

LEAKED

Understanding and Addressing Self-Generated Sexual Content Involving Young People in Thailand

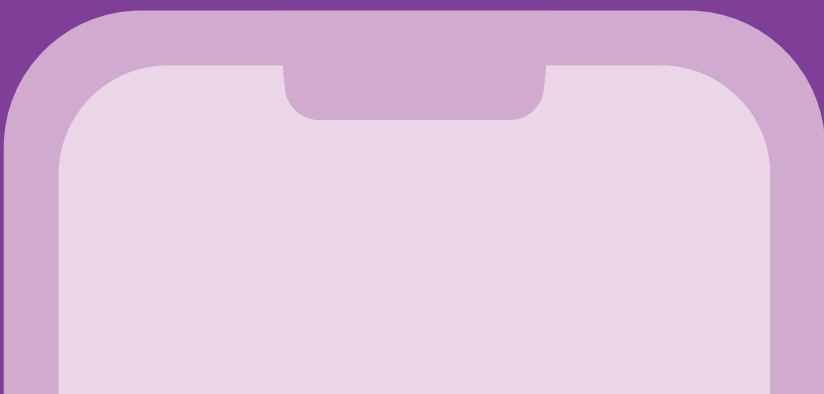
Insight
Paper

1.

The Need for
Comprehensive
Sexuality
Education
in Thailand



Leaked is a rare opportunity to ground child digital safety policy in the lived experiences of young people in the Global South. Drawing on a survey of 1,916 young people aged 9–17 in Northern Thailand, alongside qualitative consultations, the data provides critical insight into how young people understand relationships, trust, and risk in the digital environments they inhabit.



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**The Need for
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The scale of young people online is near universal in Thailand. Ninety-one percent of respondents own their own device, rising to 97% among 17-year-olds. Sixty-one percent use the internet primarily to socialise with friends. Twenty-seven percent of adolescents aged 14–17 report going online to build romantic relationships, including nearly 15% of 9–13-year-olds who already chat online with someone they like. Among older respondents, 36% report exposure to peer self-generated sexual content.

At the same time, 61% report teaching themselves about online safety.

The findings demonstrate that Thailand's current approach to child digital safety and Comprehensive Sexuality Education is operating on outdated assumptions about where relationships occur and how harm emerges. For today's young people, intimacy, trust, conflict, and coercion are inherently intertwined with being online. All while, online and offline experiences are not separate

domains but mutually reinforcing spaces. Yet policy responses continue to frame self-generated sexual content as an isolated “online problem,” addressed primarily through abstinence messaging, moral caution, or technical safeguards. This disconnect leaves young people

equipped with technical tools but without the soft skills required to navigate digital intimacy safely. Meaningful prevention therefore should reconceptualize sexuality education as digitally embedded and grounded in the realities of young people’s everyday lives.

Modern Relationships Are Often Tech-Accompanied



A central finding of *Leaked* is that relationships nowadays always have elements that play out with some type of technical element. For Thai young people, relationships, friendships and romantic connections are almost always accompanied by a digital layer. Chatting, gaming, sharing images, seeking advice, and maintaining connection through platforms are all part of being in a relationship with someone, romantic or just socially.

Romantic relationships are also firmly embedded in digital spaces. Twenty-seven percent of respondents report going online for dating or building

romantic connections. This begins early: nearly 15% of 9–13-year-olds already chat online with someone they like, rising to 39% among 14–17-year-olds and peaking at 47% among 15-year-olds. Digital spaces are therefore not peripheral to adolescent romantic development; they are key arenas in which it unfolds.



The key informant interviews echoed this. Young people described “online boyfriends,” daily video calls, and bonds formed through constant messaging. One young person reflected that during COVID, they spent more time with online friends in games than with their parents. A school head observed that children now often spend more time in online spaces than with adults.

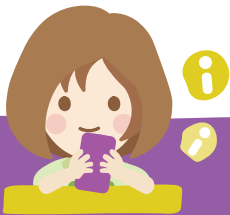
Digital platforms are also where emotional processing happens. Eighteen percent of respondents go online specifically to seek advice about relationships and sex. Many young people describe these topics as too uncomfortable to discuss with parents or teachers, making digital spaces primary sites for relationship guidance.

The blending of offline and online ties is evident in content sharing practices. Non-sexual photos are most frequently shared with friends known offline (mean 6.52/10), showing that everyday friendships are continuously maintained through digital exchange. When asked who nudes are most likely shared with,

the most common answer was someone known in person (30%), followed by someone met online and never met offline (23%). This indicates that intimate exchanges therefore occur in both their online and offline lives.

Therefore, self-generated sexual content does not function as an isolated “online risk” in young people’s lives. Instead, it is embedded within relationship-building, expressions of trust, and social norms that shape how young people interact online. This is reflected in how young people understand harm.

When it comes to the consequences of sharing self-generated sexual content, among older respondents, 81% identified non-consensual sharing as the primary concern, followed by regret (76%), bullying (70%), and emotional distress (68%). Institutional consequences such as trouble with school or police were cited far less frequently (47%). These patterns indicate that harm is understood as relational and social, not simply technical or legal.



Evidence to Action:

To remain relevant to young people's lived realities, Thailand's comprehensive sexuality education should include tech-accompanied relationship dynamics as a core component of teaching, especially when teaching about consent, intimacy, and healthy relationships. This requires recognizing digital safety as a relationship issue.



Digital Skills, Agency and Their Limits



At the same time, Leaked demonstrates that young people are not passive recipients of digital risks. Many actively protect themselves and the connections they make online, by exercising digital hard skills for example by managing privacy settings, curating their visibility, and making strategic decisions about who to trust and how to respond to uncomfortable situations. Only 4% of older young people reported not knowing how to access privacy settings on common platforms, indicating high levels of technical digital competence.

However, this agency exists within clear

limits. While young people consistently reported uncertainty about how to negotiate boundaries, refuse requests without damaging a relationship, or respond when trust shifts or relationships end. This is especially prominent under coercive circumstances where 27% of the older cohort were aware of blackmail, often for money or gifts. The data suggests that harm does not primarily occur because young people lack technical knowledge, but because the most significant risks emerge before technical safeguards can be applied, meaning during trust-building, emotional negotiation in connections, when pressure is exercised, and and during breakups.


Learning in the area of digital safety is largely informal and uneven. Sixty-one percent of respondents reported teaching themselves about online safety, with fewer than half learning from parents or school. LGBT youth and those with private accounts show higher self-reliance but also greater isolation in navigating risks. As a result, many young people are navigating complex relationship connections reactively and without structured support and adult guidance.

Frontline workers reported that taboos around discussing sex and sexuality increase children's vulnerability to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Widespread discomfort among caregivers, teachers, and communities' limits what can be openly discussed in comprehensive sexuality education, particularly when it comes to intimacy online and tech-facilitated harms.

This concern is reflected in existing insights into Thailand's comprehensive sexuality education. A 2016 review of CSE implementation in Thailand found that while most secondary and vocational institutions provide sexuality education, instruction remains heavily focused on sexual anatomy, pregnancy prevention, and STI/HIV, primarily delivered through lectures. Topics such as gender equality, sexual rights, sexual and gender diversity,


same-sex relationships, and bullying are far less consistently addressed. Teachers also overwhelmingly viewed sex among unmarried students as unacceptable, indicating that delivery is often shaped by moral judgement rather than rights-based frameworks.¹

This indicates that even where comprehensive sexuality education exists, implementation is weakened by social resistance and persistent views that discussing sexuality is inappropriate.



Evidence to Action:

To better support young people we must invest in educator and caregiver capacity-building to reduce taboo, strengthen rights-based delivery, and create a safer space for early dialogue about how relationships also manifest online.





The Misalignment between Lived Risks and Education Focus

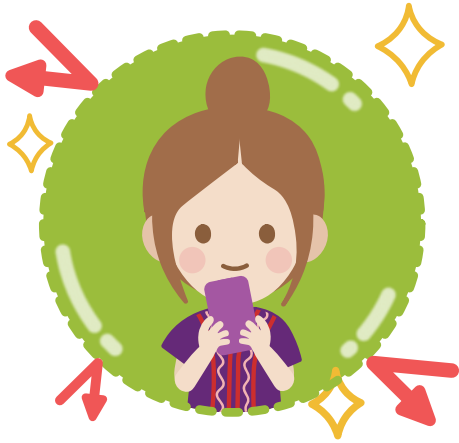
The contrast is structural. Thailand's CSE framework continues to centre biological risk, pregnancy prevention, and abstinence-oriented messaging, largely delivered from secondary school onwards and framed around physical offline relationships. Meanwhile, 91% of young people already own personal devices, 27% are engaging in romantic interactions online, and 15% of 9–13-year-olds report chatting with someone they like. Where institutional guidance assumes sexuality emerges later and primarily offline, young people are already navigating digitally embedded intimacy without structured relational support.

Additionally, peer validation, coercion, image exchange, and breakups all play into how relationships play out nowadays, which isn't explicitly

addressed in nowadays interventions.

The result is a structural prevention gap where adolescents are equipped with knowledge on physical consequences and, if they are receiving digital safety training also basic technical tools, but lack the soft skills required to navigate tech-accompanied relationships safely.

The findings suggest that preventing harm in digital contexts requires more than technical literacy. Beyond managing privacy settings or blocking accounts, young people need what Leaked conceptualises as digital soft skills. These are the social and emotional competencies required to navigate intimacy, trust, power, and conflict in tech-accompanied relationships.



Digital Soft-Skills include:

1. Trust Assessment Over Time

The ability to evaluate trust gradually, rather than equating frequent communication, shared interests, or emotional closeness with safety.

2. Boundary Communication

The capacity to clearly articulate personal limits, including around image-sharing, privacy, exclusivity, and contact frequency.

3. Refusal Without Fear

Skills to decline requests — including requests for sexual content — without fear of losing status, affection, or belonging.

4. Power-Shift Recognition

The ability to recognise when connection dynamics change, such as during jealousy, financial exchange, conflict, or breakups, and identify emerging coercion.

5. Safe Disengagement

Practical and emotional strategies for exiting connections and relationships safely when trust breaks down, including knowing where and how to seek support.

6. Contextual Judgement

The capacity to critically assess online content, peer behaviour, and relationship narratives, recognising how algorithms, social pressure, and performance shape what appears “normal” or desirable.

Unlike technical or digital hard skills, which operate at the level of platform functionality, digital soft skills operate within the interpersonal space where most harm originates. The Leaked data demonstrates that uncertainty persists precisely in these domains. Young people report difficulty negotiating boundaries, responding to pressure, and managing trust breakdown, the vulnerabilities that cannot be solved through hardskills alone.

This is compounded by timing. Younger adolescents (9–13) already report engaging in digital spaces where relationships, flirtation, and sexualised content are present, including dating apps, games, and private messaging with unknown or older users. Twenty-two percent of this cohort don’t know their account privacy status, underscoring basic digital literacy gaps. In many cases, exposure precedes formal relationship or sexuality education. Prevention, if delivered at all, often arrives after norms and behaviours are already established.

Disparities further deepen these vulnerabilities. Girls are more likely to block or report (56% compared to 28% of boys), while boys are more likely to save or share content (18% versus 4%). LGBT youth face higher exposure rates (49% compared to 32% among non-LGBT peers), often linked to identity exploration and safety-seeking online, yet report greater self-blame within a cultural environment shaped by norms of shame. Ethnic minority youth report similarly high exposure levels (49%). Cultural narratives such as “girls deserve shame” or “boys do not lose” reinforce silence and discourage help-seeking.



Evidence to Action:

Strengthening comprehensive sex education must embed digital soft skills within a gender-responsive and LGBTQ+-affirming framework that challenges silence and stigma rather than reinforcing it. CSE must also reflect the reality that younger adolescents are already navigating digital spaces where intimacy, flirtation, and sexualized interactions occur. Therefore, it must be introduced earlier and framed as a normal part of growing up online.



Aligning Education and Safeguarding with Young People's Realities



The evidence presented throughout this paper indicates that the challenge facing Thailand is not that young people are engaging in digital intimacy, but that institutional responses have not kept pace with how relationships now unfold. Adolescence has always involved exploration, trust-building, emotional negotiation, and vulnerability. What has changed is the context in which these processes take place. For many young people, digital environments are not separate from “real life”; they are integral to it.

Safeguarding and education frameworks that treat self-generated sexual content as an isolated digital risk fail to reflect this reality. When policy responses focus primarily on restriction, surveillance, abstinence messaging, or technical controls, they overlook the relational dynamics through which harm most often emerges. Such approaches risk

framing young people's behaviour as misconduct rather than recognising it as developmentally situated within digitally mediated relationships.

The Leaked findings suggest that prevention efforts must move beyond managing content and platform risk toward supporting young people to navigate digitally embedded intimacy safely. This requires acknowledging digital spaces as legitimate environments of adolescent social and emotional development and ensuring that sexuality education and safeguarding frameworks equip young people with the competencies to manage trust, pressure, coercion, and relational breakdown within these contexts.

Importantly, this shift does not minimise risk. Rather, it recognises that risk is embedded within everyday relationship

formation and therefore must be addressed through early, structured guidance rather than solely through reactive response. Integrating digital contexts into relationship and sexuality education offers an opportunity to align prevention strategies with the lived experiences of young people.

Preventing harm associated with self-generated sexual content therefore requires not only curricular adjustment but a broader recalibration of safeguarding logic. Digital spaces are primary arenas in which adolescent relationships are formed, maintained, and dissolved. Policy responses that fail to recognise this will continue to lag behind lived realities. Effective prevention must reflect the environments in which young people are already growing up.



Evidence to Action:

To ensure sustainability, the Ministry of Education should formally integrate digitally embedded relationship competencies into national comprehensive sexuality education guidance and teacher training standards, with clear monitoring indicators that assess the relational skills alongside technical digital literacy. Without institutional embedding and accountability, prevention efforts will remain fragmented and reactive.



1. United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Thailand & Ministry of Education. (2017). Review of comprehensive sexuality education in Thailand (TH/ED/2017/002). UNICEF.

