

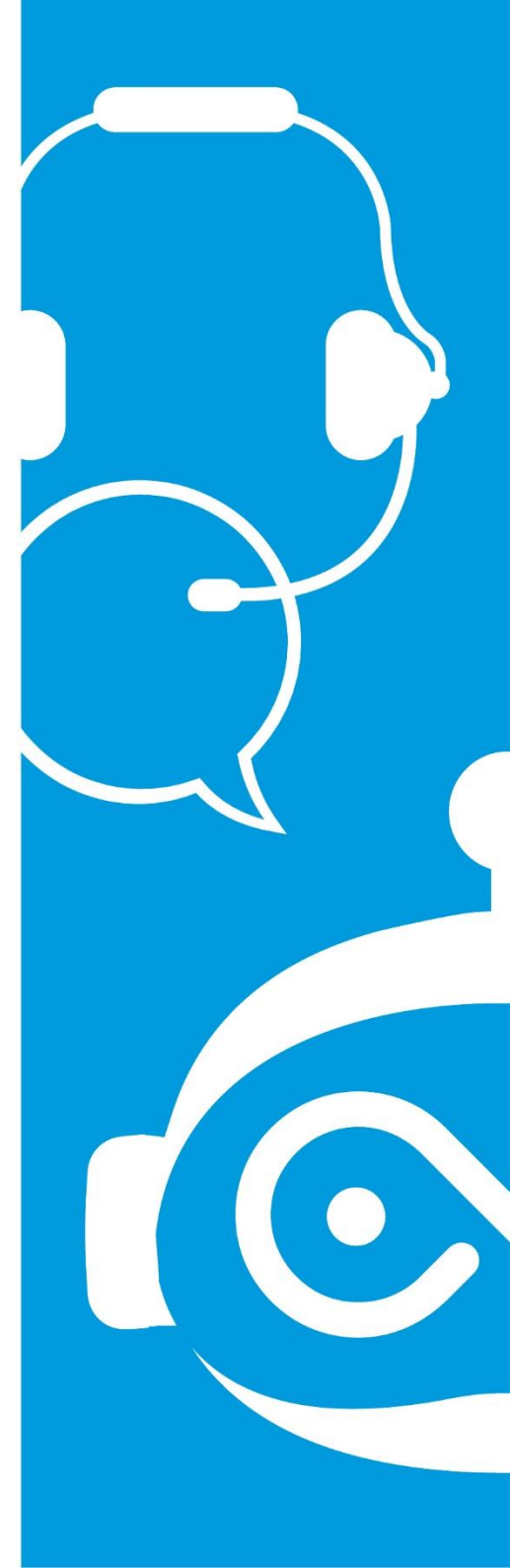


ONLINE CENSORSHIP OF SEX EDUCATION CONTENT

What is it?

Online censorship refers to a **digital phenomenon** in which social media platforms monitor the content created and shared by users and remove posts that violates their guidelines. As private companies, they determine the type of speech/content that is deemed 'problematic' and, therefore, subject to censorship, which for most of these platforms includes: hate speech, obscene content, misinformation and harassment. SRH-related censorship online relates to removing posts that discuss terms or topics related to SRH, which can significantly impact the 29% of young people that turn to these digital spaces as their main source of information on their SRH¹.

¹ Petty, "The Naked Truth: Meta's Censorship of Sexual Health Information and Advocating to Big Tech for Change."



How can it impact the sexual and reproductive health of youth?

Censorship of posts on social media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the purpose of content guidelines is to protect users and ensure the safe and informed use of these platforms. That's why, for example, one can argue that YouTube prohibiting content that falls under medical misinformation, hate speech, child or sexual abuse, and pornography, is a positive development for youth looking for accurate and appropriate SRH-related content online.

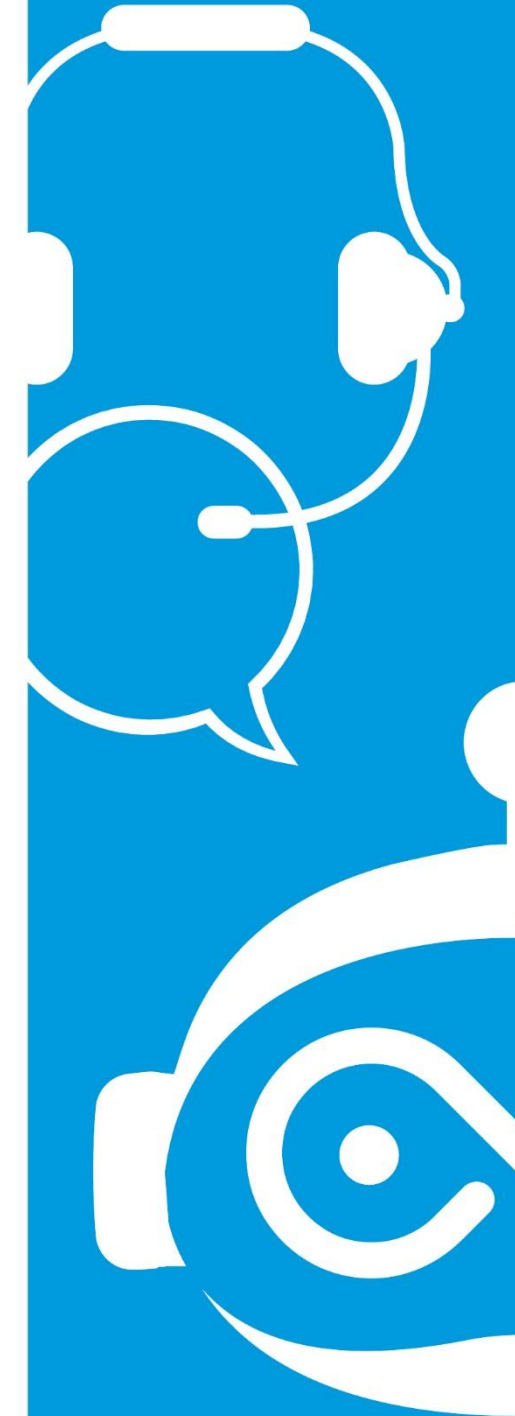
However, since these social media platforms rely on machine learning and not human evaluators to determine which content doesn't comply with guidelines, users and content creators have found content is being flagged that is educational and not provocative in nature, impeding the sharing of SRH-related knowledge and opening up debate that censorship limits access to information and freedom of speech.

Content creators complain online that Facebook classifies as a "sex publication" a post, informing others about sexual harassment at work and that a different post discussing contraceptive pills was classified as 'pornographic content'. Other educators are sounding the alarm that their posts containing medically accurate terms such as 'vagina' and 'vulva' have also been labelled as sexual content instead of educational content. Even more concerning is the fact that Facebook explicitly bans any promotion of reproductive health services that focus on sexual pleasure, resulting in removal of posts that aim to educate youth about prioritising their sexual pleasure instead of merely focusing on risk-prevention.



Supporting youth's sexual & reproductive health in the digital age: BEST PRACTICES

Researchers have found that a direct consequence of these rigorous classifications has meant that content aimed at educating marginalised groups (women and LGBT+ users) is more likely to be removed, which may lead to users turning elsewhere for this content and risking disinformation on topics that impact their SRH.



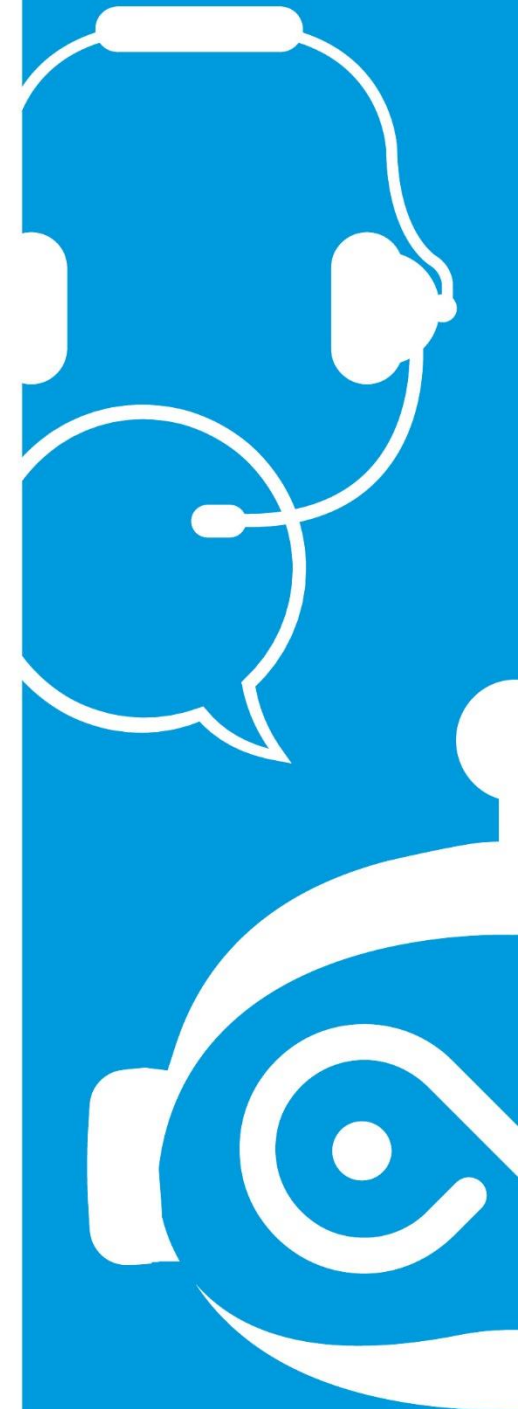
What are some ways in which youth can be supported?

- Turning to social media platforms with more lax community guidelines that still contain moderated user-generated content such as Reddit and Twitter instead of Facebook, YouTube and TikTok.
- To avoid SRH-related censorship on all platforms, users can play with words, use acronyms and less explicit images. For example, instead of 'sexual assault' the term 'SA' is used by creators and posts use with images that don't depict human bodies such as pictures of fruit and vegetables as representation of the human genitals.
- If you feel like your SRH-related post has been flagged unfairly, these platforms encourage all users to appeal for a human evaluator to review their content. This helps educational content that deals with SRH to be appropriately classified.

Related digital phenomena/tools:

See sheets:

- Social media: YouTube
- SRH material online: User-generated content
- SRH material online: Expert opinions



Further reading:

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- Peters, Brian, and Lata Nott. "Free Speech on Social Media: The Complete Guide." *Freedom Forum* (blog), August 3, 2022. <https://www.freedomforum.org/free-speech-on-social-media/>.
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- Savin, Jennifer. "Why Are Important Female Health-Related Words Being Banned on Social Media?" *Cosmopolitan*, June 13, 2023. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a44182369/female-health-words-banned/>.

