

Literature Review:

Use of Social Media to Provide Sexual Health Information and Education to Adolescents

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Introduction

Social media has become a key part of modern life, especially among adolescents, who rely on it for communication, entertainment, and information. Over 80% of adults and 90% of adolescents say they use social media.^{1, 2} In recent years, the role of social media in shaping adolescents' sexual health knowledge and behaviors has gathered increasing attention. Currently, adolescents turn to both formal and informal sources for sexual health information, and social media is becoming a key platform for accessing health-related content. This literature review explores the definition of social media, the various sources of sexual health information adolescents use, their openness to social media as a tool for sexual health education, and the impact of social media on their sexual health behaviors. Each study throughout this literature review had different age classifications for adolescences, so for the purposes of this literature review, the term adolescents includes to ages 12 to 25. By examining the current research on these topics, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences adolescents' sexual health knowledge and behaviors, as well as the potential benefits and challenges associated with its use in sexual health promotion.

Social Media and Social Networking Sites Definition

The term “social media” refers to a broad and continuously evolving set of platforms that enable users to create profiles and build personal networks to make online connections with others, including individuals, communities, and organizations. Social media can take on many forms, including message boards and forums, websites, blogs, news sites, and much more.³ These platforms typically allow users to interact with content through activities like voting on posts or articles, commenting, tagging, bookmarking, and other forms of engagement. Overall, social media is used as a collaborative space to share ideas on a larger scale.⁴ In academic

literature, the term “social media” is often used interchangeably with terms like “social network sites,” “social networking services,” and “SNS.”³ For clarity, this review will primarily use the term “social media,” but acknowledges these other terms as synonymous.

Current sources of information for sexual health information

Adolescents rely on a combination of formal and informal sources for sexual health information. Formal sources include school-based education programs and healthcare providers, which offer more structured, comprehensive, and reliable content on topics such as anatomy, reproductive health, contraception, consent, and health relationships. In contrast, informal sources include family, friends, and the internet and are often less reliable and comprehensive. Although these informal sources may contain biases, misinformation, or incomplete information, they provide different perspectives and are still valued by adolescents.⁵

For adolescents, the most common sources of information related to sexual health are family, friends, schools, and the internet.⁵ According to another literature review, adolescent females typically turn to family members, specifically mothers, for sexual health information, while adolescent males tend to seek information from friends and peers.⁵ A different study also found adolescents favored informal resources over formal, more structured resources, overall.⁶ However, the study also found different specific informal information source preferences between females and males. Females felt more comfortable approaching informal personal resources such as friends and family, while males felt more comfortable approach less personal informal information sources such as TV and the Internet.⁶ Interestingly in the study, they found as students increased in age, they felt more comfortable receiving information related to sexual health from professional resources.⁶

According to multiple studies, the topics adolescents most frequently seek information on related to sexual health are relationship topics, including how to maintain healthy relationships and communication; sexual health topics including pregnancy and pregnancy prevention, contraception, sexual disease prevention, body anatomy, and menstruation; and sexual activity topics including safe sex practices, sexual behaviors, and how to avoid sexual coercion.^{5, 6} They also found the terms “high-risk sexual sex” and “sexual curiosity” to be highly searched.⁷ This variety of topics highlights the broad range of sexual health topics adolescents are interesting in learning more about.

These studies bring attention to the variety of sexual health sources adolescents have access to and the diversity of sexual health information adolescents are seeking. An important result of these studies is the strong evidence that adolescents prefer the use of informal sexual health resources regardless of gender or age.

Key challenges in sexual health education delivery

Several factors influence the comfort levels surrounding sexual health education, both from the perspectives of educators and adolescents. Key barriers include gender-related issues that affect students’ comfort with receiving sexual health education, as well as teachers’ comfort with delivering such content.¹⁷ Studies have shown both adolescents and educators prefer sexual health education to be delivered to groups of the same gender.^{5, 6, 17} Additionally, challenges such as disruptive behavior, varying levels of maturity, disparities in peer readiness to learn about sexual health topics, limited time allocated to these subjects, and discomfort with sexual health terminology must also be addressed.¹⁷ While anonymized question boxes have been found to improve students’ comfort in asking questions,¹⁷ this solution, along with others, could be further enhanced through the integration of social media platforms. Proposed solutions for increasing

comfort and information accuracy include assigning dedicated, trained health educators to lead these discussions and allocating more time for sexual health topics.^{17, 18} Incorporating social media into these solutions could strengthen their effectiveness, accuracy, while providing consistent information for adolescents.

Adolescents' Openness to Social Networking Resources for Sexual Health Information

Adolescents are increasingly more receptive to using social networking platforms to enhance their sexual health education. A focus-group based study of adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19 years old found three key preferences: accessibility, trustworthiness, and anonymity in online resources.⁸ The term “safe” was frequently used during the study to describe where users could interact anonymously, emphasizing privacy and discretion. Additionally, adolescents expressed a preference for interactive formats over information presented in a textbook-like format.⁸ The participants of the study emphasized they would prefer resources that involve personal communication while maintaining anonymity.

Another study found students viewed receiving SMS text messages from official health organizations as an effective and personal format for sexual health information promotion.⁹ The study revealed that the format of messages—incorporating humor, rhyming, variety in content, shorter lengths, and relevance to holidays—improved engagement. They also noted providing the source of the information increased credibility.⁹ When discussing language choices, the study found informal, positive, and indirect language to be preferred by adolescents. The indirect messages were recognized to be more encouraging of healthy actions compared to the direct messages that could seem accusatory. For the content choices, emphasis on ease of understanding and variety of information to avoid boredom, especially with the content on the same topic (e.g., chlamydia) repeated in several messages. This study found that when these

adjustments were made, the interest in the messages was high and the messages were likely to be shared with others.⁹ The study went on to indicate a significant increase in knowledge in the adolescents after receiving the messages. These findings suggest that modifying the style, language, and content of health messages can significantly enhance their accessibility and retention, leading to increased sharing among peers.⁹

Impact of Social Media on Sexual Health Communication

Social media platforms have a huge impact on an individual's sexual health knowledge and their perceptions of peer behavior. Studies suggest that social networks can impact individuals' health behaviors by increasing access to knowledge and shaping the perception of peer norms.^{10, 11} One study found participants who viewed suggestive photos on social media assumed that more of their peers engaged in unprotected sexual activities. This led to an increased likelihood of participants perceiving themselves as more likely to engage in similar behaviors.¹⁰ This highlights the impact of social media on the perception of sexual health norms and behaviors, thus influencing a person's own sexual behavior.

Further research indicates that adolescents often compare themselves to their peers and are influenced by the desire to be like their peers. While this is normally a negative trend, it can be used for a positive in sexual health education. Promoting healthy sexual health behaviors as common and socially accepted can, therefore, lead to more effective health promotion, with "peer pressure" transforming into "peer education".¹¹

Social Media and Behavioral Change in Sexual Health

Social media interventions have also shown promise in promoting healthier sexual health behaviors. In the study investigating sexual health promotion via SMS, they found that

adolescents who received SMS messages about sexually transmitted illnesses (STI) testing felt less apprehensive about getting tested and considered their own STI risks more seriously.⁹ Additionally, research indicates that social media can be highly effective when promoting one-off or episodic activities, such as screening, rather than ongoing habits, such as physical exercise.¹²

A study on Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevention in high-risk populations found that social media interventions positively affected behavior changes, including increased HIV prevention and testing behaviors.¹³ Similarly, another study found that adolescents who were exposed to social networking sites promoting STI prevention, including condom use, were associated with reduced tendency for condom use to decrease over time.¹⁴ While the HIV prevention study was not conducted with adolescents, the results support the adolescent STI prevention study findings. The combination of these findings emphasize the significant impact social media interventions can have on promoting healthy sexual health behaviors in adolescent populations.

However, the impact of social media on sexual health behaviors is nuanced. In a study on homeless youth, researchers found online sexual health discussions may encourage risky sexual behaviors, while increasing knowledge about HIV/STIs and prevention behaviors.¹⁵ The study findings showed that people who use online social networks for sex-related conversations, might be more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, however, were also more knowledgeable about STIs and their possible risks and were more likely to get tested.¹⁵ While this research is still ongoing, other reviews have had similar findings of behavioral changes due to exposure to social media sources related to sexual health.¹⁶ Overall, the evidence suggests that social media is a powerful tool for promoting sexual health information, especially when it is used

strategically to increase knowledge, alter perceptions, and encourage health-promoting behaviors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has become a powerful tool for sexual health education and promotion among adolescents. It provides a platform for accessing diverse sexual health information, shaping peer norms, and influencing health behaviors. While the existing evidence suggests that social media can effectively increase knowledge and encourage positive behaviors, its impact is nuanced and sometimes leads to risky behaviors, particularly when not carefully managed. Although research on the dissemination of sexual health information via social media is still in its early stages and many areas remain unexplored, the potential of this tool is undeniable. Future interventions should harness social media's potential while considering the challenges associated with its use. By designing strategies that prioritize accessibility, trustworthiness, and privacy, social media can serve as a valuable resource in promoting adolescent sexual health and fostering healthier behaviors.

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