LEAKED 💦

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING SELF-GENERATED SEXUAL CONTENT INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THAILAND

While adults can empathize based on their own school experiences, the nerves of first real-life dating, the camaraderie of making friends, or the thrill of joining sports clubs, the online world often escapes their grasp. Growing up online is an experience most adults in Thailand didn't have and thus can't fully understand. Together with the rapid evolution of the internet, many adults struggle to comprehend the digital behaviors of younger generations, which leaves a big gap between what adults expect of young people's online behavior and how they actually engage.

As young people increasingly transfer their experiences online, milestones such as dating, exploring sexuality, and building self-confidence also find digital outlets, often beyond adult comprehension. Sharing nude or intimate images with partners or peers has become increasingly common, and some young people say these behaviors offer spaces for sexual expression and relationship exploration. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, these behaviors were arguably the only avenue for young people to progress through natural sexual development.

While these behaviors certainly bring risks, some young people have also demonstrated they are highly aware of online risks and know how to stay safe while exploring their sexuality and relationships. Often, digital safety messaging can be overly cautious and promote abstinence-style messaging. Young people face stern warnings against sharing any sexual content and the legal ramifications of doing so. Yet these messages can conflict with the reality that young people witness —where sharing sexual content can also be consensual and consequence-free. There is little support for young people to analyze the grey areas and navigate and negotiate these complex topics.

The mixed messages leave young people feeling hesitant to seek help, ironically leading to the very issues adults warn about. Nuanced discussions about self-generated sexual content involving young people, along with gender and social norms in Thailand, must be part of formal and informal dialogue about sexuality and consent. For instance, a girl sharing intimate content with her boyfriend on a streaming service might be labeled 'slutty,' while a boy sending an unsolicited explicit image might be excused as 'boys being boys.' LGBTQ youth often receive less sympathy due to myths about their sexual activity levels, making them more susceptible to bullying and blackmail, especially when their sexual or gender identity is still emerging.

Enter the 'Leaked' project: a bold initiative to bridge this divide! We're going to ask 2,000 young people in Northern Thailand directly about what it's like to be young, Thai, and online in 2024. We'll explore how technology is reshaping developmental experiences—from flirting and meeting your first partner to hindering or helping define relationship boundaries.

With their guidance, we'll craft an intervention that resonates—perhaps flipping the script on victim-blaming or spotlighting some of the silver linings that technology brings to our romantic lives, or demystifying rules about consent in the age of the screen. This isn't just about observing; it's about listening and responding to young people's calls for help in navigating the digital landscape with savvy and safety.

The Leaked project plans to:

🧠 Explore motivations, attitudes, and practices of young people in Thailand regarding self-generated sexual content and the sociocultural contexts in which it exists.

👀 Design an intervention informed by the perspectives of young people, aimed at aiding their navigation through a digital world they inhabit, rather than merely 'protecting children'.

🧑‍🤝‍🧑 Seek opportunities to involve and support stakeholders, including the Thai government, in embracing and potentially scaling up the model.

In the next 36 months, we will:

📑 **Surveys with 2,000** young people aged between 9-16 years old in Northern Thailand of motivations, attitudes, and practices regarding self-generated sexual content, using age-appropriate and ethical approaches to asking these sensitive and complicated questions.

🚓 **Collecting perspectives** of the range of relevant actors including social service providers, police, and survivors who are unavoidably encountering problems from these behaviours in their work.

📢 **Create two curricula tailored for younger and older groups, informed by the youth's voices**, that respond to – and uses – the data to intervene and help young people navigate these modern dating and relationship challenges.

📚 **Pilot, refine and evaluate** the curricula using an iterative design process, ensuring they align with the true desires and needs of the youth.

Expected outcomes:

🙍 Influencing the decision-making of young people as they intertwine their sexual development with technology and their online lives, offering informed advice through our intervention.

🥊 The 'Leaked' Project will discern effective engagement strategies, including identifying the most impactful facilitator profiles to guide youth through the program, moving away from prevalent risk-averse and judgmental narratives.

🔍 A rigorous evaluation framework, based on the UNICEF Framework for Evaluating Online Safety Initiatives, will be employed to discern effective strategies and areas for improvement.

🧑‍💼 Collaboration with Thai government officials will lay the groundwork for future expansion.

Ethical and Careful Designs:

An advisory group of predominantly Thai academics, experts, and government representatives will influence the research design. An independent ethical review will address the topic's sensitivity, possibly restricting certain inquiries to the older group (13-16). Nevertheless, garnering authentic insights from young people is crucial, so we'll navigate the ethical review process meticulously to safely engage both age groups (9-12 and 13-16) on these sensitive issues.

Collaborators

Evident is a Bangkok-based research company that supports data-driven NGO programming related to child sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Evident will lead in the design, facilitation, survey and other consultations with 2,000 young people and other key actors. After this data is obtained, through collaboration with the HUG Project, we will develop, pilot and evaluate the intervention together.

The HUG Project is a Chiang Mai based foundation that exists to protect, prevent, and restore at-risk children as well as youth who have been exploited online, sexually abused, or trafficked. HUG provides investigative support and partners with Thai police, TICAC (Thailand Internet Crimes Against Children), FBI, U.S. Homeland Security and many international embassies. HUG's partnerships influence systemic institutional changes at the policy level, as well as to solve children's immediate problems and meet their needs on a day-to-day basis.

The HUG Project will collaborate with Evident in the development of training curricula based on what young people tell us, in piloting the materials and delivery methods and evaluating impact to refine and take the training forward.

Contact person

If you need more information about the project, please contact Jennifer Schatz, Project Coordinator at jen@itsevident.org.

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