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I went through YouTube videos for entertainment and came across HIV prevention, so I took a look.... I used Facebook to see how to use a condom to prevent infection.

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(Young person, Thailand)

Building communities and accessing SRH support beyond regional boundaries

Social media, like Facebook, allow users to build online communities and stay connected with friends, peers and family, as well as finding and interacting with people that they may not have normally met offline. This can allow young people to find support from peers with similar experiences and questions regarding their SRH. For example, for young people with diverse SOGI/E, online networks can provide a source of support.¹⁷⁵ Through online groups, young people are able to receive support and connect with SOGI/E communities that they may not be able to access in their offline world, particularly in settings where same-sex behaviour is criminalised or highly stigmatised. Through these networks, young people with diverse SOGI/E are able to discuss problems and concerns, openly acknowledge their sexual orientation and identity, and seek information and advice about SRH and other related issues from peers.¹⁷²

Supporting healthy adolescent development by exploring sexual norms and sexual identity

Adolescence is a period of intense social and emotional development during which sexuality, sexual identity, and gender roles are consolidated.³ It is also when young people acquire sexual values and norms, through their interactions with their peers and sociocultural contexts.¹⁷⁶ Potential harms are discussed below, but **digital media**

can also be a very useful tool for adolescents to develop their sexuality, and explore norms, values and identities, particularly in conservative settings where open discussion of sexuality is restricted.

‘Sexting’ is used to describe the sending, receiving and/or sharing of sexually explicit text messages, photos and video.

The 2019 UNFPA online youth survey found that **31% of girls** and **51% of boys** aged 15-24 years in this region had engaged in sexting.

Research from other regions indicates that young people are increasingly using social media to develop their sense of sexual identity.¹⁷⁷ This can include posting sexually suggestive photos to receive positive feedback from peers, in order to reduce uncertainties that are a normal part of puberty and adolescent development.¹⁷⁸ Although the use of social media in this form has sparked intense concern amongst parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers, it is important to consider how these activities (when done safely) can fit within the healthy sexual development of adolescents. A growing body of research has pointed to the ways in which consensual sexting can potentially fit within the healthy sexual development of older adolescents, by helping young people evaluate their own sexual feelings and actions.^{176,179} Sexting may be used to seek positive feedback on body image from peers, and therefore help to improve self-esteem and sense of identity. Greater self-esteem and a positive understanding of sexual identity may, in turn, improve young people’s assertiveness in relationships and reduce risk-taking.¹⁸⁰ It is important to note, however, that the existing evidence related to sexting is limited to North America and European contexts, with a significant gap in knowledge for this region.

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Some health facilities use the internet and social media. One example has Facebook and Instagram accounts. Some of them have a hotline you can directly consult through WhatsApp.”

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(Young person, Indonesia)

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I think people who use the same dating app or an app that is mostly for sharing sexual issues can really get along and feel more comfortable sharing secrets.

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(Young person, Thailand)

Forming and exploring intimate relationships

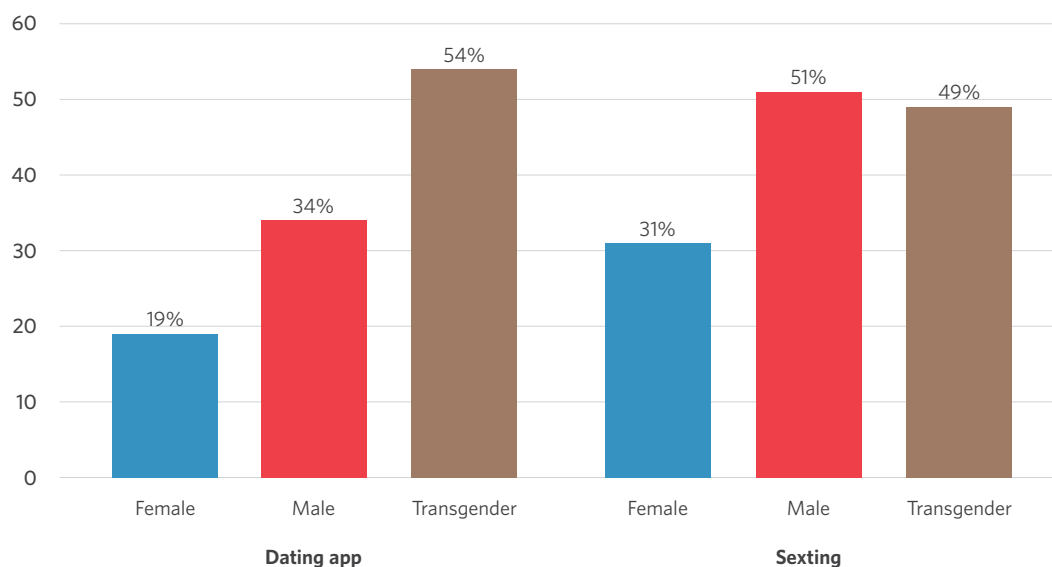
Experimenting with relationships, within a safe environment, is a normal part of adolescent development. For many young people, this experimentation and aspects of intimate relationships are increasingly conducted using digital platforms.

Like other courtship practices such as dating or flirting, sexting can be part of normal sexual behaviour. For many young people, sexting may be a first expression of sexuality during adolescence.¹⁸⁰ This is particularly true for young people with diverse SOGI/E, for whom sexting may allow private exploration of sexuality and intimacy.^{181,182} Sexting also has the potential to be beneficial as a way of sustaining intimate relationships,^{183,184} and is often conducted in the context of a romantic relationship to demonstrate

love, trust and commitment.^{185,186} In this way, consensual sexting can have a positive role when done in a safe and mutually respectful context.

Sexting can be a safer alternative to other sexual behaviours, particularly for adolescents who are forming their first romantic relationships but do not feel 'ready' to engage in other sexual activities with a partner.^{174,176,185,187} Through sexting, young people can explore sexual thoughts and feelings, that are common during adolescence, while potentially avoiding the risk of pregnancy and STIs. Sexting can also be combined with other behaviours, such as masturbation, that may help young people become more familiar with their bodies and their likes and dislikes.¹⁸⁸ While research in this region is limited, the 2019 UNFPA online youth survey found that almost a third of girls, and half of boys and transgender young people had engaged in sexting (figure 36).¹⁷³

FIGURE 36. PROPORTION OF 15-24 YEAR OLDS WHO HAVE USED DIGITAL MEDIA FOR SEXTING OR DATING APPS



Source: UNFPA 2019¹⁷³