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# Promoting Hook-Ups or Filling Sexual Health Information Gaps? Exploring Young People's Sex Talk on Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

Social media hold enormous potential for sexuality education and sexual health promotion among young people given the audience reach and interactive functions that could be adapted for intervention delivery. This paper reports the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project on the use of social media as a platform for peer sexual communication. To explore the nature of content posted on Facebook confession pages, which host semi-anonymous peer exchanges, 2186 original posts in a Facebook “sex secrets” page popular with college students in Hong Kong were analyzed. Conventional sexual activities within the context of romantic heterosexual relationships were most frequently mentioned in the posts. Problematic or risky sexual activities such as hook-ups (spontaneous casual sex) and sexting that are common among American college students were not salient. Nevertheless, the sexual culture of Hong Kong college students was not without peculiarities. Fetish or roleplay, for instance, was mentioned thrice as often as sexting. Findings on intimate concerns illuminate the needs and gaps in sexuality education and sexual health knowledge.

## CCS Concepts

• Information systems → Information systems applications → Collaborative and social computing systems and tools → Social networking sites.

## Keywords

Facebook, sexuality education, sexual health information, youth, college students, Hong Kong

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become a major channel for young people to discuss sex and other intimate concerns owing to its ease of use, availability in large numbers to young people, and perceived confidentiality in seeking answers to sensitive questions [1]. For instance, online bulletin boards catering specifically to youth have

been shown to provide a valuable avenue of peer advice and social support, allowing users to candidly discuss sensitive issues concerning sexuality and intimacy [2]. However, there has been little evidence that such candid discussions extend to mainstream social media channels where most young people congregate online.

Despite their popularity among young people, social media have not been the main channel for peer sexual communication among young people owing to worries about confidentiality and stigma in disclosing sensitive self-information [3]. The recent rise of “confessions” (also known as “secrets” or “whispers”) pages on Facebook which facilitate semi-anonymous exchanges of personal experiences might assuage those worries.

### 1.1 Facebook “Confessions” and Peer Sexual Communication

The popular Facebook “sex secrets” confession page unofficially linked to a large, comprehensive university in Hong Kong is the subject of the present study. A distinctive feature of this confession page is that university students openly discuss sexual relations and personal experiences with their peers in a de-identified manner. To post an anonymous message, users type their messages in Google Forms without providing any identifiable information through a link on the Facebook page. An anonymous administrator would then post their messages to the page. Facebook users who like or comment on the posts in the confession page, however, are publicly identifiable.

In Hong Kong, where people are generally reticent about sex [4], such Facebook confession pages provide a rare mainstream platform for sexual communication. However, their popularity with university and secondary school students has been met with mixed public reception. The press has highlighted support for their potential as a peer resource to address the inadequacy of sexuality education in Hong Kong against concerns over their negative influence as a platform for encouraging causal sex among the younger generation. This public controversy raises questions about the nature of content posted on these pages which the present study seeks to explore.

Studying sexual communication involving social media, particularly social network sites, has the potential to connect into the broader sexual cultures of young people which span cultural expectations, intimacy, relationships, values, practices, fears, desires, pleasures, sexual tastes, and so on [5]. Prior research shows that peer communication about sexual experiences has an impact

on young people’s perceived sexual norms such as the extent to which their peers are “hooking up” (i.e., having intimate interactions outside of romantic relationships) or sanction risky sexual relationships, which could affect their own sexual behaviors and attitudes [6]. Viewed from a more positive perspective, exchanging personal experiences online enables young people to manage and cope with the uncertainty concerning the normalcy of their sexual situations [7].

Furthermore, the unobtrusive observation of sexual communication among peers allow researchers to uncover the actual concerns of young people and gaps in their knowledge about sex and health [8]. Such insights could inform the development of sexuality education resources that better cater to young people’s needs and interests. For example, young people are more interested to learn about sexual experiences rather than just sexual health [9]. Yet, a content analysis of sexuality education websites found inadequate coverage of issues such as sexual pleasure and sexual diversity [10] which were frequently discussed among young people in online forums [2].

## 1.2 Research Questions

To explore the nature of content posted on the Facebook confession page, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1:** What types of sexual activities are most frequently mentioned in a Facebook confession page?

**RQ2:** What types of intimate concerns are most frequently raised in a Facebook confession page?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Data Collection

The particular Facebook confession page was selected because it appeared to be active, interactive, and substantial. The page was liked by over 15,000 Facebook users and contained several messages posted on a daily basis in the past six months. Using a data scraping application (NCapture), all publicly accessible posts in the Facebook page were captured and imported into NVivo 11 for analysis. Each downloaded post entry entailed the message, number of likes, comments, and when the message was posted. Duplicated posts and original messages from the administrator were excluded. The final sample comprised 2186 anonymous posts that appeared on the page between May and October 2015.

### 2.2 Content Analysis

#### 2.2.1 Coding of sexual activities

Nine specific categories of sexual activities were developed and refined through constant comparison between posts during pilot coding. Each post may be assigned multiple categories (within the nine types of sexual activities) if more than one sexual activity was mentioned. If sexual activity was mentioned in a post but could not be specifically identified (e.g., “we had sex”), the post would be coded as unspecified sexual activities. Posts that did not mention any sexual activity were coded as no sexual activities described.

#### 2.2.2 Coding of intimate concerns

Intimate concerns (i.e. worries or problems around sexual relations) mentioned in the posts were grouped by three primary categories: health concerns, relational concerns, and body appearance concerns. Sub-categories were developed and refined through constant comparison between posts during pilot coding. Posts were assigned multiple categories or subcategories as appropriate.

### 2.3 Inter-Coder Reliability

One of the authors coded all 2186 posts in the sample. To verify inter-coder reliability, a trained coder independently coded 295 posts (13.5%) that were randomly selected from the sample. The inter-coder reliability, calculated using Cohen’s Kappa, for both sexual activities ( $K = 0.75$ ) and intimate concerns ( $K = 0.70$ ) was good [11].

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 RQ1: Types of Sexual Activities Mentioned

The frequencies of sexual activities mentioned in the posts are presented in Table 1. Penetrative sex was the mostly frequently mentioned specific sexual activity followed by other regular forms of sexual acts such as making out, oral sex, and masturbation. Threesome or group sex was the least frequently mentioned sexual activity. About 26% of all posts (570/2186) had no mention of sex.

**Table 1. Frequencies of sexual activities mentioned in the posts**

|                                    | <i>n</i> | %     |
|------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Oral Sex                           | 245      | 8.60  |
| Penetrative Sex                    | 674      | 23.66 |
| Hand Job                           | 42       | 1.47  |
| Watching Adult Videos              | 64       | 2.25  |
| Making Out (Kissing/Petting)       | 276      | 9.69  |
| Masturbation                       | 239      | 8.40  |
| Sexting or Phone/Cam Sex           | 46       | 1.61  |
| Fetish or Role Play (SM, Sex Toys) | 134      | 4.70  |
| Threesome or Group Sex             | 22       | 0.77  |
| Unspecified Sexual Activities      | 537      | 18.80 |
| No Sexual Activities Described     | 570      | 20.00 |
| Total Activities Coded             | 2849     |       |

### 3.2 RQ2: Types of Intimate Concerns Raised

The frequencies of intimate concerns raised in the posts are presented in Table 2. Health concerns around sexual relations (e.g., “Is it possible for me to get pregnant if my boyfriend tried to ‘run the red light’ on the first or second day of my period?”) were most frequently raised whereas relational ones (e.g., “My boyfriend is quite rough whenever he does it with me, when he’s really horny he would even skip foreplay”) were the least raised. More specifically, concerns related to the appearance of one’s or a partner’s private part (mostly about penis size/shape or pubic hair) were most commonly raised whereas concerns about acceptance of casual sex or abstinence before marriage were the least raised.

**Table 2. Frequencies of intimate concerns raised in the posts**

|                            | <i>n</i> | %     |
|----------------------------|----------|-------|
| Health concerns            | 444      |       |
| Condom use                 | 111      | 13.01 |
| STI or HIV                 | 49       | 5.74  |
| Contraception              | 64       | 7.50  |
| Period or PMS              | 36       | 4.22  |
| Pain or injury             | 69       | 8.09  |
| Other medical concerns     | 115      | 13.48 |
| Relational concerns        | 118      |       |
| Acceptance of casual sex   | 18       | 2.11  |
| Intimacy and pleasure      | 39       | 4.57  |
| Monogamy or cheating       | 38       | 4.45  |
| Abstinence before marriage | 23       | 2.69  |
| Body appearance concerns   | 291      |       |
| Private part related       | 231      | 27.08 |
| Non-private part related   | 60       | 7.03  |
| Total concerns coded       | 853      |       |

## 4. DISCUSSION

This study is one of the first to document the actual use of Facebook for peer sexual communication. Social media hold enormous potential for sexuality education and sexual health promotion among young people given the audience reach and interactive functions that could be adapted for intervention delivery. Unlike sexuality education websites or topic-specific online forums, established social media channels are likely to reach a wider audience of young people given that many of them are already users and may be unmotivated to venture beyond the walled gardens of those channels. However, the unwillingness to share intimate self-information among peers has been a major barrier to sexual health intervention via social media. The present research demonstrates that semi-anonymous exchanges within a social network could help to overcome this barrier.

The posts in this Facebook confession page were rich on discussions of sexual activities (73.9% of all posts) and sexual health concerns (52% of all concerns raised). Although the findings do show that Hong Kong college students were sexually active, the sexual activities mentioned were mostly conventional ones described within the context of romantic heterosexual relationships as opposed to casual hookups. Threesome or group sex, which carries a higher level of STI risk, was the least frequently mentioned sexual activity. Sexting also ranks as one of the least frequently mentioned activities even though it has been documented to be common among college students elsewhere [12].

In fact, fetish or roleplay which included sadomasochism and use of sex toys were mentioned about three times as often as sexting.

The findings on intimate concerns were illuminative of the needs of young people in Hong Kong as well as gaps in their sexuality education and sexual health knowledge. Condom use tops the list of frequently mentioned sexual health concerns. Departing from the focus of typical sexual health promotion messages, this study indicates that young people were not concerned about whether or when to use a condom but about finer details such as size, comfort, and proper usage. This study further suggests that young people require instruction on a neglected aspect of “safer sex” which is how to avoid pain or injury during sex. It also reveals inconsistencies in young people’s knowledge about birth control and menstrual cycle. On body appearance, young people were most concerned about the normalcy of their private part or that of their partner regarding size, shape, and pubic hair. On sexual relationships, the most frequently raised concerns were about sexual intimacy and pleasure such as dealing with a partner’s expectations or achieving closeness and arousal. Young people also frequently discussed sexual arrangements within a romantic relationships and wanted to hear others’ thoughts about having a sex partner or casual sex.

### 4.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations. The content analysis was conducted on only one such confession page and encompassed the messages posted within a particular timeframe. Any messages that may have been deleted or altered prior to this analysis would not have been accounted for. There was also no means of verifying the credibility of the concerns or activities posted not least because of the anonymous feature of the confession page. Furthermore, the frequencies and types of messages posted may have been influenced by the administrator in unknown ways. There was no evidence that messages posted were moderated by the administrator but posts primarily seeking sex partners were discouraged to avoid contravening Facebook’s community guidelines. Finally, the focus on sexual activities and intimate concerns in this initial study scrutinizes only a limited part of the sexual communication and behaviors of young people.

### 4.2 Ongoing Research

#### 4.2.1 Further analysis of sexual narratives

Despite these limitations, the preliminary findings provide support for further analysis in the ongoing research. Qualitative content analysis of the posts is warranted for a richer understanding of why, when, and how young people may pursue sexual health information. For example, the discussions about STI in the posts revealed that young people are not concerned with learning about specific pathogens or even the means of transmission. Rather, they were worried if the abnormalities (e.g., fishy-smelling penis) presented in them or their partner were symptoms of STI.

The findings suggest that it would be fruitful to dwell deeper into the sexual narratives in the posts as they could reveal distinctive aspects of youth sexual culture in Hong Kong. One exemplar pertains to how young people in Hong Kong conceptualize abstinence before marriage. Sexual narratives from a sample of American undergraduate students indicate that conscious abstinence before marriage is driven by one or a combination of three major factors: religious motivations, waiting for committed relationships, and fearful of sex [13]. By contrast, the preliminary findings in this research suggests that conscious abstinence with undergraduate students in Hong Kong may be driven by the symbolic value or sacredness of sex—not in a religious sense but

as a form of respect which stands in opposition to the casual attitude of “having fun” or “everyone is doing it.”

#### 4.2.2 Further analysis of advice exchange

Another major theoretical concern of the ongoing research is to understand how young people seek and offer advice on sensitive personal issues through the confession page. Advice is a form of supportive communication that is concerned with soliciting and providing problem-focused guidance. This study reveals that advice exchange is a prominent feature of the sexual discussions in the confession page but the underlying process has yet to be examined. Prior research informs us that advice exchange is neither a necessary feature of online groups nor a straightforward process [14]. Both advice seeking and advice giving may be expressed in different forms and levels of directness given that advice is not always warranted or welcomed [15].

Studying advice exchange in the context of peer sexual communication via social media has the potential to deepen our understanding of the role of homophily involved with sexual health information seeking. Homophily or the perceived similarity among communicators drives identification and relating in online interaction [16]. Advice from “similar others”—common experience, background, and views—could be more powerful than advice from experts when it comes to online health information. An experimental study demonstrated that participants were more likely to regard online responses based on personal experience as personally relevant and to heed the advice offered compared to online responses based on formal expertise [17]. Unlike regular Facebook pages or online groups formed around particular health issues such as cancer [18], the salient group reference (university affiliation), which signals a common social network, could be a powerful source of homophily among users of the confession page. Previous research has shown that participants of demographically homogenous online support groups are more empathetic to group members than participants of demographically heterogeneous online support groups formed around the same health issue [19].

### 4.3 Conclusion

Taken together, this research project offers a significant extension to a nascent but growing body of research on social media channels as de facto social support groups [3, 18]. More specifically, this research seeks to contribute to social media communication research and practice in at least two ways. Firstly, it evaluates the utility of a relatively novel social media channel in facilitating constructive peer engagement on sensitive personal concerns, which raises significant theoretical questions about self-disclosure and homophily in supportive communication within social networks. Secondly, this research documents the actual communication and topical concerns of young people regarding intimacy and sexual health, which offers insights for intervention efforts that are attuned to their real life needs and preferences.

### 5. FUNDING

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