

# Young Queer Women's Use of the Internet and Digital Technology for Sexual Health Information Seeking: Facilitating Positive Experiences

## THE PROJECT

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We conducted a community-based research project to understand more about young queer women's needs and experiences with finding sexual health information through the Internet and other types of digital technology. This included three focus groups with a total of 18 queer women between the ages of 16-29. We asked questions about what types of technology they used, what sexual health information they looked for online, their positive and negative experiences with online sexual health information seeking, and their suggestions for change.

**This factsheet is for service providers, educators, and creators of online and digital sexual health resources.** It outlines the positive experiences participants discussed, as well as their suggestions for change, in order to assist you in facilitating positive online sexual health information seeking experiences for young queer women.

## TYPES OF SEXUAL HEALTH INFORMATION SOUGHT

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Participants reported looking for a **wide range of sexual health information** online, including information about sexually transmitted infections, sexual identity, healthy relationships, and "how to" information about sexual practices. The resources that were most favoured offered a mix of this information.

## POSITIVE EXPERIENCIES

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Participants discussed a number of ways in which their online sexual health information seeking experiences were positive. We recommend implementing these ideas in generating online sexual health content to enhance young queer women's experiences.

### Anti-Oppression Approaches

Writing about sexual health information from an anti-oppression perspective can be positive for young queer women, as it recognizes the many intersecting identities and associated power structures young queer women experience. In this approach, sexual health information can be relevant to young queer women's whole selves.

*"I start thinking about things [with] a queer lens, or like I try to think about things... from an intersectional lens...there's certain terms, or certain words, or certain ways of...talking about things, and then I notice that if...that's not part of how [sexual health information] is written, then I'm like, uhhh, or if it's like, we're all like giving examples where they're you know... heteronormative examples, I'm also like uhhh?"*

## Access to Multiple Perspectives

Young queer women appreciated having access to many different perspectives when searching for sexual health information online, which helped them understand their own needs and experiences within a wider context. They also recognized that their needs have not, and will not stay the same as they deal with changing life circumstances.

*“What I like about most social media too, is that you get different opinions from different people...it’s like really nice to hear what people have to say, and it helps you form your own opinions as well.”*

*“A variety of different ways to reach out to people is important...different people are different people, and you’re...looking for different things depending on the stage of life you’re in.”*

## Identity Experiences

Many of the participants discussed ways in which the Internet facilitated their understanding of their own sexual identity, which was emphasized as an aspect of their sexual health. This took place through interacting with others, as well as reading about sexual identity information posted online.

*“In [a] giant ABCs of LGBT kind of master-post I found, it kind of differentiated between romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction, and sexual attraction...because you can find someone aesthetically attractive without being sexually attracted to them.... Those are other, just little ways of describing, like, how you identify as far as your sexuality goes that I found so helpful, not only in, like, being comfortable with my own identity, but articulating that to the people that I was close with. So. Kudos, Tumblr.”*

*“One day I actually just typed into Google, “What does it mean if you aren’t attracted to anyone specifically but you’re just attracted to everyone?” [laughing] It was like the vaguest sentence I’ve ever written in my entire life, and like the term pansexual came up, and I read it, and I was like, Oh my god! Like this is the thing I’ve been looking for forever!”*

## Gender Neutral Presentation of Information

Young queer women talked about how they appreciated gender neutral presentation of information, both in terms of not adopting heterosexual, cisgender perspectives as well as in the context of having more neutrally styled sexual health apps. Participants named this as important for their own inclusion and self-exploration, as a principle of anti-oppressive values, and as a recognition of the multiple gender identities their partners and loved ones may embody.

*“Specific to apps, there’s one I discovered recently... it’s kind of a period tracker app, but it also like helps with knowing when you’re most fertile, when to expect [laughter] hormones...it’s fantastic, because it’s not really gendered, which I find really awesome.”*

*“At the clinic I work at we have a really great pamphlet that’s talking about...no matter how you identify like how important paps are, and no matter who you’re having sex with, or who or what you identify as, having paps are really important for cervical health.”*

## **Representation**

Participants discussed how positive sexual health information seeking experiences included instances of feeling like they were represented within the information, or they identified with the author(s) in ways that validated their identities and experiences.

*“If I’m looking for something where I’m like, also just kind of looking for a form of validation, like sometimes if someone had written a blog post about it, or there’s like there’s like a comments section and someone was like, “This weird thing happened! Like, am I normal?!” Then that makes me feel like, like that’s like a form of validation in itself, and I think that’s super important.”*

*“I find that sometimes like it’s not even just like about information, it’s about affirmation. It’s about whether or not you are that thing, and sometimes you just have to like sit there and like, again, sit, and then find something that just is like, you are okay, because you are you, like sometimes you just need that.”*

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE**

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Participants had many suggestions for change to better their experiences of online sexual health information seeking. These suggestions included ensuring information is easily accessible as well as accessible in spaces that aren’t specifically targeting queer people, including content by and for queer people, presenting information in collaborative and interactive formats, and having more access to experts. Below are some specific examples of ways in which online sexual health information resources can be improved based on participants’ suggestions.

### **Accessible Information**

Young queer women emphasized the importance of being able to easily access the information they needed to maintain positive sexual health, which meant being able to find information relevant to their needs.

*“There’s not a lot of information online about like, queer women, dating, or like, non-binary people dating, or like sex with that, or it’s like what the stats are on like, STIs even, in terms of... being informed, it’s really hard when our populations aren’t as extensively even like thought about, and so we end up doing this funny little like translating from hetero, translating from monogs, translating all of these experiences into like, what does this mean for me, so like, yeah, I think like, it can help, especially in terms of like support and validation to go to spaces with people who have experienced things that you have, right?”*

*“It’s also super important [that]...whatever the...intervention or project might look like, I think it’s important to go into like, non-queer spaces as well...I think it’s important to have like, more conversations about sexual health and more conversations about queer health, and queer sexual health in...mainstream or...not just exclusively queer spaces.”*

### **Information for and by Queer People**

Participants discussed the benefits of having access to information about queer sexual health that was created by other queer people. They noted that the information may be more likely to be accessible and representative of their sexual health experiences if authors were queer identified.

*“Yeah I think it’s important for a lot of the resources of information to be by queer people for queer people, and that would be super helpful and a lot more welcoming, and a lot less daunting than a lot of the resources that are available now.”*

### **Collaborative and Interactive Formats**

Young queer women in the focus groups appreciated accessing information on platforms that enabled them to engage in discussion or interact with others. This appreciation related to information regarding more social aspects of sexual health in particular.

*“I really like participating in forums... a place where people can go and just...type in their experience and maybe like see if other people are experiencing the same thing, and you know, be able to share the information.”*

*“Is it accessible, is it accurate...and is there like, a way to contribute to that information and...to like check it I guess and hear other people’s perspectives on it, which is why if it’s just an article and there’s no... space for like contribution or like discussion then...I’m less likely to return.”*

### **Access to Experts**

As the Internet is making it easier to connect people than ever before, participants desired to extend this connection between themselves and sexual health experts. They discussed ways in which the Internet and other digital technologies could be used to put them into direct contact with service providers without the challenges of in-person health service utilization.

*“[My ideal online sexual health information seeking experience] would look like a panel of queer health providers that can do online chats or have like a 24-hour phone line that you could call and discuss sexual health information...then you know that that information is coming from trained, reliable sources that are non-judgmental and non-biased.”*

Project Partners



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