

# #LetsTalkAboutIt

Sexuality Education in  
Hong Kong



**MW**

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## Executive Summary

Sexuality education is essential to helping young people become happy and healthy adults. As they grow up, they have to deal with changes in their bodies, while trying to connect with their peers and making sense of conflicting messages from the world about relationship “shoulds” and “should nots”. Both school and home play a critical role in supporting our youth to become confident, competent young adults in sex and relationship matters.

So how has Hong Kong (HK) done so far in terms of sexuality education?

Given the potentially wide scope of this topic, we have narrowed down our objectives to two issues that we think are more timely, relevant and under-researched in HK:

- (I) **Technology and youth dating** - We want to know if (and, if yes, how) technology has influenced HK youth’s behaviour and attitudes in the context of dating and sex, with a focus on: (a) online dating, (b) the role of instant messaging and social media, and (c) sexting.
- (II) **Sexuality education and sexual competence** - We want to better understand how young people learn about sex and relationships (that is, their sources of sexuality education) and their competence in these issues. We are especially interested in the role of parents in educating children about sex and relationships.

We engaged Ipsos HK to conduct a survey among 502 young people aged between 12 and 24 in HK. Survey fieldwork was conducted from March to April 2016. 402 respondents were recruited online, while 100 respondents were recruited in person.

### (I) Technology and youth dating

- a. **Online dating** is common among youth in HK, but they have a largely negative perception of it.
  - i. 67% have used an online dating platform. Among online dating platform users, 47% have gone out with someone whom they met online, and 43% with dating experience have dated someone whom they met online.
  - ii. Yet, HK youth’s perception of online dating is largely negative. 55% think that people lie on online dating platforms. 48% is worried about disclosing personal information. Only 39% agree that it is a good way to meet people. The discrepancy between online dating usage and perception is one of the questions arising out of this research that warrants further study (a possibility is that some one-time users of online dating did not have a good experience).
- b. **Instant messaging and social media** has altered young dating norms.
  - i. Texting and private messaging is the most popular communication channel among young daters – across genders, age groups and relationship stages. It is preferred to in-person meetings, phone calls and other social media interactions.
  - ii. Among those who have had experience in breaking up, 53% experienced breaking up via text, 22% experienced “ghosting” (that is, simply ignoring and shutting down communications), and 16% experienced a one-sided change in Facebook relationship status.
  - iii. Although one of the functions of social media is to connect people to their communities, its use in dating is still mainly in private communications. 63% will not display their relationship status on Facebook. A majority (67%) does not feel the need to share posts of PDA (public display of affection) to show the world how much they care about their partner.
  - iv. HK youth have mixed views of whether social media is good or bad for relationships. 50% of young daters agree that social media brings about positive influences to relationships, by allowing them to be emotionally closer to their partner (57%) and to be more aware of what is going on in their partner’s life (63%). Yet, 45-52% agree that seeing their partner’s interactions with others on social media makes them feel insecure and unsure about their relationship.

- c. **Sexing** is neither commonly practiced nor well received by young people in HK.
  - i. Overall, 22% of the respondents have sent or received a sext. 10% of the respondents have sent a sext. 21% have received a sext.
  - ii. Generally, HK youth view sexting negatively: 24% described it as “disgusting”, 21% called it “stupid” and 16% described it as “risky”.

## **(II) Sexuality education and sexual competence**

- a. There is room for improvement for HK youth’s **competence in sex and relationship matters**.
  - i. Among youth who have had sex, 44% did not use contraceptives every time they had sex, and 11% did not use contraceptives at all. Out of those who did use contraceptives, not a small number chose relatively ineffective methods e.g., extra-vaginal ejaculation (12%) and natural rhythm (10%).
  - ii. 40% felt that they were incompetent in sex and relationship matters. Nearly 40% (39%) wished that they had delayed their first time of having sex.
- b. There needs to be more and better **sexuality education**, especially at home.
  - i. The two main sources of sexuality education for young people in HK are school teachers (29%) and the media (27%). The latter is a cause for concern because information from the media may not be accurate and/or sufficient for young people who are often curious about sex and relationships.
  - ii. Sexuality education at home is inadequate and starts too late. An overwhelming 77% of the respondents did not have their parents talk about sex with them growing up. Parents play an especially small role in sexuality education among boys.

## **Implications and suggestions**

The prevalence of online dating among HK youth has implications for sexuality education programmes. To the extent that they are still preaching a blanket “no” to the use of online dating, this approach may not be effective in teaching young people safety precautions when using these platforms, or generally in reaching out to young people. In light of technological advances, there is a need to critically examine the content, relevance and timeliness of sexuality education.

More generally, sexuality education programmes should be evaluated as to their reach and impact on young people. Any effective methods and best practices should be identified and shared among practitioners. Parents also need to do more, start earlier and pay more attention to their boys’ needs in sexuality education. The Government can take the lead – both in encouraging reviews and exchanges by sexuality education practitioners, and in providing more community education for parents.

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**Effective sexuality education can equip young people with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships, which is fundamental to their personal development and wellbeing. We hope that this study will act as a starting point – for experts and practitioners to further their work and research in this area, and for the public to start talking about sex and sexuality education. Let’s talk about it.**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Objectives

Sexuality education is essential to helping young people become happy and healthy adults. As they grow up, they have to deal with changes in their bodies, while trying to connect with their peers and making sense of conflicting messages from the world about relationship “shoulds” and “should nots”. This is often exacerbated by a lack of open discussion of sex-related matters in school and at home, due to cultural, religious and other reasons. Both teachers and parents play a critical role in supporting our youth to become confident, competent young adults in sex and relationship matters.

So what is “sexuality education” and how is it different from “sex education”? In simple terms, sexuality education is more holistic and goes beyond the anatomical or biological aspects that are typically associated with sex education (e.g., body changes during puberty, gender biological differences, the anatomy of sexual intercourse, contraceptive use and HIV/AIDS prevention). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) used the terminology of “sexuality education” in its *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, and explained it as follows:

“Effective sexuality education can provide young people with age-appropriate, culturally relevant and scientifically accurate information. It includes structured opportunities for young people to explore their attitudes and values, and to practice the decision-making and other life skills they will need to be able to make informed choices about their sexual lives.

The primary goal of sexuality education is that children and young people become equipped with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships ...”<sup>1</sup>

Working towards comprehensive and impactful sexuality education in Hong Kong (HK) entails first understanding the status quo, hence our study. We want to study the current dating and sexual practices and attitudes of HK’s youth, and their sex and relationship competence and education.

Specifically, this study has two objectives.

- i. We want to know if (and, if yes, how) technology has influenced HK youth’s behaviour and attitudes in the context of dating and sex, with a focus on: (a) online dating<sup>2</sup>, (b) the influence of instant messaging and social media on dating, and (c) sexting<sup>3</sup>.
- ii. We want to better understand how young people learn about sex and relationships (that is, their sources of sexuality education) and their competence in these matters. We are especially interested in the role of parents in educating children about sex and relationships.

### 1.2 Methodology

We engaged Ipsos HK to conduct a survey among 502 young people aged between 12 and 24 in HK. Survey fieldwork was conducted from March to April 2016. 402 respondents were recruited online, while 100 respondents were recruited in person. In recruiting young persons within the age bracket of 12-14, prior parental consent was obtained. For this group of respondents, the actual interview was carried out within a “controlled environment”, where a project supervisor oversaw the entire

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*,

<sup>2</sup> We defined “online dating platform” to include any online dating or match-making websites, forums, chat rooms, and mobile apps e.g., Tinder and WeChat.

<sup>3</sup> We defined “sexting” to mean sending messages with nude pictures or videos of oneself.

interviewing process and provided explanation or support when necessary. The parents of these respondents waited in a separate room to allow privacy for their child to complete the survey by him/herself.

The questionnaire consisted of 41 questions, classified into 5 sections: (a) background; (b) dating and relationship; (c) technology and dating; (d) sex; (e) sexuality education and competence.

### 1.3 Limitations

The limitations in this study include the following:

- i. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, respondents were given an option to refuse to answer certain questions, especially as they pertain to sex. This necessarily limited our sample size. The sample size of our respondents aged 12-14 with relationship and sex experience was particularly small, and further research can be undertaken with respect to youth aged 12-14 only.
- ii. Sex is a taboo subject. Insofar as the questions in the survey relate to sex, there might have been underreporting by respondents.
- iii. The questionnaire did not contain any questions on sexual orientation. Indeed, this study does not distinguish between respondents based on their sexual orientation, or address or attempt to address the issue of sexual orientation and how that might or might not impact responses. We consider this to be another topic that is worthy of future independent research.

## 2. Respondents' Demographics

The total sample size for this survey is 502. Table 2.1 shows a breakdown by respondents' demographics.

### 2.1 Gender

This study interviewed an equal number of male and female, so to facilitate cross-sectional analysis based on gender. 50% of the respondents are male while the rest are female.

### 2.2 Age

Respondents ranged from 12 to 24 years old. Out of all the respondents, 19.9% are within the 12-14 age bracket, 19.9% are within the 15-17 age bracket, 29.9% are within the 18-20 age bracket and 30.3% are within the 21-24 age bracket.

### 2.3 Education level

A total of approximately half (53%) of the respondents have attained secondary level, among which 21.5% have attained junior secondary level and 31.5% have attained senior secondary level. The remaining 47% of the respondents have attained tertiary level or above.

### 2.4 Studying status

Most (81.7%) of the respondents are students who are still in school.

### 2.5 Monthly household income

Out of all the respondents, 20.9% reported a monthly household income of less than HKD 20,000, 16.5% reported a monthly household income of HKD 20,000 to HKD 29,999; 26.1% reported a monthly household income of HKD 30,000 to HKD 49,999, and 16.5% reported a monthly household income of HKD 50,000 or above.

### 2.6 Parents' marital status

87.5% of the respondents have parents that are married, while 12.5% have parents that are divorced or at least one of them deceased.

### 2.7 District

17.1% of the respondents live on Hong Kong Island. 34.9% of the respondents live in Kowloon and the remaining 48% live in the New Territories, outlying islands and other areas.



Table 2.1: Respondents' demographics

	Sample size (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
- Male	251	50.0
- Female	251	50.0
<b>Age</b>		
- Aged 12-14	100	19.9
- Aged 15-17	100	19.9
- Aged 18-20	150	29.9
- Aged 21-24	152	30.3
<b>Education level</b>		
- Junior secondary (Form 1 to Form 3)	108	21.5
- Senior secondary (Form 4 to Form 6)	158	31.5
- Tertiary or above (including tertiary non-degree course e.g., associate degree and higher-diploma; university undergraduate degree; and university post-graduate)	236	47.0
<b>Studying status</b>		
- In school	410	81.7
- Out of school	92	18.3
<b>Household income</b>		
- Below HKD 20,000	105	20.9
- HKD 20,000 – 29,999	83	16.5
- HKD 30,000 – 49,999	131	26.1
- HKD 50,000 or above	83	16.5
- Don't know	100	19.9
<b>Parents' marital status</b>		
- Married	439	87.5
- Divorced / deceased	63	12.5
<b>District</b>		
- Hong Kong Island	86	17.1
- Kowloon	175	34.9
- New Territories / Islands / Others	241	48.0

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Dating

“Dating” is a term that is context-specific and subjective. It carries different meanings to different people, depending on their age, social and cultural background and personal experience. We want to find out what young people in Hong Kong consider as “dating” and their dating experience.

#### 3.1.1 Definition of “dating”

Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with certain elements that are commonly associated with dating. These elements can be physical (holding hands, embracing, kissing, etc.) or social (communications with one’s dating partner, introduction to friends and family, etc.).

Most respondents thought that dating involved holding hands (80%), embracing (70%) and kissing (46-59%). Only 12% responded that dating involved having sex.

To 70% of the respondents, dating denotes exclusivity (that is, not dating other people). Other commonly-accepted dating “must-dos” include meeting each other in person whenever both persons are free (71%), meeting each other in person during weekends (59%), and texting each other every day (59%).

Table 3.1.1: What does dating mean to you?

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
It involves the following physical contact:		
- Holding hands	404	80
- Embracing	351	70
- Kissing on the face	296	59
- Kissing mouth to mouth	233	46
- Touching body part	167	33
- Having sex	62	12
We must have agreed to call each other boyfriend / girlfriend	258	51
Regarding communications, dating means we must:		
- Text each other every day	296	59
- Call each other every day	184	37
- Meet each other in person every day	94	19
- Meet each other in person during weekends	295	59
- Meet each other in person whenever both of us are free	355	71

We must not date other people	353	70
We must introduce each other to our friends	204	41
We must introduce each other to our parents	154	31

*Note: The above table shows the percentages of respondents that agree with the corresponding statements.*

### 3.1.2 Dating experience

62% of the respondents have dated, while 38% does not have any dating experience.

*Table 3.1.2: Have you ever dated?*

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
Yes	311	62
No	191	38

### 3.1.3 Age of first date

Respondents with dating experience (“daters”) were asked how old they were when they first dated. For almost half of them (47%), their age of first date was below 16 years old. For 28% of the daters, they first dated when they were 16-17 years old. The remaining 25% first dated when they were 18 years old or older.

*Table 3.1.3: How old were you when you first dated?*

	No. of respondents (n=311)	Percentage (%)
Below 16	145	47
16-17	87	28
18 or above	79	25

*Note: Only respondents with dating experience were asked to answer this question.*

## 3.2 Technology and dating

Technology permeates every single aspect of our daily lives, and it has shaped and created new norms in modern human interactions. We are interested in its impact on dating among young people in HK, given their frequent usage of instant messaging, social media and other mobile applications.

Specifically, we identified three aspects of dating that may be affected due to technological advances.

- (a) Online dating - More and more online dating platforms (such as Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, OK Cupid, WeChat) have been introduced into the market in recent years. Conventional wisdom has us associate online match making services with being “desperate” or “risky”. Does this (still) hold true in HK? How popular is online dating among our younger demographic?
- (b) Influence of instant messaging and social media on dating – With instant messaging and social media taking on an increasingly important role in human interactions, it is expected that two young lovers’ ways of communicating will be quite different from their older counterparts. We are interested in the resulting changes in dating norms and practices among youth in HK. What is the most popular platform among young daters and does it change as a relationship progresses? Are young people more concerned about being social (i.e., to share aspects of their relationships on social networking sites) than about being intimate with their partners? Has technology distanced people or brought them closer in the dating context?
- (c) Sexting – Sending messages with nude pictures or videos of oneself, a.k.a. “sexting”, has received its fair share of reporting and study overseas. Pew Research Center reported in 2009 that 4% and 15% of cell-owning teens in the U.S. aged 12-17 have sent and received sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images via text messaging on their cell phones.<sup>4</sup> Snapchat, with its “auto-delete” function for images and videos and frequently described as the “sexting” app, has emerged as the most popular social network among American teenagers.<sup>5</sup> We are curious whether young people in HK, too, sext.

### 3.2.1 Online dating

Respondents were asked if they have ever used any online dating platform, which is defined as widely as possible to include any match-making websites, forums, chat rooms, and mobile apps, e.g., Tinder and WeChat. An overwhelming 67% answered yes (which we shall call “online dating platform users”).

47% of the online dating platform users have gone out with someone whom they met online. Out of all online dating platform users, 43% of daters reported that they have dated someone whom they met online.

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, *Teens and Sexting*, retrieved at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/12/15/teens-and-sexting/>

<sup>5</sup> *Snapchat Is Now The Most Popular Social Network Among Teens, According To New Study* (Mashable, 14 April 2016), retrieved at: <http://mashable.com/2016/04/14/snapchat-teens-winner/#EA8GPWG7eSqG>

Table 3.2.1(a): Online dating experience

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you used any online dating platform?</b>		
- Yes	337	67
- No	165	33
	No. of respondents (n=337)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you ever gone out with someone whom you met through an online dating platform?</b>		
- Yes	157	47
- No	180	53
<i>Note: Only online dating platform users were asked to answer this question.</i>		
	No. of respondents (n=224)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you ever dated someone whom you met through an online dating platform?</b>		
- Yes	97	43
- No	127	57

*Note: Only online dating platform users who have dated were asked to answer this question.*

Interestingly, despite the common occurrence of online dating, respondents have mixed views towards it. When asked for their thoughts on online dating, respondents seemed most concerned about its truthfulness (55% agreed that “people lie on online dating platforms”), followed by its danger of disclosing personal information (48% agreed that “it is dangerous as it publicises your personal information”). Only 39% responded that “it is a good way to meet people”. Even fewer believed in its matchmaking algorithms (17%) or its relative efficiency in connecting people (14%).

Table 3.2.1(b): What do you think about online dating?

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
People lie on online dating platforms	276	55
It is dangerous as it publicises your personal information	239	48
People who use it are lonely	124	25
It is a good way to meet people	194	39

Its algorithm allows people to find a better match	83	17
It is easier and more efficient than other ways of meeting people	72	14

*Note: Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.*

### 3.2.2 Influence of instant messaging and social media on dating

Respondents were asked to rank their preferences for various platforms in different stages of a relationship: showing interest in someone, communicating with one’s boyfriend / girlfriend, and breaking up. Texting is the most popular platform – across age groups, genders, and relationship stages.

For the initial or budding stage of a relationship, respondents answered “text or other private forms of messaging” (44%), followed by “meeting in person” (26%) and “social media interactions” (16%).

Respondents who have dated preferred to communicate with their dating partners by “text or other private forms of messaging” (52%), “meeting in person” (26%) and “phone calls” (16%). Only 3% respondents answered “social media interactions”.

There are some rather interesting findings on how young people break up. While, like dating, texting came first as the most chosen method (53%), not few have broken up with someone by simply ignoring and shutting down communications (also known as “ghosting”<sup>6</sup>), or have received the ghosting treatment (22%); or by one-sidedly changing his/her Facebook status (16%). Whether this reflects a more relaxed, casual attitude in modern dating or a tendency to avoid confrontation among youth in HK, or both, is worth further looking into.

Table 3.2.2(a): Preferred communication methods

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>What is usually your preferred way of showing interest in someone?</b>		
Text or other private forms of messaging	222	44
Meeting in person	131	26
Social media interactions (e.g., following, liking or commenting on posts)	79	16
Phone calls	49	10
Video calls	18	4
Others (Too shy to contact, don’t know, etc.)	3	-

*Note: “-“ denotes less than 1%.*

<sup>6</sup> Why “Ghosting” Haunts Modern Relationships (The Guardian, 29 March 2016), retrieved at: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2016/mar/29/how-ghosting-became-phenomenon-in-modern-dating>

	No. of respondents (n=311)	Percentage (%)
<b>What is usually your preferred way of communicating with your boyfriend / girlfriend?</b>		
Text or other private forms of messaging	161	52
Meeting in person	82	26
Phone calls	50	16
Social media interactions	9	3
Video calls	9	3

*Note: Only respondents with dating experience were asked to answer this question.*

	No. of respondents (n=223)	Percentage (%)
<b>Thinking about your past break-ups, have you done any of these or has any of these happened to you?</b>		
Text or other private forms of messaging	118	53
Meeting in person	84	38
Ignoring and shutting down all communications	49	22
Phone call	45	20
One-sidedly changing one's Facebook status	35	16
Writing on one's Facebook wall	11	5
None of the above	15	7

*Note:*

- 1. Only respondents who have broken up were asked to answer this question.*
- 2. Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.*

Turning to social media, we wanted to find out how eager or willing young people in HK are in sharing content on social networking sites about their relationships. While social media allows people to publicise content about themselves and their private lives – and is championed for its ability to do so and, in turn, connecting people – our survey revealed that only 32% of the respondents would publicly display their relationship status on Facebook.

*Table 3.2.2(b): Do you publicly display your relationship status on Facebook?*

	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
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(n=502)		
Yes	159	32
No	314	63
I don't use Facebook	29	6

Generally, respondents have mixed feelings towards social media's influence on relationships. On one end of the spectrum, some think that social media brings couples closer together (63% agree that "I am more aware of what's happening in my boyfriend's / girlfriend's life" and 57% agree that "I feel emotionally closer to my boyfriend / girlfriend"). On the other end of the spectrum, sharing information about one's private life on social networks can be a source of insecurities and anxieties (52% agree that "seeing my boyfriend's / girlfriend's interactions with others on social media makes me feel jealous" and 38% agree that "I feel pressured to post pictures and updates about my relationship on social media because my boyfriend / girlfriend wants it"). Overall, however, half (50%) of the respondents agree that social media has a positive influence on relationships.

*Table 3.2.2(c): What do you think about social media's influence on relationships?*

	No. of respondents (n=311)	Percentage (%)
<b>Positive</b>		
- I am more aware of what's happening in my boyfriend's / girlfriend's life	197	63
- I feel emotionally closer to my boyfriend / girlfriend	176	57
- Social media has a positive influence on relationships	157	50
<b>Negative</b>		
- Seeing my boyfriend's / girlfriend's interactions with others on social media makes me feel jealous	162	52
- I feel pressured to post pictures and updates about my relationship on social media because my boyfriend / girlfriend wants it	119	38
- I find my boyfriend / girlfriend's act of posting pictures or updates about our relationship on social media annoying	84	27

Note:

1. Only respondents with dating experience were asked to answer this question.
2. The above table shows the percentages of respondents who strongly agree with or agree with about the corresponding statements.
3. Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.

Gender may have a role in the way social media is perceived in relation to relationships. For instance, men (44%) are more likely than women (32%) to feel pressured to post pictures and updates about their relationships on social media just because their dating partner wants it.



### 3.2.3 Sexting

Sexting, defined in our study to mean sending messages with nude pictures or videos of oneself, is not common among young people in HK. Only 10% of the respondents have sent a sext, and those who have done so mainly did it “to please the recipient” (45%). There are more respondents who have received a sext (21%), of which 66% deleted the sext after viewing, while 32% saved it.

Table 3.2.3(a): Sending a sext

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you ever sexted?</b>		
Yes	51	10
No	451	90
	No. of respondents (n=51)	Percentage (%)
<b>Why did you send the sext?</b>		
To please the recipient	23	45
I was asked to send it and I was okay with it	22	43
I was bored	11	22
As a joke	10	20
I was asked to send it and I didn't know how to refuse even though I didn't want to	9	18
My friends sext so I did too	6	12
Don't know	1	2

*Note: Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.*

Table 3.2.3(b): Receiving a sext

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you ever received a sext?</b>		
Yes	105	21
No	397	79

	No. of respondents (n=105)	Percentage (%)
<b>What did you do with the sext?</b>		
Viewed and deleted it	69	66
Saved it	34	32
Forwarded / showed it to my friends	5	5
Uploaded it onto the Internet (Facebook, forum, etc.)	2	2
Blacklisted the sender	1	1

*Note: Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.*

It comes as no surprise that HK youth’s perception of sexting is largely negative. 24% of the respondents called it “disgusting”, and another 21% said it was “stupid”. That said, a small part of the respondents associated it with “harmless fun” (9%), “sexually arousing” (8%) and “exciting” (8%).

*Table 3.2.3(c): What is your view of sexting?*

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
Disgusting	121	24
Stupid	104	21
Risky	78	16
I feel uncomfortable about it	71	14
Harmless fun	43	9
Sexually arousing	42	8
Exciting	40	8
Don’t know	3	1

There are cross-sectional differences in the tendency to sext and the perception of sexting, based on one’s dating experience, experience with online dating and sex experience.

- Dating experience - Sexting is more common among those who have dated than those who have not. Among those who have dated, 15% have sent a sext, compared to 2% of those who have not dated. Respondents with dating experience also view sexting more positively.
- Online dating experience - Sexting is more common among online dating platform users than non-users. 15% of online dating platform users have sent a sext, vastly greater than the 1% of non-users.

- **Sex experience** – Sexting is more common among those with sex experience than those without. 33% of the respondents with sex experience have sexted, far more than the 4% of those with no sex experience. Those who have had sex tend to see sexting more positively.

*Table 3.2.3(d): Significant differences in views on sexting based on dating experience and sex experience*

	With dating experience (%) (out of 311 respondents)	Without dating experience (%) (out of 191 respondents)
Disgusting	18	34
Sexually arousing	11	4
	With sex experience (%)	Without sex experience (%)
Disgusting	8	29
Harmless fun	16	6
Sexually arousing	20	5
Exciting	14	6

### 3.3 Sex

We want to understand HK youth’s attitude and behaviour in relation to sex. With respect to sexual practices, our questions are directed at finding out their competence in sexual knowledge and their tendencies to engage in sexually risky practices.

#### 3.3.1 Definition of “sex”

Respondents were asked what counted as “sex” to them. Curiously, only 83%, but not all of them, answered yes to “vaginal sex”. Only approximately half thought that physically intimate acts like anal sex and oral sex amounted to sex (56% and 51% respectively).

*Table 3.3.1: What counts as “sex” to you?*

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
Vaginal sex	417	83
Anal sex	280	56
Oral sex	256	51
Fingering or hand jobs	204	41
Dry humping or genital rubbing	177	35
Touching any body part	64	13

Refused to answer	29	6
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*Note: Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, therefore the sum of frequencies may exceed the total number of respondents answering this question and the sum of frequencies may exceed 100%.*

### 3.3.2 Sex experience

The majority of the respondents (74%) have no sex experience, while 23% of the respondents have had sex. Within the latter group, 79% of them have had three or fewer sex partners. For more than half (54%) of the respondents with sex experience, their first time of having sex was after they had reached adulthood, that is, 18 years old or above. 22% first had sex when they were 16-17 years old. For the remaining 9%, they first had sex when they were below 16 years old.

Table 3.3.2: Sex experience

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have you ever had sex?</b>		
Yes	116	23
No	370	74
Refused to answer	16	3
	No. of respondents (n=116)	Percentage (%)
<b>How many people have you had sex with?</b>		
One	51	44
Two	28	24
Three	13	11
Four	2	2
Five or more	16	14
Refused to answer	6	5
<i>Note: Only respondents who have had sex were asked to answer this question.</i>		
	No. of respondents (n=116)	Percentage (%)
<b>How old were you when you first had sex?</b>		
Below 16 years old	11	9
16-17 years old	26	22

18 years old or above	63	54
Refused to answer	16	14
<i>Note: Only respondents who have had sex were asked to answer this question.</i>		

However, when the same group of respondents who have had sex was asked if they would have preferred to have sex at a later age, 39% answered yes.

### 3.3.3 Contraceptive use

Another indicator of youth sexual competence is the usage of contraceptives. Out of all the respondents with sex experience, only 56% used contraceptives every time and only 20% used contraceptives more than half of the time. 11% did not use contraceptives at all.

Condom is the most popular method of contraception (64%). Notably, the second most popular method is extra-vaginal ejaculation (12%), and the third most popular method is natural rhythm (10%) – both of these methods cannot protect oneself against sexually transmitted disease and are relatively less effective in terms of preventing unwanted pregnancy.

Table 3.3.3: Contraceptive use

	No. of respondents (n=116)	Percentage (%)
<b>Do you use contraceptives?</b>		
Yes	101	87
- Every time	65	56
- More than half of the time	23	20
- About half of the time	9	8
- Less than half of the time	4	3
No	13	11
Refused to answer	2	2
<b>What method of contraceptives do you normally use?</b>		
Condom	74	64
Extra-vaginal ejaculation	14	12
Natural rhythm	12	10
Washing afterwards	5	4
Oral contraceptives (pre-intercourse)	4	3
Oral contraceptives (post-intercourse, a.k.a. “Plan B”)	1	1

I don't use any	4	3
Refused to answer	2	2

### 3.4 Sexuality education

As a first step to understanding the impact of existing sexuality education programmes in HK, we interviewed young people about their main sources of sexuality education. We also sought to find out the role of parents in sexuality education, and young people's self-perceived level of competence in sex and relationship matters.

#### 3.4.1 Main source of information about sex

Growing up, respondents mainly learnt about sex from their school teachers (29%) and the media (27%), which we defined to include newspapers, magazines, online forums, chat rooms and social media. That not a small number of our young people are mainly receiving information about sex from the media is a cause for concern, as information from the media may not be accurate and/or sufficient for young people who are often curious about sex and relationships. Nearly 20% also learnt about sex mainly from their peers.

Table 3.4.1(a): Main source of information about sex

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
School teachers	144	29
Media (newspaper, magazines, online forums, chat rooms and social media)	137	27
Peers (boyfriend / girlfriends, classmates, friends, siblings, cousins, etc.)	95	19
Pornography	55	11
Social workers and social welfare organisations	32	6
Parents or older relatives (aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.)	19	4
Health professionals	19	4
Workplace	1	-

*Note: “-“ denotes less than 1%.*

A young person's main source of information about sex can affect the timing for him/her to later engage in sexual conduct. Our data shows that more of those whose main source of information about sex is pornography have had sex, and less of those whose main source is their teachers have experience in sex.

Table 3.4.1(b): Comparison of main source of information about sex based on sex experience

	With sex experience (%) (out of 116 respondents)	Without sex experience (%) (out of 370 respondents)
School teachers	10	34
Pornography	18	9

### 3.4.2 Sexuality education from parents

Our data shows that not many parents in HK have taken steps to educate their children about sex – merely 23%. For 77% of our respondents, their parents have not spoken to them about sex at all. Out of the parents who have spoken to their children about sex, most (67%) did so infrequently, about every 6 months to 1 year.

Table 3.4.2(a): Sexuality education from parents

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
<b>Have your parents talked to you about sex?</b>		
Yes	114	23
No	388	77
	No. of respondents (n=114)	Percentage (%)
<b>How frequently do your parents talk to you about sex?</b>		
Every 1-2 months	12	11
Every 2-6 months	26	23
Every 6 months to 1 year	76	67
<i>Note: Only respondents who have received sexuality education from their parents were asked to answer this question.</i>		

Notably, there are cross-sectional differences in the role of parents in sexuality education based on age and gender.

- Age – Comparing the main source of sexuality education for youth from different age groups, we found that only 1% from the age group 12-14 received information about sex mainly from their parents, significantly less than the age group 15-17 (8%). This suggests that parents should start earlier in talking to their children about sex.

- **Gender** – Parents are less likely to talk about sex with their boys than girls. This finding is in line with international and overseas guidance that sexuality education for boys is often neglected and that more policy efforts should be spent to promote awareness in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

Table 3.4.2(b): Comparison of sexuality education from parents based on gender

	Male (%) (out of 251 respondents)	Female (%) (out of 251 respondents)
<b>Have your parents talked to you about sex?</b>		
Yes	16	29
No	84	71

#### Pornography as an alternative source of sexuality education?

Among the respondents who did not have their parents talk to them about sex, 13% answered that their main source of information about sex is pornography. In comparison, among the respondents whose parents did talk to them about sex, only 5% answered that their main source of information is pornography. Whether a lack of sexuality education from home has anything to do with young people seeking information elsewhere, including pornography, is an issue worth further studying.

### 3.4.3 Competence in sex and relationship

Approaching the question from the perspective of young people themselves, respondents were asked to rate their level of competence in sex and relationship matters. 60% felt competent, but 40% did not.

Table 3.4.3: Do you feel competent about sex and relationship matters?

	No. of respondents (n=502)	Percentage (%)
Competent (including “very competent” & “competent”)	302	60
Not competent (including “less than competent” & “very incompetent”)	200	40

The role of parents in sexuality education may be correlated with their child’s perceived competence. Out of the respondents who did not receive sex education from their parents, 57% felt competent about sex and relationship. The percentage of respondents that felt competent is higher at 69% among those who had their parents talk to them about sex.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* (see above Note 1); UK Department for Education and Employment, *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance*, retrieved at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/283599/sex\\_and\\_relationship\\_education\\_guidance.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/283599/sex_and_relationship_education_guidance.pdf); and Government of Western Australia Department of Health, *Talk Soon. Talk Often - A Guide for Parents Talking to Their Kids about Sex*, retrieved at: [http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/HealthyWA/Original/Sexual-health/TSTO\\_V2.ashx](http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/HealthyWA/Original/Sexual-health/TSTO_V2.ashx)



## 4. Implications, Areas for Further Study and Conclusion

### 4.1 Technology and youth dating

#### **Online dating is common among youth in HK, but they have a largely negative perception of it**

Nearly 70% of the respondents have used an online dating platform. Among these online dating platform users, almost half have gone out with someone whom they met online and almost half of those with dating experience reported that they have dated someone whom they met online. These findings suggest that online dating is quite the norm among youth in HK and, contrary to the belief that online dating is a futile exercise because there is a disconnect between “virtual” and “reality”, it actually has a fair likelihood of connecting people in real life in the context of modern dating.

That said, HK youth’s perception of online dating is not universally or even largely positive. About half of the respondents think that online dating users lie and that these platforms carry the danger of leaking one’s personal information. More tellingly, despite the widespread use of online dating, only less than 40% agree that it is a good way to meet people. One possible explanation for this is that our survey asked if users have tried online dating, but not user experience or repeated usage. It may well be that young people are willing to try online dating at least once, but many did not have a good experience - but whether this is true requires further studying and validation.

Further, our study does not address the *quality* of relationships that come out as a result of online dating. This is a difficult question to answer for a quantitative research, but will be an interesting one for a research employing qualitative methods. For instance, how many young couples that met online end up in a good, stable relationship (and what is a “good” relationship anyway)? Related to this is the question of platform differentiation: what kinds of relationship are formed and how do they differ based on the variety of online dating platforms in the market? Is Tinder really the “hook-up” app, and is Coffee Meets Bagel more promising for people looking for something long term?

In any case, the prevalence of online dating among youth in HK has implications for the design and approach of sexuality education programmes. To the extent that they are still preaching a blanket “no” to the use of online dating, this approach may not be effective in teaching young people safety precautions when using these platforms, or generally in reaching out to young people. In light of technological advances, there is a need to critically examine the content, relevance and timeliness of sexuality education.

#### **Instant messaging and social media has altered dating norms among youth in HK**

Texting and other forms of private messaging is the most popular channel of communication among young daters or to-be-daters, and this is true across age groups, genders and relationship stages. Interestingly, for break ups, some young people like to use the infamous “ghosting” method, that is, ignoring and shutting down all communications (22%); some of them would also one-sidedly change their Facebook status (16%). This can be a reflection of a more casual, relaxed attitude towards dating, or young people’s inability or unwillingness to deal with conflicts, or both. If it is the latter, then it may have implications on relationship education programmes or other interventions directed at inter-personal skills and relationship management for youth.

While one may think that young people are keen to display their private lives on social media, our results show the opposite. Only about one-third of the respondents will publicly show their relationship status on Facebook. But young people do feel pressured to share content about their relationships on social media - almost a quarter of the respondents do so to please their other halves.

Despite the anxieties and insecurities created by social media, half of the respondents agree that social media has a positive influence on relationships overall - by keeping partners updated on each other's lives and bringing couples closer emotionally.

### **Sexing is neither commonly practiced nor well received by young people in HK**

Overall, 22% of the respondents have sent or received a sext. Less have been on the sending end (10%) than the receiving end (21%). HK youth's perception of sexting is largely negative, ranging from "disgusting" (24%) to "stupid" (21%) to "risky" (16%), though a minority thinks that it can be "harmless fun" (9%), "sexually arousing" (8%) and "exciting" (8%). Not so surprisingly, our results show that sexting is more common and well received among young daters, users of online dating, and those with sex experience.

## **4.2 Sexuality education and sexual competence**

### **HK youth's competence in sex and relationship matters can be improved**

More needs to be done to improve the sex and relationship competence of young people in HK, based on our findings of their practice of sexually risky behaviour and their subjective competence level.

In terms of contraceptive use, 44% of the respondents did not use contraceptives every time they had sex, and 11% did not use contraceptives at all. Out of those who used contraceptives, 12% used extra-vaginal ejaculation and 10% used natural rhythm, both of which are relatively ineffective in preventing pregnancy and ineffective in protecting one against sexually transmitted disease.

Teenagers are known to be prone to seek validation and affection through sex and relationships, and adequate education should be able to teach them proper decision-making skills and prevent over-early engagement in sexual conduct.<sup>8</sup> Yet, 39% of the respondents with sex experience answered that they would have preferred to have sex at a later stage.

Overall, nearly half of the respondents felt they were incompetent in sex and relationship matters.

### **There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of HK's sexuality education**

Although school teachers is the main source of sexuality education for 29% of the respondents, another 27% cited the media as the main source of information about sex. Information on unmonitored chat rooms, forums and social media may or may not be accurate and, in any event, will be insufficient in addressing young people's many questions and uncertainties about sex and relationship matters.

Currently, sexuality education is subsumed into part of the primary and secondary school curriculum, specifically in the Moral and Civic Education framework, among other subjects. Besides formal education in school, there are other programmes and activities, some provided by government bureaus and some by non-governmental entities, which teach young people about sex and relationships. All of these make up part of the sexuality education in HK. The findings of this study suggest that HK's sexuality education can be improved and should be reviewed. In reviewing sexuality education programmes, proven effective methods should be identified. Sharing best practices is one way to scale impact. Educators in this area should be encouraged to form a network for exchanging notes, and technology can be used as a platform for this purpose. The Government can take the lead in encouraging ongoing reviews, setting standards, and facilitating exchanges by practitioners.

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<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* (see above Note 1)

## **Parents should play a bigger role in sexuality education**

An overwhelming 77% of the respondents have not had their parents talk to them about sex growing up. The situation is particularly concerning within the age group 12-14, of which only 1% answered that their parents were their main source of information about sex. Further, boys (16%) are less likely to receive sexuality education from their parents when compared to girls (29%).

That parents do not play an active role in their children's sexuality education may have two implications. We found that significantly more of those respondents who obtained information about sex mainly from pornography did not receive sexuality education from their parents, suggesting that a failure to teach at home may cause young people to seek information elsewhere, including pornography. Where a young person's main source of information about sex is his/her parents, it is also more likely for him/her to feel competent about sex and relationship matters.

Parents need to do more, start earlier and pay more attention to the needs of their boys in sexuality education. Increasing HK parents' role in sexuality education requires policy efforts from the Government – in raising parents' awareness and educating parents about the importance of sexuality education at home. Practitioners in the field of sexuality education can also include parents in sexuality education workshops, as a first step to cultivating an environment in which sex is not a taboo subject and can be freely discussed between parent and child.

### **4.3 Areas for further study**

The findings of this survey have led to some interesting questions that can be further studied in-depth. For instance, an understanding of the current practices and perceptions of online dating can better inform sexuality education. A qualitative study may be more appropriate to learn about the nuances of young people's views and experiences in relation to online dating. Alternatively, one might want to identify best practices in sexuality education by way of a longitudinal study, one that is targeted at specific programmes and their outcomes. Turning to sexting, which seems to be more prevalent among youth in countries like the U.S. and U.K., it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study to identify the underlying factors at play.

We note that there are several issues that have not been explored or fully explored in this study, which are nevertheless worthy of attention. One is sexual orientation, specifically the issues and challenges faced by sexual minorities. Another is the effect of pornographic or sexually explicit materials on young people. Finally, as noted above, a more focused research on the age group of 12-14 will be valuable in view of the limited sample size in this study.

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**Effective sexuality education can equip young people with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships, which is fundamental to their personal development and wellbeing. We hope that this study will act as a starting point – for experts and practitioners to further their work and research in this area, and for the public to start talking about sex and sexuality education. Let's talk about it.**

13 June, 2016



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