Vacancy announcement

Institutional Consultancy to Conduct Quantitative Research on the Impact of Social Media Filtering and Moderation Policies on Access to Sexuality Education and Information

Background

In today’s digital age, children and young people are increasingly turning to digital platforms for information concerning sexuality, gender, reproductive health, and relationships. Digital spaces have matured into indispensable and trustworthy resources for young people, providing them with easily accessible and user-friendly information, as well as guidance and support. The role of digital spaces becomes particularly accentuated in regions where alternative sources of comprehensive sexuality education, such as school-, community- or family-based programmes, are scarce or nonexistent.

The provision of inclusive and high-quality sexuality education and awareness within digital spaces transcends mere convenience; it constitutes a fundamental right to information and expression, particularly for young learners. Nevertheless, as dialogue on these themes continues to evolve in digital domains, new challenges arise. Hate speech, cyberbullying, online gender-based violence, and explicit content pose serious risks to young individuals seeking information and engaging in conversations about their identities, health, and relationships.

In response to these challenges, among other measures, social media platforms enact filtering and moderation policies, aiming to ensure user’s safety and safeguard them from harmful content. While these actions are taken to prevent potential risks and curtail adverse practices, they can also inadvertently impede the overall accessibility of sexuality education and availability of evidence- and rights-based sexuality-related content in digital spaces. These measures might inadvertently restrict the inclusivity of these digital realms, marginalize those of diverse sexualities, gender identities and expressions, and erode fundamental rights and freedoms.

UNESCO emphasizes the importance of providing adolescents and young people with safe and accessible online education and information on sexuality. Meanwhile, the enforcement of filtering and moderation policies can lack clarity and consistency. As a result, content designed for educational purposes that addresses sexuality and relationships might be flagged as inappropriate or offensive, even when it is intended solely for educational value and devoid of explicit material.

The implications of such policies extend beyond the mere removal of content. The ramifications may span from the elimination of posts or accounts to curtailing the visibility of specific content or hashtags through shadow banning, thus hindering content monetization and advertising potential. These complex restrictions place digital content creators in a challenging position, requiring them to navigate the nuanced and often opaque boundaries set by social media platforms, often at the risk of unjust punitive actions or outright bans. Consequently, the enforcement of such policies might significantly impact the accessibility and quality of content on sexuality, gender and health within digital spaces, and young individuals are disproportionately affected. The absence of reliable open resources can lead individuals to seek information from less reputable or even harmful sources, including the darker corners of the internet.
In line with the UNESCO Guidelines for the governance of digital platforms, UNESCO plans to conduct an in-depth study of the effects of filtering, moderation, and other platform-driven restrictive practices and policies on access to sexuality education and information on social media. This in-depth mixed-method study investigates how platforms’ restrictions affect content creators and educators, and how these practices impact young people’s access to sexuality education and information on social media.

Scope of work

UNESCO is seeking an institutional consultancy to conduct two quantitative studies aimed at:

1) Investigating the frequency and nature of challenges faced by digital content creators and educators regarding filtering, moderation, and other instances of platform-driven restrictions related to sexuality education and information on social media.
2) Gaining insights into how and why social media is used for accessing information and education on sexuality and exploring the effects of platform-driven restrictions on the learning opportunities of users.

Following specific guidance from UNESCO, and in close collaboration with the designated team in the Section of Health and Education, the contractor's tasks will include:

Study 1 with content creators:

1. Participate in a virtual kick-off meeting with UNESCO staff to define parameters for the quantitative online survey, including language selection, target audience, survey outreach modalities, and submission timelines.
2. Liaise with other UNESCO contractors supporting work on digital CSE to ensure alignment between areas of work.
3. Develop a comprehensive research plan, encompassing data collection strategies and tools for quantitative research involving digital sexuality education content creators and educators, with the aim to:
   - Examine the prevalent platform-driven restrictive practices encountered by them;
   - Assess the frequency of filtering, moderation, and other instances of platform restrictions related to sexuality education and social media information, as experienced by content creators and educators;
   - Identify strategies employed by content creators to navigate platform limitations;
   - Solicit content creators’ and educators’ ideas on addressing these issues and provide guidance on social media policies.
4. Draft a communication strategy to promote engagement with content creators and educators in quantitative research. Consider collaborating with recognized content developers and civil society organizations to enhance research visibility and participation.
5. Ensure the translation of survey tools and communication materials into the official UN languages and/or other languages.
6. Carry out the multi-region online survey. Secure a minimum of 500 submissions from content creators and educators, ensuring diversity in geographic representation.
7. Compile a list of at least 80 digital sexuality education content developers and educators for future contact and interviews during the qualitative research phase.
8. Prepare a preliminary report (up to 25 pages) on the research findings. Finalize the report content based on the review and feedback from UNESCO, incorporating data visualizations, infographics, and an associated PowerPoint summary (up to 20 slides).
Study 2 with social media users:

1. Participate in a virtual kick-off meeting with UNESCO staff to define parameters for the quantitative online survey, including language selection, target audience, survey outreach modalities, and submission timelines.

2. Develop a comprehensive research plan that includes data collection strategies and tools for quantitative research involving users (audience – ages 16 to 24 years) of 5 to 10 relevant channels, publics, or communities on social media, with the aim to:
   - Uncover why users prefer to seek information and education on sexuality on social media platforms over other sources;
   - Identify motivations and advantages that drive users to seek out sexuality education content on social media;
   - Explore the factors most important to users when accessing sexuality education content on social media;
   - Investigate the limitations and challenges users face when attempting to access sexuality education content on social media;
   - Examine if users have ever been deterred from seeking such content due to platform restrictions;
   - Reveal users’ sentiments regarding safety, free access to information and education on sexuality on social media, and freedom of expression concerning sexuality-related matters.

3. Draft a strategy to promote engagement with content creators and educators to involve their audience in quantitative research. Ensure the involvement of 5 to 10 digital content creators/educators to distribute the survey among their audience.

4. Ensure the translation of survey tools and communication materials into the required languages (depending on the social media communities selected for survey dissemination).

5. Carry out the multi-region online survey. Secure at least 1000 submissions from users/subscribers/followers of social media communities, publics, and channels, ensuring diversity in geographic representation.

6. Prepare a preliminary report (up to 25 pages) on how social media serves as a platform for accessing information and education on sexuality and impacts of platform-driven restrictive practices on their learning opportunities and coping strategies. Finalize the report content based on the review and feedback from UNESCO, incorporating data visualizations, infographics, and an associated PowerPoint summary (up to 20 slides).

Contractor profile

Work experience:

- Proven expertise in multi-country quantitative and mixed-method research, online survey development and deployment, and stakeholder engagement.
- Familiarity with digital policies, content moderation, and freedom of expression in digital spaces.
- Desirable background in health and education, with a focus on gender and sexuality, as well as research in sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Strong report writing skills.

Skills:

- Cultural sensitivity and interpersonal skills for effective communication with diverse stakeholders.
- Technical proficiency in digital tools for online interviews and data analysis.
- Adherence to ethical research practices and principles.
Educational Background of Contractor’s Team Members:

- Project lead holds a Master’s degree in social sciences, gender studies, media studies, or related fields. Ph.D. is advantageous.

Languages:

- Excellent written and oral skills in English are mandatory.
- Proficiency in at least one other official UN language (Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish) is an asset.

Timeline:

The consultancy will take place from April to July 2024.

Application process:

Interested teams should submit a cover letter outlining their qualifications and relevant experience, list of team members and their proposed roles for this project, CV for key team members and at least two (2) samples of previous research work, as well as a financial proposal to Ms Séverine Pillado at se.pillado@unesco.org, by 21 April 2024, 23:59 CET. Please indicate "Institutional consultancy application - quantitative study" in the subject line.

The applicant may choose to conduct only one study. In such a case, the applicant should clearly specify the study number (Study 1 or Study 2) in their application.

For further information or clarification, please contact Ms. Yulia Plakhutina at y.plakhutina@unesco.org