anytime anywhere in a
discreet manner. For every sexual question or
topic imaginable, some form of formal and/or
informal online sex education is available. In
offline contexts, however, there may not even be
one single expert or peer role model available.
Also, in anonymous or pseudonymous online
contexts, people are more comfortable sharing
their sexual questions and experiences because
they do not feel as much shame, guilt, or fear.
Still, access to sex education on social media has
sparked polarized debates regarding its benefits

and risks: Some argue that sex education on social
media can be empowering for young people, espe-
cially if they can access comprehensive digital sex
education and find role models that are lacking
offline (e.g., social media influencers who serve as
empowering role models for queer and trans
youth; Manduley et al. 2018). At the same time,
others argue that young people are at risk of being
exposed to age-inappropriate or misleading sex-
ual information on social media (e.g., adolescent
boys and young men receiving sex information
from online pornography or from misogynistic
online communities such as pickup artists or
incels [involuntary celibates]; Waling 2022).

Sex educators have embraced social media
since its invention, aiming to meet the needs of
sex information seekers and their ever-changing
media use habits (Johnston 2017). On social
media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or
TikTok sex educators can reach a much larger
audience than in face-to-face workshops or with
printed brochures and flyers. They can also pre-
sent their information in interesting ways through
videos, animations, games, illustrations, or quiz-
zes. And they can interact with their audiences,
collecting their questions and comments and
engaging in meaningful dialogue. While tradi-
tional mass media restrict participation through
gatekeeping, social media allow anyone to create
an account and share their sex education mes-
sages, whether they are professional sex educators
or lay persons acting as peer educators. The lack
of gatekeeping and content control on social

media has led to polarized debates. While some see the lack of gatekeeping as an opportunity for broad participation and democratization of sex education on social media (Manduley et al. 2018), others highlight the dangers of lack of gatekeeping in the form of information overload and the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Cookingham & Ryan 2015; Todaro et al. 2018). Still others point out that lack of gatekeeping on social media is an illusion as many platforms—more or less openly—prevent the dissemination of certain types of sex education or the involvement of certain types of sex educators based on national laws, community rules, and algorithmic control (e.g., Duffy & Meisner 2023). Sex education content creators attempt to circumvent these control regimes, for example through self-censorship and with so-called algospeak (e.g., using "seggs" for "sex" or "le$bean" for "lesbian" on TikTok to circumvent content bans; Steen et al. 2023).

Given the increasing amount of sex education on social media and the ongoing controversies about its opportunities and challenges, there is a growing interest among sex educators and sex researchers in answering the following five questions: Who provides sex education on social media? What topics are addressed by sex education on social media? What is the information quality of sex education on social media? Who uses sex education on social media and how? What are the effects of sex education on social media? This chapter will answer these questions based on the current state of research and illustrative examples.

Who Provides Sex Education on Social Media?

Whether people search for "abortion," "sexual abuse," or "female orgasm" on social media, the sexual information they find is provided by four main types of content providers: (1) media professionals, (2) sexual health professionals, (3) lay persons, and (4) political, religious, commercial, and other actors.

- *Media Professionals*: Journalists regularly cover issues relevant to sexual and reproductive health. For example, events such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States in 2021 have led to an outpouring of mass media coverage educating the public about the legal, ethical, medical, and psychological dimensions of abortion. Today, media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television stations typically distribute their content not only through traditional channels but also on social media platforms. That's why—in the area of social media sex education—individual media professionals as well as media organizations are highly visible as providers of the most popular social media posts on many sexual and reproductive health topics. For example, a content analysis of the top-ranked German-language abortion videos on YouTube found that 83% of the videos were provided by media professionals (Döring, 2023). The prominent role of media professionals is also evident when looking at different topics, languages, and platforms. Media professionals gather and fact-check sexual information from various sources in their reporting.

- *Sexual Health Professionals*: Sexual health professionals such as trained physicians, psychologists, or sex educators have become relevant providers of sex education on social media. Leading sexual health organizations such as Planned Parenthood provide sex education content on Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, and YouTube. Individual sexual health professionals have managed to become regular and popular providers of sex ed. content on social media. Examples include Dr. Lindsey Doe from the United States with her English-language podcast and YouTube channel "Sexplanations" (>1 mil subscribers), ObGyn Physician Danielle Jones from the United States with her YouTube channel "Mama Doctor Jones" (>1.3 mil subscribers), sexologist Lic. Cecilia Ce from Argentina with her Spanish-language Instagram account "lic. ceciliace" (>1 mil subscribers), gynecologist Dr. Sheila de Liz from Germany and her

medical and psychological colleagues with their German-language TikTok channel "DoktorSex" (>1 mil subscribers), and sexual health professor Dr. Liu Wenli with her Chinese-language educational accounts on Bilibili, Baidu, WeChat, and Weibo (Yiping & Lingping 2023). A content analysis of the top-ranked German-language contraception posts on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok found that 17% were provided by sexual health professionals (Döring et al. 2023). Sexual health professionals use their professional expertise to create and disseminate informative and entertaining sex education material on social media.

- *Lay Persons*: Lay persons with diverse sexual identities and lifestyles serve as peer sex educators on social media. They share their personal experiences and provide insights into their daily lives to encourage others in their sexual self-reflection and self-expression. Previous studies have pointed to peer sex educators from the LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, intersex, queer, plus) community who share stories of coming out or everyday struggles as part of a homosexual couple (e.g., Lovelock 2019; McBean 2014; Manduley et al. 2018). Minorities within minorities are represented on social media, such as non-binary trans YouTubers and trans YouTubers of color (Miller 2019). Women support and educate each other online, for example in finding the best sex toys through sex toy review videos or weblogs, and are breaking with the social norm of female sexual modesty. People with various disabilities and chronic illnesses also share their sexual knowledge. While the academic literature acknowledges peer sex educators with inclusive messages that are consistent with the human rights-based *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* (SRHR) framework, it also warns of lay persons who spread harmful messages. Examples are misogynistic, anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, and other hateful massages from groups within the so-called manosphere such as PUAs (pick-up artists), MGTOW (men going their own way), incels (involuntary celibates), or other types of "alpha male" ideology (Han & Yin 2023). Within the manosphere, references to evolutionary psychology are often used to falsely prove misogynistic ideologies about female sexuality (Bachaud & Johns 2023). Some peer sex educators gain notoriety, go through a process of professionalization and commercialization, and end up selling their coaching sessions, books, and workshops. Overall, peer sex educators use their experiential knowledge as well as external sources to create their sex education messages.

- *Political, Religious, Commercial, and Other Actors*: Sexual and reproductive health issues are often at the center of controversial legal and ethical debates. As a result, political and religious individual actors and organizations are also visible as sex education providers on social media. Based on their political and religious ideologies they disseminate sex education messages that are often one-sided and not necessarily in line with the SRHR framework. Last but not least, commercial companies (e.g., condom brands, Xu et al. 2023) use social media to disseminate sex education information in the context of marketing their products or services (e.g., condoms, innovative sex toys, or menstruation products). This mixed group of actors is the smallest among the different providers of sex education on social media.

Reliable statistics on the number and reach of different social media sex education providers are not available. There is also little research on the backgrounds and operations of social media sex ed. providers. A particular problem that sex ed. creators face is the content control of the social media platforms, which they try to circumvent through self-censorship, algospeak (Steen et al. 2023), and public manifestos (e.g., Stardust et al. 2022). Overall, there seems to be a consensus in the sex education field that more sexual health professionals should embrace social media to ensure the provision of high-quality sex education content on all relevant social media platforms and in all languages (Yiping & Lingping 2023).

What Topics Are Addressed by Sex Education on Social Media?

There is no national or international catalogue of the most widely used sex education materials on social media. Therefore, it is also not possible to provide statistical data on their thematic scope. However, based on observations and ongoing discussions in the field, five claims about how social media sex education topics differ from traditional, risk- and biology-focused formal sex education (Fine 1988; Fine & McClelland 2006) seem plausible but need to be empirically tested (Döring 2021; Fowler et al. 2022):

- *Social media sex education covers all the topics suggested as relevant by traditional, risk- and biology-focused sex education curricula.* Social media sex education materials include basic biology and body knowledge, prevention of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus; e.g., Lewis & Melendez-Torres 2023) and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), prevention of unintended pregnancy, and prevention of sexual violence.
- *Social media sex education covers topics related to sexual pleasure and well-being more frequently and in more detail than traditional sex education.* In particular, peer sex educators talk openly about different techniques for solo and partnered sex, the use of sex toys, or positive romantic and sexual experiences. For example, female peer sex educators challenge social norms of female sexual modesty and sexual double standards and encourage other women to explore their sexual desires (Sciberras & Tanner 2023).
- *Social media sex education covers topics related to gender and sexual identity and diversity more frequently and in more detail than traditional sex education.* Peer sex educators from queer and trans but also from ace (asexual spectrum) or polyamorous communities provide respective first-hand information and focus more on psychological, social, and political dimensions of sexuality as opposed to biology (e.g., "MANstruation": Kosher et al. 2023; the "genderbread man": Van Wichelen et al. 2023).
- *Social media sex education covers topics relevant to adults and seniors more frequently and in more detail than traditional sex education.* Traditional sex education is mainly aimed at young people, but all age groups are active on social media, so material and advice is provided for all age groups (e.g., sexual activity during adolescence, after menopause, with chronic illness, or with physical and mental disability; Curtiss et al. 2023).
- *Social media sex education covers topics related to online sexual activities (OSA) more frequently and in more detail than traditional sex education.* Social media sex educators, by definition, are familiar with the many intersections between sexuality and digital media. They often address OSA such as sexting, online dating, online pornographies, and online harassment, and thus can and should help their audiences improve their sexual literacy for the digital age (Pinsky 2023).

Beyond the differences in content between offline and online sex education, it is also unclear how online and offline sex education differ in terms of teaching formats and pedagogical and didactic measures (Almanssori & Stanley 2022). Other unanswered questions include how best to use different social media platforms to teach about sexuality (Duggan 2023), how to circumvent platform bans on sexual content (Soares 2022), and how to engage stakeholders from the respective target groups (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities; Curtiss et al. 2023).

What Is the Information Quality of Sex Education on Social Media?

A common concern about sex education on social media is the perceived questionable and low quality of information. Since social media platforms, by definition, allow all users to upload their own user-generated content (UGC) without any quality control, social media sex education material is

viewed with suspicion. Indeed, there is sex education content on social media that contradicts human rights and the values of the SRHR framework (e.g., sex education within the manosphere). Furthermore, sex educators whose content is in line with the SRHR framework may still provide incomplete, biased, or inaccurate information. Poor information quality can occur, for example, when professional or peer sex educators are guided by prejudice, are not up to date with the latest research, do not carefully and repeatedly correct all their messages, or deliberately push a biased agenda to attract attention. Analyses of media quality report varying but notable prevalence rates of misinformation (Döring & Conde 2021):

- Of all N = 25 German-language Wikipedia entries on contraception methods, 36% had low information quality according to the modified DISCERN index (Döring et al. 2022b).
- Of N = 155 English-language YouTube videos on premature ejaculation, 57% provided "poor" information (Kaynak et al. 2020).
- Of the N = 250 top-ranked German-language contraception videos on TikTok, 72% had low information quality according to the modified DISCERN index (Döring et al. 2023).
- Of the N = 42 most popular YouTube videos on male infertility, 90% were given mediocre to bad-quality evaluations by experts (Ku et al. 2020).

However, individual error rates in social media sex ed. materials are not very informative without any meaningful benchmarks or comparative data (Döring 2021). The same or even higher error rates could be found in offline contexts such as sex education at the kitchen table, in the schoolyard, or in the doctor's office, if one were to analyze them. The trope of unreliable social media content has not been convincingly supported by data, and comparative analyses are needed. Also, the activities of peer sex educators on social media should not be seen as a problem of information quality per se as peer educators often provide different information (mainly experiential

knowledge) than experts (mainly factual knowledge). In order to promote sexual literacy, access to both types of knowledge may be helpful for sex information seekers. For example, in order to make informed decisions about contraception, it is helpful for individuals to have factual information from experts about what methods are available, how they work, and how safe they are. It is also helpful to hear from peers about their practical experiences with the different methods. Last but not least, misinformation on social media often does not go uncommented and uncriticized by attentive fellow users. To fully evaluate information quality, it is therefore relevant to analyze public reactions to misinformation such as the top comments on problematic YouTube or TikTok videos (Southerton & Clark 2023).

Who Uses Sex Education on Social Media and How?

The use of social media for sex education is widespread among the population. However, certain *characteristics of populations* lead to particularly intense use: People who lack access to targeted, comprehensive sex education in their offline environments (e.g., because of their cultural, religious, or family background or sexual minority status) are more likely to make use of social media sex education. For example, interview studies show how LGBTQ+ youth use search engines to access social media sex education (Delmonaco et al., 2020). Additionally, youth with limited access to sex education in school are more likely to turn to the Internet and social media for sex information.

Apart from population characteristics, the search for sexuality education on social media can be triggered by various *situational factors*, such as normative developmental tasks (e.g., first visit to the gynecologist), relationship or health problems (e.g., relationship conflict, or breakup, recent sexual dysfunction, genital itching), or surprising public events (e.g., unexpected coming out of a celebrity as queer, transgender, or HIV-positive) as well as regular public events (e.g., World AIDS Day).

Being a member of an underserved population and/or facing a situational trigger can lead to an increased proactive search for sex education content on social media. This proactive search behavior is also referred to as *pull mode*. In pull mode, users actively search for sex education on the Internet and social media using, for example, the search engine Google, topic-related hashtags (e.g., #metoo, #prochoice, #contraception), or YouTube and TikTok search masks with keywords such as "orgasm" or "abortion" (Allison et al., 2023).

The pull mode of online access to sexuality information differs from the *push mode*. In push mode, users are passively exposed to sex education content on social media, such as when their friends share material via Instagram, Telegram, or WhatsApp, when social media influencers they follow post sex education messages, or when sex education organizations disseminate sex education material widely. Young people are divided about receiving sex education content in push mode on social media: On the one hand, they value the presentation of sexual health topics on social media as an opportunity to learn and spark open discussions about sexuality. On the other hand, they may feel embarrassed, especially if they feel that others might observe their engagement with sex education content (Byron et al. 2013).

What Are the Effects of Sex Education on Social Media?

The goal of sex education is to increase people's sexual literacy so that they are better equipped to protect and improve their sexual health, rights, and well-being. However, the actual results of sex education vary widely depending on who uses what type of social media sex education content and in what way. Several negative and positive effects are discussed (Döring 2021).

The most discussed *negative effect* is the risk of people receiving misleading, inaccurate, or harmful messages from low-quality sex education on social media, whether it is sex education messages from media or health professionals that contain factual errors, or sex education messages from laypeople that overgeneralize individual experiences or are rooted in harmful ideologies such as those of the manosphere. To make users less vulnerable to negative effects, it is important to promote their sexual and media literacy so that they are able to seek out sex education that is helpful to them and to avoid or critically evaluate content that is low quality or inappropriate for them. To protect users from misinformation and disinformation, it is also important for content providers and social media platforms to ensure that high-quality sexuality education is available and easy to find. In addition to the negative effects of misinformation or disinformation, another negative effect can be disempowerment through online aggression, such as hate speech against online communities where sex education is shared for people with minoritized sexual identities (Döring et al., 2022a).

The most widely discussed *positive effect* is the benefit of people finding additional, high-quality sex education on social media that is not available to them offline, whether on mainstream topics such as contraception or masturbation, or on niche topics such as specific preferences, fetishes, or kinks. In addition to factual and experiential knowledge, social media sex education also provides role models, communities, individual advice, and social support, and can thus promote sexual empowerment (Döring et al. 2022a). Strong positive effects, albeit anecdotal, are evident in all social media comment sections, where audiences enthusiastically thank social media sex educators for their helpful content: "I absolutely love how positive you are!!! Some of us are a bit underage but it's pretty great learning about how u can explore ur sexualityyy"; "I wish you were our health teacher instead of that guy we got stuck with in school"; and "OMG thank you I have no one to talk to about sex." Outcome studies that use interviews or surveys to collect data or apply experimental designs show that exposure to social media sex education is associated with sexual risk reduction and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Condran et al. 2017; Engel, 2023; Stevens et al. 2017). In addition, social media analytics can be used to evaluate social

media sex education in terms of audience interaction and subjective effects mentioned in user comments (Young et al. 2020).

Discussion

Social media sex education is here to stay. It is popular among Internet users because it provides easy, anonymous, shame- and guilt-free access to a wide variety of sexual information and sexual role models. While lack of quality control and poor information quality are common concerns, studies are inconclusive because they typically do not provide comparative data or realistic benchmarks for error rates in offline contexts, and often do not distinguish between the different functions of factual versus experiential knowledge about sexuality. It appears that social media sexuality education often addresses topics that are neglected in traditional sexuality education and thus provides added value. Current research suggests both negative and positive effects of social media sex education (e.g., sexual misinformation and sexual empowerment).

It is important for sexual health and education professionals to check social media regularly, to see how they, their institutions, and their issues are being represented. It is also important for them to talk with their clients about sex education on social media, or even to become active on social media themselves. Digital channels are essential not only for the sex education of the general population but also for the training of sexual health professionals, who are challenged to include online sexual activities (e.g., online dating and digital sexual violence) in their sex education curriculum and to move at least some of their sex education offerings from offline to online mode.

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