Good sex matters: Pleasure as a driver of online sex education for young people [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

Lindsay van Clief, Elianne Anemaat
RNW Media, Hilversum, Noord Holland, 1217 AM, The Netherlands

Abstract

Background
There are few documented examples of online sex education platforms that make an impact on young people’s sexual health and wellbeing, yet research shows that new media has enormous potential to be harnessed in this way. The same is true for a pleasure-positive approach to sex education curricula and programmes. This research provides empirical evidence from the Love Matters’ websites in Mexico, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, and India to highlight the prevalence and importance of talking about pleasure-related topics with young people.

Methodology
Love Matters is an online sex education platform targeting seven countries and attracting 30 million website visits in 2018. We analysed data through Google Analytics to explore the difference between sex education-focused content and pleasure-focused content and how young people engage with different types of sexual health information on the Love Matters platforms.

Results
Pleasure-focused content is 1.5 times more popular than sex education-focused content across all platforms. However, education-focused content attracts more organic traffic, suggesting young people purposefully search for sexual health information online. Users generally spend longer on the site engaging with sex education-focused content than pleasure-focused content.

Conclusion
This research provides empirical evidence from five countries in the Global South to support the notion that young people are actively looking for sexual health information that covers the full scope of sexual experience and pleasure, including – but not limited to – the reduction of health risks. This paper furthers the efforts to adopt a pleasure-positive approach to both online and offline sex education interventions.

Keywords
sex education, pleasure, young people, new media, online, Google Analytics, digital

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Corresponding authors: Lindsay van Clief (lindsay.vanclief@gmail.com), Elianne Anemaat (elianne.anemaat@rnw.org)

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Competing interests: L.v.C. and E.A. both work for RNW Media which is the organization that hosts the Love Matters programme.

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Introduction

Since the pioneering work of Michelle Fine in 1988, the missing discourse of pleasure has been used as a lens to both enhance and critique sex education (comprehensive or otherwise) and sexual and reproductive health and service provision while also creating a movement of community programmes and discussions (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2007; Allen, 2012; Beasley, 2008; Boonstra, 2011; Gruskin et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2013; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Ollis, 2016). Sex education curricula tend to approach sexual health from a public health perspective, focusing on risk reduction of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), reducing teenage and unwanted pregnancy and emphasising the delay of first-time sex (Allen, 2007). Yet pleasure, in all its facets intrinsically connected to sexual experience, has been notably absent in the educational context of sexual health (Fine, 1988).

Pleasure, then, relates to the full context of sexual experience, including love, sex for pleasure, relationships, boundaries, communication, desire etc. (Wood et al., 2019). Talking about pleasure has been highlighted as a “gap” between discourses in sex education and the realities of young people’s sexual experience (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2001; Fine, 1988; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016). Despite these discussions and recommendations, most sexual health education programmes continue to solely focus on risk reduction and avoid larger conversations about sex and sexuality. With this research, we will highlight an online example of integrating pleasure-focused topics to help inform young people about their sexual health and rights in Mexico, Egypt, India, Kenya and Nigeria.

The primary focus of incorporating pleasure is acknowledging young people as sexual beings with wants, needs and desires (Allen, 2001; Allen, 2005; Boonstra, 2011; Fine, 1988; Hanbury & Eastham, 2016). It is about bringing a stronger rights framework into sexual health “to include such issues as gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, violence, and individual rights and responsibilities in relationships” (Berglas et al., 2014, p. 63). Researchers have argued that not talking about pleasure means that the needs of young people are not being met (Francis, 2010; Giami et al., 2006; Ingham, 2005; Philpott et al., 2006b). Taking pleasure out of the conversation effectively negates one of the main motivators for high-risk sexual health behaviour – which is, indeed, pleasure (Gruskin et al., 2019). Rather, the guiding notion should be to ground sex education in the actual lived (sexual) experiences of young people, thereby encouraging a healthier outlook towards sex that is both safe and enjoyable.

It is important to address key topics like negotiation and communication, as well as diversity of bodies, genders and sexual orientations when you are integrating pleasure into the conversation (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Beasley, 2008; Fine, 1988; Gruskin et al., 2019; Tepper, 2000). To effectively speak with young people, you need to make sure that the information is reflective of the population you are speaking to (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2001; Allen, 2005; Giami et al., 2006).

If not, it further marginalises young people when they do not fit into the cis-gendered and heteronormative model or are having sex outside of a committed relationship.

In the last decade, the arguments are no longer about if you should include pleasure, but how (Allen, 2012; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). There have been a number of interventions and research publications on how to best include pleasure-related topics in sexual health education, with some promising findings (Hanbury & Eastham, 2016; Gruskin, et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2017; Philpott et al., 2006a; Philpott et al., 2006b). There have also been some projects and programmes that have adapted such discourse and narratives (Philpott et al., 2006b). The Pleasure Project, for example, has demonstrated that when talking about pleasurable sex and condoms, sales and use of condoms increase more than with other, more traditional fear-based or sex-negative methods (Philpott et al., 2006a; Philpott et al., 2006b).

Unfortunately, many of these projects “…tend to occupy marginal spaces and are not included in mainstream policy-making or news reporting, unless being chastised and accused of corrupting the young” (Hanbury & Eastham, 2016). More innovation in sex education is needed, as well as more research to test the existing theories.

This is not to say that school-based programmes have not made attempts to integrate pleasure. However, they seem to share various challenges and pitfalls revolving around teacher training, lack of sensitivity around gender and sexual diversity, community acceptance and fear of these approaches (Allen, 2005; Allen, 2012; Fine, 1988; Francis, 2010; Giami et al., 2006; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Ollis, 2016). Some sex education curricula have incorporated pleasure within existing risk reduction models, thus effectively framing pleasure as a risk factor for unhealthy behaviour, emotional turmoil, STIs and STDs and pregnancy (Lamb et al., 2013). This results in an opposite discourse where pleasure is equated to fear and danger instead of the notion that sex can be pleasurable and safe (Hanbury & Eastham, 2016; Lamb et al., 2013; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016).

These reflections demand better definitions of pleasure and best practices for its integration to attain a more sex-positive and validating approach to the sexual experiences of young people. In a special edition of the journal Sex Education, McGeeney & Kehily (2016) speak about the disconnect between research and practice. Despite the larger trend of acknowledging pleasure in academic theory and research studies presented on its benefits, a lack of larger uptake or significant change in these practices can be noted on the ground. This calls for a closer connection of practitioner and researchers to help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Universality of pleasure

There is a scarcity of research on the relationship between pleasure and sex education from the Global South, despite the rise of sexual health education globally post the HIV/AIDS crisis (Altman, 2008; Ingham, 2005). Looking at theory, one would suspect that that the concepts of pleasure and the empowering of young people as sexual beings would be universal, however there is little research to support this (Ingham, 2005). Some
research has been done in Africa, Asia and South America that indeed implies more universality of pleasure (Francis, 2010; Müller et al., 2017; Philpott et al., 2006b; Simon & Daneback, 2013). Yet, the vast majority of the body of research linking pleasure to sex education is from the United States, Australia and New Zealand which raises many more questions than answers (Wood et al., 2019). This research aims to fill this gap by contributing empirical evidence from various countries in the Global South to help highlight the importance and universality of pleasure.

There are hints to pleasure as a universal concept when looking at research and theory in other disciplines. In communications and marketing, there has been a long-standing principle of ‘hedonic consumption’ which echoes the importance of pleasure in making decisions, and our natural bias for positivity and things that people believe will make them happy (Alba & Williams, 2013). This perspective is relevant because it acknowledges the emotional aspects of the selection process and consumption of products (including information), which means that utilitarian use and practicality are not always enough (Jordan, 1998). When taking this approach to sex education, this implies that the risk reduction focus, despite its use and importance, is missing elements to make it successful and impactful with young people themselves. It is important to address the emotion and the context behind the decisions and motivators to have the desired effect.

New media as vehicle for health interventions
With the growth of the internet and mobile technology, new media has become increasingly important as a source of information for people’s sexual and reproductive health (Allen, 2005; Allison, et al., 2012; Lefebvre, 2007; Levine, 2011; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004; Vance et al., 2009). Some even challenge the concept that schools are the best place for sexuality education in today’s landscape, highlighting the popularity of the internet as a source for young people (Giami et al., 2006; Jones & Biddlecom, 2011). As Simon and Daneback state: “…adolescents want to learn about sexual experiences, not just sexual health, the Internet may cater better to adolescent’s education interests, thus serving as a replacement for topics lacking in [school-based sex education]” (Simon & Daneback, 2013, p. 314). Although it may not be ideal to serve as a full replacement, young people are seeking information online even when other sources may be available in their communities or schools.

There is a strong interest in exploring new media and digital avenues to engage with young people about their sexual health (Giami et al., 2006; Jones & Biddlecom, 2011; Levine, 2011; Lefebvre, 2007 (Oosterhoff et al., 2016). The web has fewer barriers to access and fewer censors when it comes to sensitive, taboo or sexual information (Müller et al., 2017). There is a rise of websites, mobile applications and social media accounts that share sexual health related information to people when they want it, where they want it (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004; Vance et al., 2009).

The internet offers educators a space to share information and engage directly with young people themselves, with varying degrees of privacy and is largely less subject to censorship than school and other formal education institutions (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). This freedom allows for new approaches and discourses that could further embody the pleasure perspective and overcome many of the common barriers highlighted around sex education. It is clear that young people are using new media as a source whether the information available online is accurate or not (Jones & Biddlecom, 2011; Simon & Daneback, 2013).

Digital and new media methods are also an intervention that can cross borders. The trend of young people searching for sexual health information online is present in different geographical and cultural contexts (Simon & Daneback, 2013). “Freedom from geographic and temporal boundaries, open access to sources and information, and the ability to create the digital and social contours that surround health conversations, information seeking, decision making, and behavioural choices” (Lefebvre, 2007, p. 34). Online platforms can offer insights into young people’s behaviour and insights at scale in under-researched locations.

Love Matters
Love Matters is the flagship sexual and reproductive health and rights programme of RNW Media, an international media organisation based in the Netherlands that focuses on building digital communities for social change. Love Matters is a collection of online platforms where young people (between fifteen and thirty) can access information about love, sex and relationships. Love Matters is active in China, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and provides evidence and rights-based sexual health information in local languages to anyone who has access to the internet. Love Matters engages with young people on the topics of sexual and reproductive health and rights using a pleasure-first approach (Gruskin et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2017).

In 2018, Love Matters’ websites hosted almost 30 million visits, and Love Matters’ pages were viewed 49 million times. More than 5.6 million fans followed the Love Matters Facebook pages, interacting through likes, comments and shares. Love Matters China and Egypt maintain strong video platforms with 46 million and 26.2 million views respectively (RNW Media, 2018).

Rather than shying away from pleasure-related topics, Love Matters covers all topics related to love, sex and relationships, and try to make sure that the information is relevant, interesting and engaging for young people. As an example, the article Oral Sex: Top 5 Facts contains tips for giving pleasurable oral sex, highlighting some techniques while also including a tip to use

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1“The term new media is a broad term that refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation, and community formation around the media content” (Allison et al., 2012).

2Love Matters web analytics confirm that 90% of the online audience is between the age of 18 and 30.

3https://lovemattersafrica.com/making-love/ways-to-make-love/oral-sex-top-five-facts
a barrier contraceptive method during oral sex. The idea behind this approach is to contextualise sex education information in a pleasure-focused way which both acknowledges and engages with young people’s interests, with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness of the information provided (Philpott et al., 2006a; Philpott et al., 2006b).

Methods
Study background
To understand to what extent young people are visiting the platforms and engaging with the content, we make use of various digital data collection and analytic tools. Web analytics, including Google Analytics, have been used in digital marketing for decades and are now increasingly being used as a process evaluation tool for online health interventions because they provide valuable insights into the extent to which people are exposed to the intervention, and how intensively they engage with it before leaving (Crutzen et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2017; Plaza, 2010).

Data extraction
For this study, we used Google Analytics to analyse reach and engagement of users with four of the longest running websites: Love Matters India, Love Matters Africa (operated from Kenya and Nigeria), Hablemos de Sexo y Amor (operated from Mexico), and Love Matters Arabic (operated from Egypt). We collected data from January 1st to December 31st of 2018, based on the following indicators: sessions by landing page, traffic type, session duration, time on page, and exit rate. The number of sessions show how many times people visit the website, while the landing page indicates which page they enter first. Session duration shows how many seconds (on average) people stay on the website, while time on page shows the number of seconds (on average) people stay on a specific page. Traffic type gives insight in how users find your website. Lastly, exit rate shows the percentage of people that end their session with a certain page (Müller et al., 2017).

We are looking at total amounts of sessions that include both organic and paid traffic sources. We choose to use both types of traffic sources because ad clicks and normal clicks both imply interest from the user. The ads are targeted to key words and interests related to the themes discussed in this paper.

Data categories
For the purpose of this research, and to help demonstrate which themes attract and interest young people, we have divided the Love Matters website content in two categories: sex education and pleasure. Building on the notion that sex education primarily takes a risk reduction approach, main content themes for sex education are Birth Control, Our Bodies (covering anatomy and issues related to physical development), Pregnancy, and Safe Sex (including safe sex practices, STIs and STDs). Pleasure then takes on the content themes that acknowledge and address the full context of sexual experience: Love and Relationships (covering dating advice, harassment, relationship problems and tips), Making Love (covering orgasms, sex tips and sexual problems), and Marriage (covering proposals, weddings, married life).

Results
Attracting visitors: sessions by landing page
We found significant differences in user interest when distinguishing between pleasure-focused content and sex education-focused content. For all four platforms (India, Africa, Arabic and Hablemos), we see that pleasure content attracts a higher number of visitors than sex education content: a combined total of 9.1 million sessions came in on pleasure pages, while sex education pages attracted 6.3 million sessions across the platforms. Pleasure-focused content is on average 1.5 times more popular than sex education-focused content. Love Matters Arabic and Hablemos show the greatest difference between pleasure and sex education: respectively 1.6 (3.8 million pleasure versus 2.3 million education sessions) and 1.7 (697,350 pleasure versus 409,914 education sessions). Love Matters Africa and India are on the lower part of the scale, with pleasure content surpassing sex education by an average of 1.3. Figure 1 shows that despite the differences in scope between the four platforms, the pleasure trend is consistent throughout all platforms.

For all platforms, the popularity of pleasure-focused topics is centred around the content category Making Love, which accounts for 77% of the 9.1 million pleasure-focused sessions, with focus on articles and facts on orgasms and how to have pleasurable sex. Regional differences can be found when looking at topical interest: Love Matters Arabic’s top position is determined by the popularity of virginity as a topic category, covering information and facts on virginity, and the hymen. Over the year, more than 660,000 sessions came in on pages related to virginity, which is 6.5% of all incoming traffic on Love Matters Arabic. Although the topic of virginity also attracts users to Love Matters India and Love Matters Africa (respectively 812,000 and 41,000 sessions), we see that articles under Ways to make love interest most users on Love Matters India (nearly 1.1 million sessions, making up 9% of total incoming traffic), while Orgasms are the most popular on Love Matters Africa (almost 104,000 sessions, making up 11% of total incoming traffic).

Most of the interest in sex education-related content is focused on the male and female anatomy, with a particular emphasis on Penis shapes and sizes, which is the most popular page under sex education-focused content for all platforms except Hablemos, whose article Reasons for delayed menstruation is the top-visited sex education page. Sex education topics focused on risk reduction, such as contraception, pregnancy and safe sex, are the least popular and attract close to 1.7 million sessions, making up 29% of 5.9 million sex education-related sessions. As shown in Figure 2, this relative disregard for risk reduction...
topics is a visible trend on Love Matters India, Arabic and Hablemos. Although Love Matters Africa follows the same trend when it comes to safe sex and birth control, the Pregnancy content category is an outlier in this category and attracts a high number of visitors with almost 100,000 sessions over the year, making up 10% of the total incoming traffic to Love Matters Africa.

Because the Love Matters platforms attract visitors through different channels, it is worthwhile to consider the implications of organic traffic in relation to pleasure and sex education content. On Love Matters India, nearly 50% of all incoming traffic to educational content is based on organic searching (against 33% for pleasure pages), which means users have been looking for specific key words that led them to the website. On Love Matters Africa, organic traffic to educational pages is somewhat lower with 24%, but still follows India in the trend that sex education pages attract 1.5 times more organic traffic than pleasure pages. Love Matters Arabic is once again the outlier: with barely any paid traffic, their organic traffic to both sex education and pleasure is remarkably high, with 71% and 68%, respectively.

**Spending time: Time on page, session duration**
Although pleasure-focused content surpasses sex education-focused content in terms of popularity and attracting visitors, we observe a different trend when it comes to the amount of time users spend on the pages and the total length of their sessions. Figure 3 shows that on all platforms except Hablemos, users...
generally spend more time on sex education pages than pleasure pages; for Love Matters India, the difference is considerable, with 02:04 against 02:41, respectively, which is a 30% increase in average time spent on sex education-focused pages. For Love Matters Africa and Arabic, the difference is smaller with 8%.

Perhaps more interesting than average time by category, however, are the specific topics that come out on top. The theme Safe Sex may not attract high visitor rates on Love Matters Arabic and India, but its users spend on average 40% more time on pages about STIs and STDs than, for example, on the (five times more popular) Ways to Make Love articles (03:32 against 02:14). The same trend emerges when comparing total session duration between the two categories of landing pages: for all platforms except Hablemos, users coming in on Safe Sex spend longer interacting with the website than those who come in on Making Love, with Love Matters India peaking at a 1.5 difference. This supports the assumption that users interested in this category take more time to go through the content.

In terms of session duration, there are relatively minor differences between pleasure and education content. However, it is interesting to note that users coming in on Love Matters Arabic, Africa and Hablemos through organic search typically have a very short session duration. For example, the more than 56,000 organic visitors to the Love Matters Arabic fact page on Wet Dreams spent around 1 minute and 11 seconds reading the page before leaving, which is 40% less than the time generally spent on educational pages. A possible explanation for this is that organic users tend to be looking for a specific piece of information and leave as soon as they have gone through the article.

Looking at how users exit the website, we see that exit rates for educational content are lower than pleasure content on all platforms, which means that users are more likely to click through to other pages when they are on educational content. For Love Matters Africa, Arabic and India, the difference is between 3 and 5%, and slightly higher for Hablemos with 8%.

**Discussion and conclusion**

With over 30 million visits to the Love Matters sites in 2018, young people are evidently looking online for sexual health-related content. The new digital era is here, and this is no longer a potential but a reality. Love Matters is carving out a significant space online where sex education and pleasure are accessible and integrated in countries all over the world. While the platforms are in different languages and driven by local needs, there are still trends that go beyond borders.

The findings of this research enforce the notion that young people are primarily engaged with topics that address their interests and concerns as they explore different aspects of their sexual identity. Sexual development goes beyond risk reduction of unwanted pregnancies and STIs or STDs, therefore interests and concerns do too. If we wish to provide young people with information and guidance on how to have healthy and fulfilling sexual relationships, we cannot disregard the crucial elements of sexual pleasure. Considering strategies from other disciplines, such as hedonic consumption, can support in creating interesting and engaging sex education material. Integrating sexual health information with different aspects of (sexual) pleasure is how Love Matters attracts young people to their platforms.

The quantitative nature of analysing website traffic through Google Analytics means we can only speculate and make assumptions on the interpretation of certain metrics. Whether young people staying longer on a page means they are taking up the content is something we cannot determine, but the sheer number...
of clicks shows us that something is happening on a large scale. Our findings show that young people spend more time on sex education-related pages, which implies that they are reading the content with care and interest. Furthermore, we see that young people also search, purposefully, for content related to risk reduction. They are bringing their curiosities, questions and concerns to search engines rather than classrooms, looking for trustworthy information. The availability of online platforms that reliably addresses their interests and answers their questions on all aspects of sexual experience is therefore not just an opportunity, but a necessity.

Addressing sexual pleasure does not mean that we should disregard the health risks that are inevitably linked to sex. Reducing the risk of STIs and STDs, as well as teenage and unwanted pregnancies, remains an essential part of sexual health. Yet, unless it is positioned in the broader scope of sexual experience, it is unlikely to fully and effectively engage young people. As the concept of using pleasure as a driver of online sex education is evident, more work in both design and research is needed to understand how pleasure can be used to more effectively engage young people on sex education. Love Matters shows that by building awareness, trust and community around sexual health through openly addressing pleasure, it is also possible to provide fact-based information around contraception methods, STI and STD prevention and other risk-reducing behaviours to millions of young people around the world.

Data availability
Underlying data

This project contains a sample of the Google Analytics data from the Love Matters websites in India, Mexico, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt.

Owing to the large size of the data analysed in this study, the full dataset has not been made available. However, interested parties may request access by contacting data@rnw.org.

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Zero “No rights reserved” data waiver (CC0 1.0 Public domain dedication).

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John S. Santelli
Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA

This research article addresses a critical issue in sexuality education: adolescent use of online platforms to receive content focused on sex education (including safer sex, STIs, and HIV) and pleasure (love and relationships, making love, and marriage). Data are reported from Love Matters websites in five nations: Mexico, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, and India. Google analytics is used to provide information on the search behaviors of youth visiting websites in these countries. A comparison of search behavior for content focused on sex education and pleasure is provided.

This study is a useful and interesting comparison of youth use of online sexuality education. The Internet - in many communities - has become the destination of choice for sexuality education. The inclusion of pleasure-focused content is particularly important as such content is seldom included in school- or community-based sexuality education. This non-judgement exploration of adolescent behavior gives an adolescent “voice” to young people’s interests and needs, unconstrained by adult fears and social norms. This study exists against the backdrop in many local communities where there is a failure to provide sex ed or the only education provided is about abstinence. The key clinical implication of this study is that young people online are searching for information about a myriad of topics related to human sexuality.

The review of existing literature on sex education and pleasure in the Introduction is excellent and provides a comprehensive rationale for the work of Love Matters. It would be helpful in revising the article for the authors to return to this literature in the Discussion. In the study, we learn that young people are searching for information about multiple topics including pleasure. Does this study reaffirm or refute the work of Fine and others who are cited?

There are a number of places where further explication or definitions could be provided to readers who are not digital natives. These include organic traffic (Abstract) and paid traffic (Results).

In understanding the ratio of searching on pleasure vs. sex education pages, it would be helpful if the reader had some idea of the “denominators”, the number of pages or words devoted to these two categories on the Love Matters websites in each country. Search behaviors could have been influenced...
by the amount of content available to view.

The study provides little information about pleasure-focused content. A bit of information is found under in the Methods section under Data Categories. More information and/or examples would be helpful. Likewise, it is unclear how abstinence is classified. Of course, it is difficult to classify certain information as either pleasure or sex education; how did the authors deal with that issue?

A few other specific comments: on page 7, line 3 “increase in average time” would be better as “greater amount of time.” Also, on page 7, line 10 “5 times more popular” is difficult to understand.

Overall, a noble and important effort!

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature? Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound? Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others? Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate? Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility? Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results? Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Adolescent health and medicine, sexual and reproductive health, sexuality education

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.