



The "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page: A tool to fill gaps left by inadequate school sexuality education for gay youth in South Africa

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Abstract

This study explores the use of the "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page by South African gay youth as a resource to fill the gaps left by inadequate school-based sexuality education. Using a queer theoretical approach, we examined 51 anonymous user-generated posts to analyse how these digital interactions challenge heteronormative and cisgendered educational frameworks while fostering new avenues of queer knowledge and community building. The research identifies significant deficiencies in formal sexual health education for gay youth in South Africa, such as the lack of practical identity-specific sexual health information, harmful misconceptions about STI and HIV transmission in same-sex relationships, and prevalent shame associated with sexual health. The study highlights the pressing need for comprehensive, LGBTQ+ inclusive sexuality education within South African schools and advocates for a multifaceted strategy that integrates enhanced formal education with the strategic use of online resources.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ youth; sexuality education; social media; Curriculum studies; educational crisis; decolonial education

Introduction

The lack of adequate sexual education for LGBTQ+ youth in schools presents a pressing challenge, notably in contexts dominated by heteronormative ideologies (Francis, 2019b; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). Despite progressive legislation in South Africa, many LGBTQ+ learners perceive their identities as overlooked or negatively portrayed in the educational system (Francis, 2021). This exclusion leaves young individuals unprepared for healthy sexual relationships and susceptible to harmful health consequences (Naser et al., 2022). Such educational exclusion highlights a significant crisis, exposing broader systemic flaws in curriculum creation and implementation. Le Grange (2021) notes that the South African curriculum still carries colonial biases favouring heteronormative views, neglecting varied sexual orientations. Failing to create inclusive sexual education curricula results in what Giroux (2024)

might term "scholasticide" against LGBTQ+ youth. This major oversight perpetuates the systematic neglect of their essential needs, experiences, and identities, effectively excluding them from educational discussions and rendering them invisible in spaces meant to honour their diverse expressions. Many LGBTQ+ youth seek online platforms for alternative sexual information and community support (Mustanski et al., 2011). Websites like Facebook allow anonymous discussions on sensitive topics and foster connections with those who share similar experiences (Hanckel et al., 2019). Yet, combining school-based sexual education with online information-seeking presents challenges, bringing both benefits and risks in digital settings (Mustanski et al., 2015).

While this study acknowledges the broader LGBTQ+ spectrum, it is important to note that the empirical focus centres primarily on the experiences of gay male youth who actively participate in the "Secrets in the Gay Hive"

Facebook page. The experiences of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming youth, while equally important, are largely absent from this specific data source. This limitation reflects both the nature of the platform studied and highlights an area for future research (Cavalcante, 2019; Craig et al., 2015).

This study uses a queer theoretical framework (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) to examine how South African gay male youth engage with a Facebook group called "Secrets in the Gay Hive" to compensate for the lack of adequate school-based sexual education. By analysing user-generated content using concepts like heteronormativity, cisgenderism, performativity, and intersectionality, we aim to show how these digital interactions challenge traditional educational models while nurturing new queer knowledge and communities. Drawing on Afro-queer epistemologies (Matebeni, 2017; Mulaudizi, 2023), this research also examines how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary sexuality education in South Africa, necessitating decolonial approaches to curriculum reform. This research meets the need for curriculum studies addressing contemporary educational dilemmas (Pinar, 2019; Apple et al., 2018). It investigates how curricula act as arenas for ideological struggles, where certain information is prioritized and others are marginalized or excluded. By exploring how gay male youth confront these curricular deficiencies through digital resistance, this study enhances our comprehension of the curriculum as a contested space where power, identity, and knowledge converge.

Providing inclusive sexuality education that effectively caters to the diverse needs of young people is a major challenge both in South Africa and globally. Evidence consistently demonstrates that sexuality education in schools frequently falls short in addressing the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. This oversight leaves them unprepared for healthy sexual relationships and increases their vulnerability to negative sexual health outcomes (Naser et al., 2022). A significant problem is the heteronormative emphasis in most sexuality education curricula, rendering LGBTQ+ identities and experiences either invisible or abnormal

(Francis, 2019b). As one participant noted in the study by Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014): "Whenever someone mentions sex, it is synonymous with penis-vagina intercourse, excluding other sexual acts" (p. 791).

Beyond heteronormativity, school-based sexuality education is further influenced by what Ansara and Hegarty (2012) refer to as "cisgenderism", an ideology that delegitimises or pathologises gender identities not matching one's assigned sex. Such intersectional dynamics result in what Kosciw et al. (2018) describe as compounded educational marginalisation experienced by LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who are transgender or gender nonconforming. In South Africa, Wilmot and Naidoo (2014) report that life orientation textbooks consistently depict gender in a binary framework, with an absence of reference to transgender identities, while Francis (2023) discovered that even when educators included discussions of sexual diversity, they often neglected or conflated transgender experiences with sexual orientation. Beyond exclusion, certain sexuality education methods actively stigmatise LGBTQ+ identities. Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014) identified three primary means of marginalisation for LGBTQ+ youth: silencing, heterocentrism, and pathologisation. The latter technique typically involves mentioning LGBTQ+ identities solely in the realm of HIV/AIDS, perpetuating damaging stereotypes. Similarly, when transgender identities are recognised, they are often pathologised via medicalised narratives that present gender variance as a disorder rather than recognising them as legitimate forms of gender diversity (Gilbert, 2014).

The gaps in curriculum reveal what Apple et al. (2018) term the "selective tradition" in curriculum formulation, a method where specific knowledge is sanctioned while others are sidelined. Within South Africa, this selectiveness is further entangled with its colonial heritage. These colonial impacts are prominently seen in the reinforcement of gender binaries in educational contexts. As Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2018) highlight, current cisgender norms in education are closely linked to colonial European gender systems that overrode more flexible indigenous gender perceptions. Matebeni (2017) illustrates

how precolonial Southern African societies frequently acknowledged multiple gender categories beyond the traditional binary. Building on this foundation, Mulaudizi (2023) demonstrates how the coloniality of gender continues to manifest in contemporary South African constitutional and legislative frameworks, creating ongoing challenges for LGBTQ+ recognition and rights (Adamson, 2022).

Despite the presence of progressive policies in South Africa, schools often continue to uphold heteronormative and cisgenderist ideologies. Francis (2021) explains that assumptions based on heteronormativity are still deeply entrenched, with educators frequently conflating sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation in problematic manners. This confusion, as identified by Frohard-Dourlent (2018), acts as a considerable obstacle to providing effective education for transgender students. Nzimande (2017) points out inadequacies in teacher education programs, highlighting their failure to equip educators to effectively handle gender diversity. As a result, LGBTQ+ youths increasingly look to online communities for support and knowledge. These digital forums offer what Bradford et al. (2019) describe as "counterpedagogies," alternative educational environments that challenge and replace traditional heteronormative and cisgenderist notions with more inclusive perspectives. Nevertheless, as Cavalcante (2019) observes, the reliance on online resources underscores a critical shortcoming in the educational system's duty to meet all learners' needs.

Online sources as an alternative for LGBTQ+ youth sexual health needs

The shortcomings of sexuality education in schools push numerous LGBTQ+ youth to search for information through alternate avenues, frequently turning to the internet (Naser et al., 2022; Delmonaco, & Haimson, 2023). The online sphere offers unique possibilities for private, self-directed inquiry into sexual topics that may be considered taboo or are otherwise inaccessible in traditional settings (Delmonaco, & Haimson, 2023). Such digital platforms provide several significant benefits for LGBTQ+ youth seeking

sexuality-related information, although they also pose notable challenges. A primary advantage is the anonymity and privacy offered by these online environments, which enable young individuals to delve into sensitive subjects without the concern of being judged or exposed (Kim et al., 2025). Furthermore, online resources typically depict a wide array of LGBTQ+ experiences and identities, offering diverse views potentially absent from standard sexuality education (Mustanski et al., 2011). The internet also promotes social connectivity, enabling LGBTQ+ youth to establish ties with peers and mentors, thereby mitigating feelings of loneliness (Kim et al., 2025). Moreover, digital resources often deliver more current information relative to the possibly antiquated content of school curricula (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023).

Despite these merits, there are several drawbacks. The prevalence of misinformation online is a significant issue, with frequently encountered inaccuracies and misleading content (Finkelhor et al., 2021). Research by McCormack and Wignall (2017) demonstrates that young people often struggle to distinguish between reliable and unreliable online sources of sexual health information, potentially leading to dangerous misconceptions about sexual practices and health risks. Young individuals may also stumble upon age-inappropriate materials, including explicit sexual content (Naser et al., 2022). Alarming, online avenues also pose risks of predatory behaviour and the potential for exploitation (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Digital platforms can expose vulnerable youth to grooming, cyberbullying, and other forms of online harm that traditional educational settings, despite their limitations, are designed to prevent. Lastly, the vast amount of available information can be daunting and challenging to sift through, especially for youth who are still honing their critical thinking capabilities (Delmonaco & Haimson, 2023). These complexities underscore the necessity for a balanced strategy that harnesses the benefits of digital resources while proactively addressing the risks and limitations they pose in supporting LGBTQ+ youth sexuality education. As Döring et al. (2022) argue, digital sexual identities exist in a complex space between

empowerment and disempowerment, requiring careful navigation and support.

These online platforms are emerging as innovative educational alternatives, embodying what Freire (1970/2000) would describe as a challenge to traditional educational structures. When conventional curricula fall short of addressing the needs of marginalised groups, these communities instinctively create "hidden curricula" (Giroux & Penna, 1979) to preserve and disseminate vital knowledge. In the field of curriculum studies, such online collectives represent a resistance to the "hegemonic curriculum" characterised by Connell (1993), which sustains existing power relations and marginalises diverse perspectives. The Facebook page "Secrets in the Gay Hive" serves as a medium for developing a counterhegemonic curriculum, where LGBTQ+ youth cultivate knowledge that critiques educational systems based on heteronormative and cisgender norms.

Complexities and Opportunities

The connection between sexuality education in schools and the pursuit of information online is intricate. While online sources can address essential gaps, they should not serve as a substitute for thorough and inclusive school programmes. Ideally, educational institutions would offer sexuality education inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics, thus lessening the necessity for young individuals to look for potentially unreliable online information. Unfortunately, many schools encounter difficulties in implementing truly inclusive curricula due to various challenges, such as insufficient teacher training, opposition from the community, and prevalent heteronormative mindsets (Francis, 2019a). In this setting, online platforms can play a crucial role as a complementary resource, supplying LGBTQ+ youth with information and community support that might be inaccessible through other means.

This initiative to rethink sexuality education coincides with the push for a decolonised curriculum within South African educational arenas (Sifuentes, 2022). Modern experts in curriculum development assert that genuine inclusivity in education necessitates challenging the colonial remnants that continue to

dictate what is considered valid knowledge. As Mbembe (2016) posits, decolonising education requires more than merely including diverse perspectives in existing curricula; it demands a comprehensive overhaul of the epistemological structures that prioritise certain types of knowledge and methods of dissemination. Mustanski et al. (2015) formulated and appraised an online sexual health education program named Queer Sex Ed, aimed specifically at LGBTQ+ youth. Their research demonstrated that the program was implementable, well-received by participants, and initially effective in enhancing sexual health knowledge and fostering self-acceptance among gay male youth. Such focused online interventions could serve as valuable supplements to conventional school-based education. To cultivate genuinely inclusive sexuality education, a paradigm shift from heteronormative conventions towards recognising the breadth of human sexuality and gender is imperative. By emphasising these diverse lived experiences, sexuality education can more effectively enhance the health, well-being, and empowerment of all young individuals.

Theoretical framework

Queer Theory: A Critical Lens for Understanding LGBTQ+ School Youth Sexuality Education Experiences

Queer theory provides a compelling framework for analysing the way South African LGBTQ+ youth engage with sexuality education through online platforms like Facebook. Originating in the early 1990s, it opposes the rigid definitions of gender and sexuality, emphasising that identities are socially constructed and performative rather than inherent (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). A key element of this theory is the idea of heteronormativity, the widespread belief that heterosexuality is the standard, "normal" sexual orientation (Warner, 1991). In the realm of sexuality education, this is reflected in curricula that are primarily centred on heterosexual interactions and reproductive sex, thereby marginalising LGBTQ+ narratives (Francis, 2019b). Queer theory facilitates a critical evaluation of how this exclusion within South African educational systems pushes youth towards

online avenues for finding information and community. Its focus on fluid, performative identities (Butler, 1990) sheds light on how spaces like the "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page provide a secure environment for youth to explore varied sexual identities. This concept resonates with Muñoz's (2019) notion of "queer worldmaking," which involves creating alternative spaces that support nonnormative identities and desires.

The concept of intersectionality, a fundamental element of Queer theory introduced by Crenshaw (1991), is vital for comprehending the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in South Africa. According to Francis (2019a), intersections of race, class, and sexuality contribute to both marginalisation and forms of resistance. This perspective enables us to examine how these overlapping identities affect the youth's interaction with sexuality education, both in schools and online. Sedgwick's (1990) idea of "reparative reading" elucidates how youth resourcefully employ Facebook to address the gaps left by heteronormative education. By utilising queer theory, we transcend merely documenting how online information is sought. It allows us to critically assess how these actions challenge heteronormative frameworks, foster new queer communities, and could potentially reformulate perceptions of sexuality education. In the realm of curriculum studies, queer theory serves as a formidable tool for probing the ideological roots of educational content. As Kumashiro (2002) points out, curricula are inherently partial, reflecting and reinforcing prevailing social norms and power dynamics. Applying queer theory to curriculum analysis exposes how heteronormativity functions as a foundational structure in education systems, influencing which knowledge is included or omitted in formal educational settings.

Methods

This study illustrates how gay male youth leveraged social networks to cultivate a supportive online environment for exploring their identities. The predominant concept of Facebook pages as a supportive community corresponds with current research highlighting social media's role in facilitating connection and resilience among these

youth groups (Byron et al., 2019; Fox & Ralston, 2016). As identified by Fox and Ralston (2016), online platforms are vital for many young gender and sexual minorities, offering avenues for knowledge exchange, information collection, and support in shaping their identities. This investigation employed a qualitative design, utilising data from Facebook to examine the contrast between South African gay male youth's sexual education desires and what they are taught in school. The anonymity provided by social media can encourage more open dialogues about sensitive subjects like non-normative sexualities (Hanckel et al., 2019), reflecting how online environments can serve as "backstages" for marginalised groups, permitting self-expression without fear of stigma, as articulated by De Koster (2010).

This method aligns with Pinar's (1995) concept of the "reconceptualist" perspective in curriculum studies, which focuses on perceiving curriculum as lived experiences instead of just formal guidelines or policies. Through studying how gay male youth produce and disseminate knowledge beyond formal educational systems, this research emphasises the discrepancy between the intended curriculum (what schools aim to teach) and the actual curriculum (what learners effectively learn).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As researchers engaged in LGBTQ+ educational research, we acknowledge our positions as advocates for inclusive education and social justice. The first author identifies as a queer educator and researcher with extensive experience in sexuality studies, while the second author brings expertise in inclusive education with a focus on marginalised communities. Our commitment to LGBTQ+ advocacy informed both our research interests and analytical lens, potentially influencing our interpretation of the data. We recognise that our perspectives as researchers from higher education institutions may differ from the lived experiences of the youth whose voices we seek to amplify. To address potential biases, we engaged in ongoing reflexive practices throughout the research process, regularly discussing our interpretations and challenging our assumptions.

We also acknowledge the inherent power dynamics in researching vulnerable populations and the ethical complexities of studying online spaces where youth seek support and community (Döring et al., 2022; McCormack & Wignall, 2017).

Data Source and Sampling

Data was gathered from a public Facebook page titled "Secrets in the Gay Hive," which is designed for South African gay men. This platform enables users to post questions and discussions about topics like gay sexuality, relationships, health, and identity anonymously. A purposive sampling method was used to select 51 posts for analysis, based on two criteria: 1) the post's author clearly stated they were either secondary school learners or aged 18 years or under, and 2) the post addressed issues such as sexuality education needs, school experiences related to their sexuality, or personal sexual autonomy. The sampling process involved systematically reviewing all posts on the page over a 12-month period (January 2023 to December 2023). Age and school status were determined through explicit self-identification within the posts themselves, where users voluntarily disclosed information such as "I am 18 and in Grade 12" or "I am a high school learner." Only posts containing such clear demographic markers were included in the sample. This approach necessarily limits our sample to youth who explicitly disclosed their age and educational status, potentially excluding other school-going youth who chose not to reveal such information (Hanckel et al., 2019). The page administrator anonymises all posts before they are published, erasing any personal identifiers. This anonymisation process encourages participants to candidly discuss sensitive matters without fear of being identified. This aligns with Hanckel et al.'s (2019) observation that gay male identities frequently turn to online anonymity to safely explore their identity and obtain support. For instance, one anonymised post said: "I am 18 and terrified to come out at my all-boys school. Has anyone been through this?" As a researcher, I did not have access to any personal data about the posters.

Study Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged in this study. First, the demographic information available about participants is limited to what they voluntarily disclosed in their posts, preventing deeper analysis of intersectional factors such as race, geographic location, or socioeconomic background. Second, the focus on a single Facebook page dedicated to gay men inherently limits the scope to primarily gay male experiences, potentially excluding the voices of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming youth. Third, the predominant reliance on English-language posts may have excluded youth who primarily communicate in other South African languages. Fourth, the voluntary nature of posting means our sample may not represent youth who are less comfortable with digital expression or who face greater barriers to internet access. Finally, while the anonymised nature of the platform encourages candid sharing, it also prevents follow-up clarification or deeper exploration of individual experiences (Townend & Wallace, 2016; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Despite the Facebook page being accessible to the public, priority was given to ethical considerations due to the sensitive data and the vulnerability of the involved demographic. Approval was secured from the page's administrator to utilise post content for the research. Furthermore, an announcement was made on the page to describe the research project and seek consent, which was granted by 12 members along with the administrator, although there is no direct link to their individual posts. None of the collected data contains identifiable information, and all data were already anonymised. Additional ethical safeguards included regular consultation with the university's ethics committee throughout the research process, establishment of protocols for handling potentially harmful content (such as posts indicating self-harm), and commitment to presenting findings in ways that do not further stigmatise or pathologise LGBTQ+ youth experiences (McCormack & Wignall, 2017). This methodology is consistent with the latest best practices for ethical social media research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016) and follows guidelines by Hanckel et al. (2019) to

honour the privacy preferences of LGBTIQ+ youth online.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the 51 chosen posts was conducted via reflexive thematic analysis adhering to the six-step method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, we immersed ourselves in the data by reading all posts numerous times to fully grasp their content, enabling preliminary insights and the identification of emerging patterns. Subsequently, the posts were coded line by line independently by researchers, utilising descriptive codes. By examining these codes, potential patterns and groupings were identified, leading to the formation of broader themes. These early themes highlighted significant aspects of how participants engaged in sexuality education beyond the school environment. In the fourth step, a review and refinement of the themes took place, ensuring their relevance to both the coded extracts and the data as a whole. Clear definitions and names were then assigned to each theme, clarifying the specific elements of sexuality education that participants found absent in their school experiences. The analysis was subsequently tied to the research question and existing literature, placing the findings in the wider context of LGBTQ youth experiences with sexuality education. This comprehensive approach extended the analysis beyond simple description to provide valuable insights into the research topic.

Alongside thematic analysis of user posts, we carried out an additional curriculum policy analysis to provide context to learners' experiences within the educational setting. This included a review of South Africa's Comprehensive Sexuality Education Curriculum Guidelines and the Life Orientation Materials for Grades 8-12, with a particular emphasis on the representation (or omission) of LGBTIQ+ identities, relationships, and health issues. This curriculum analysis revealed significant gaps in LGBTIQ+ representation, with life orientation materials containing only minimal references to sexual diversity and no specific guidance for educators on addressing same-sex relationships, gender identity, or LGBTIQ+-specific health concerns. These omissions directly correspond to the educational

gaps identified in the youth posts, providing crucial context for understanding their online information-seeking behaviours (Francis, 2023; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

Fundings & Discussion

This study's findings and discussions section delves into three important themes derived from the experiences of gay youth in South Africa: deficiencies in sexual health education, issues related to relationships and identity, and the complexities of desire and sexual identity. Based on stories shared on the "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page, this section highlights significant shortcomings in school-taught sexuality education and the intricate challenges faced by these individuals in comprehending and articulating their sexualities.

Gay youth sexual health education gaps

Stories from the "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page vividly highlight the significant deficiencies in sexual health education for gay youth in South Africa. These accounts expose a reality filled with confusion, misinformation, and peril, all rooted in the inadequacies of school-based sexuality education to cater specifically to the needs and experiences of nonheterosexual students. This shortcoming exemplifies what Apple et al. (2018) describe as the curriculum's role in perpetuating social inequalities through the selective presentation or omission of knowledge. An examination of South Africa's Life Orientation curriculum reveals that while it nominally acknowledges diverse sexualities, the focus of practical sexual health information remains predominantly on heterosexual practices.

A common thread in these narratives is the absence of practical sexual health information tailored to gay individuals. As noted by an 18-year-old learner,

"I know about condoms, but what about other things? Are dental dams really necessary? And how do you even use them? School never mentioned any of this."

This statement underscores the dominant heteronormative slant present in many sexuality

education programs, which often exclude discussions of sexual activities beyond penile-vaginal intercourse. The rare mention of dental dams in typical sex education highlights the specific educational gaps faced by LGBTQ+ youth. Another example of the lack of practical, skill-based education is offered by an 18-year-old high school learner who observes,

"I learnt about lube and douching when you have sex as a gay man. I don't know where to get this and how to use it."

This narrative highlights the shortcomings of sexuality education in delivering not only knowledge but also the essential skills and resources required by gay youth to ensure safe sexual experiences. Mustanski et al. (2011) suggest that the absence of practical guidance may leave gay youth ill-equipped for their sexual endeavours, which could elevate their risk of adverse health consequences. Particularly alarming are the accounts that expose a troubling ignorance regarding the transmission of STIs and HIV within same-sex relationships. A Grade 11 learner admits,

"I like it when he cums inside of me. We never had an HIV test. At school, they always talk about the risk of getting HIV between a man and a woman if you have unprotected sex."

This statement clearly demonstrates how concentrating on heteronormativity in HIV education might result in gay youth falsely believing they are less at risk. Francis (2019b) highlights that this "very not rainbow" method in sexual education can pose significant public health risks. The accounts further uncover an alarming trend of shame and apprehension around sexual health, potentially discouraging gay youth from obtaining essential medical attention. According to a grade 12 learner,

"I am itching there after we had unprotected sex. I am scared to go to the clinic because they may know that I am gay."

Fear of stigma and discrimination in healthcare environments is a significant, documented obstacle to the proper care of LGBTQ+ individuals. These accounts indicate that such experiences often begin early in life, likely

establishing a trend towards enduring health disparities. From the standpoint of queer theory, these accounts may be seen as instances of what Butler (1990) refers to as "gender trouble." The confusion and anxiety voiced by these young people regarding their sexual identities and behaviours underscores the destabilising impact of desires and experiences that deviate from heteronormative norms. Their resort to anonymous online forums for guidance and support can be interpreted as resistance to heteronormative educational structures, forming what Muñoz (2019) might describe as a "queer counterpublic" where unconventional knowledge and identities find recognition and exploration.

Nonetheless, while these online spaces are essential for support and information, they also carry inherent risks. The same anonymity that permits candid discussion can also lead to the dissemination of misinformation. Research by McCormack and Wignall (2017) demonstrates that young people often receive conflicting or inaccurate sexual health information online, particularly regarding practices specific to same-sex relationships. For example, a grade 10 user questions about the safety of oral sex practices.

"Is there a right way to do it? What are the risks? I am scared of STIs, but too ashamed to ask anyone in person."

This underscores the dual aspects of online platforms; although they offer a venue for inquiries that might feel too awkward to voice in person, the information they provide can sometimes be inaccurate or incomplete. Furthermore, the dependence on these digital spaces highlights concerning digital vulnerabilities. As Peter and Valkenburg (2016) note, young people seeking sexual information online may encounter age-inappropriate content, predatory behaviour, or develop unrealistic expectations about sexual relationships based on pornographic or sensationalised content. The dependence on these digital spaces highlights a concerning neglect of duty by formal educational systems. As Pascoe (2011) notes, when schools do not deliver thorough and inclusive sexuality education, they inadvertently drive LGBTQ+ youth towards possibly unsafe online resources for

essential health guidance. This not only jeopardises these youths but also entrenches their marginalisation, subtly conveying that their experiences and needs aren't deemed important by conventional education. The stories from "Secrets in the Gay Hive" thus serve as a strong critique of the current state of sexuality education in South Africa. They expose a system that lets down LGBTQ+ youth in several ways: by not supplying practical, pertinent information; by neglecting the specific health challenges this group encounters; and by failing to provide an environment where LGBTQ+ youth can safely and confidently explore their identities and access healthcare.

To fully grasp this educational shortcoming, it must be viewed within the larger historical and political forces that influence the South African curriculum. Maistry (2021) notes that the modern South African educational system remains under the sway of its colonial past, which historically categorised non-normative sexualities as abnormal or pathological. Today, these historical influences are compounded by neoliberal education policies that prioritise standardisation and quantifiable skills over a deeper exploration of identity and social justice issues. These deficiencies have significant and potentially life-changing outcomes. The lack of LGBTQ+ inclusive sexuality education leads directly to health disparities, from higher risks of STIs and HIV to deferred or neglected healthcare due to stigma fears. Francis (2021) argues this is not solely an educational matter but a critical public health and human rights issue.

Gay School Youth Relationship and Identity Challenges

The stories provide a detailed depiction of the difficulties gay learners encounter in managing relationships and developing their identities. These accounts illustrate a terrain filled with uncertainty, secrecy, and worry, arising from insufficient representation, education, and backing in their surroundings. A common thread in these narratives is the scarcity of realistic, affirmative examples of LGBTQ+ relationships. A 19-year-old high school learner inquires

"How do you talk about boundaries with another guy? I want to try something, but I am not

ready for everything. In movies, it seems that gay guys just jump into bed. Is it strange to want to take it slow?"

This inquiry underscores the significant impact of media stereotypes on the expectations and concerns of LGBTQ+ youth regarding relationships. According to Pascoe (2011), the lack of varied and in-depth portrayals of LGBTQ+ relationships in mainstream media can lead young individuals to develop skewed perceptions of what their relationships should resemble. The problem is further intensified by the lack of inclusive LGBTQ+ relationship education in schools. Without appropriate guidance on how to navigate same-sex relationships, young individuals are often left to explore independently, sometimes in clandestine and possibly perilous manners. This educational gap illustrates what Kumashiro (2002) describes as "education that oppresses through curriculum," where specific knowledge and experiences are systematically omitted from formal education, thereby perpetuating existing social hierarchies. Through our examination of South Africa's Life Orientation curriculum materials, we discovered that although healthy relationships are discussed in detail, the provided examples and scenarios are almost entirely centred on heterosexual relationships.

LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences with Desire and Sexual Identity

Another recurring topic within these narratives is the uncertainty linked to sexual roles and identities in same-sex relationships. These accounts portray a scene rife with bewilderment, internalised homophobia, and a notable absence of precise information concerning sexual orientation and gender expression. An 18-year-old user remarks:

"I always hear about bottoms, tops, vers. I don't know what those words mean. All I know is that I am into guys. I do, I know what I am. I am a bit shy of asking people. I think I am gay, 18 years old and in grade 11".

The absence of fundamental terminology to discuss sexual preferences and practices highlights a significant deficiency in LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education. This lack of information

may leave gay adolescents, in particular, unprepared to comprehend and express their own desires and experiences. The way rigid gender norms are internalised and affect sexual expression is apparent in numerous stories. A 19-year-old recounts,

"I have always topped my boyfriend, who is in grade 11 and I am in grade 12 and I am 19. When his p#ns touch me, I feel to be topped. I feel embarrassed to ask him to top me. Can a girly gay top a straight acting gay? I also don't want to feel like I am becoming a girl. I am confused."

This narrative illustrates how heteronormative ideas about gender roles can infiltrate same-sex relationships, generating anxiety and constraining sexual expression. The worry about "becoming a girl" by taking on a receptive role in sexual activity exemplifies what Butler (1990) refers to as the performative aspect of gender, suggesting that gender is an action we perform rather than an inherent attribute.

Sifuentes (2022) described the intricate mix of traditional African gender norms, colonial gender constructs, and modern global LGBTQ+ identities, which can be seen in these expressions of gender confusion. Drawing on Afro-queer epistemologies, Matebeni (2017) argues that understanding contemporary LGBTQ+ experiences in South Africa requires acknowledging how colonial impositions disrupted indigenous gender systems that were often more fluid and inclusive. The intersection of these colonial legacies with contemporary global LGBTQ+ discourses creates complex identity negotiations for young people. The lack of educational content addressing these intersections leaves South African LGBTQ+ youth grappling with conflicting cultural narratives around gender and sexuality. Another user's experience vividly highlights the tension between same-sex attraction and cultural expectations.

"I have a girlfriend and I enjoy sex with her. While watching porn, I accidentally clicked on a gay site. I continued to watch it and it turned me on. I now do it all the time. I want to try it with a guy, but I don't want to be gay. I am confused. I now look at these girly boys in my school and I

want to try it with them. My culture does not allow such an arrangement. I am very confused."

This story highlights the intricate relationship between sexual attraction, societal expectations, and the development of personal identity. The individual's interest in "girly boys" yet rejection of a gay identity illustrates the strong impact of cultural norms surrounding heteronormativity and gender roles. The uncertainty and apprehension these young people feel regarding their attractions underscore how disruptive such non-conforming desires can be within conventional categories. Their efforts to align personal attractions with societal norms and their perceptions of self underscore the pervasive force of "compulsory heterosexuality," as termed by Rich (1980). The motif of clandestine or taboo desires recurs in several stories. A grade 10 user recounts,

"My girlfriend has a gay brother. We all went out one night during school holidays and I slept over at their house. Because of the adults who think we are only friends I was allowed to sleep in my girlfriend's brother's room. He started to touch me and I touched him back. We went too far. I enjoyed it and I want to do it again. I don't know how to behave when I am with my girlfriend and her brother because I now want to be closer to him."

These narrative sheds light on the intricate network of desires and relationships that numerous LGBTQ+ young individuals often navigate covertly and without proper guidance. Most disturbingly, these stories expose a troubling lack of awareness surrounding consent and the boundaries of healthy relationships. As one person inquires,

"Is it normal to have a crush on your cousin. He is so handsome. Sometimes I even dream about him. Friends at school say that it is okay as long as he is your cousin from the mother's side. How can I let him know that I like him? I suspect he is a grey cat."

This inquiry not only highlights confusion regarding the suitability of family-oriented attractions but also uncovers the potential for peer-spread misinformation when

comprehensive sexuality education is lacking. Such posts reveal concerning gaps in understanding about appropriate relationships and consent, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive education that addresses these fundamental concepts. The reliance on peer advice and unregulated online information can perpetuate harmful misconceptions and potentially dangerous behaviours (McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

The narratives from "Secrets in the Gay Hive" act as a strong critique of the present condition of LGBTQ+ youth support and education in South Africa. They expose a system failing on numerous fronts: providing inaccurate information about sexual orientation and gender identity, perpetuating harmful gender norms, and neglecting to foster safe environments for LGBTQ+ youth to explore their identities and desires. These curricular shortcomings must be seen as part of what Apple et al. (2018) describe as the educational system's ideological role in perpetuating social inequalities through selective knowledge dissemination. As Pinar (2019) asserts, curriculum transcends mere academic content, serving instead as a "complicated conversation" about the knowledge that is valued, whose narratives are significant, and the futures that can be envisioned.

Relying on anonymous online platforms for fundamental insights into sexual identities and practices highlights the pressing necessity for thorough, LGBTQ+ inclusive sexuality education in schools. As Francis (2019b) suggests, this education must transcend basic biology to encompass the intricate social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of sexuality and relationships. It should equip young individuals with the language and conceptual tools to understand and express their desires and identities, challenge heteronormative norms, and validate diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Furthermore, these narratives emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive methods in supporting LGBTQ+ youth. Mayeza and Vincent (2019) point out that addressing LGBTQ+ issues in South Africa involves navigating the complex intersections of culture, religion, and post-apartheid politics. Support systems should be

crafted to assist young people in harmonising their desires and identities with their cultural heritage, rather than forcing a choice between the two. Ultimately, these narratives and inquiries reveal the remarkable resilience of LGBTQ+ youth in the face of societal pressures and insufficient support. By turning to online platforms for information and community, these young individuals perform what Muñoz (2019) terms "queer world making," crafting spaces where alternative identities and desires can be explored and validated. However, while these online communities offer vital support, they must supplement, not replace, comprehensive, real-world education and support systems. The objective should be to build a world where LGBTQ+ youth are not compelled to depend on anonymous online forums or potentially unreliable peer advice to grasp their own desires and identities. Achieving this requires an all-encompassing approach, including comprehensive sexuality education, cultural competency training for educators and healthcare practitioners, and wider societal efforts to challenge heteronormative beliefs and affirm LGBTQ+ identities. Only through such extensive efforts can we support LGBTQ+ youth in navigating the intricate landscape of desire, identity, and cultural expectations in a healthy and affirming manner.

Conclusion

This research explored the ways in which South African gay male school youth utilise the "Secrets in the Gay Hive" Facebook page as a complement to insufficient school-based sexuality education. By employing a theoretical queer perspective, the study examined user-generated content to show how online activities challenge heteronormative educational systems and offer new forms of queer knowledge and community. The research highlights significant shortcomings in school sexuality education for LGBTQ+ youth in South Africa. Stories shared on the Facebook page reveal a picture of confusion, misinformation, and risk, resulting from the failure of formal education systems to cater to the unique needs of nonheterosexual youth. Notable concerns include the lack of LGBTQ+-specific sexual health information, dangerous misconceptions regarding STI and HIV transmission in same-sex relationships, and a widespread sense of shame

and fear about sexual health that deters youth from seeking the care they need.

From the perspective of curriculum studies, these results highlight the ramifications of what Kumashiro (2002) termed "crisis-maintaining education" a curriculum that sustains rather than resolves social challenges by consistently neglecting certain knowledge and experiences. The shortcomings of South African sexuality education for LGBTQ+ youth serve as a pronounced example of how curricula can uphold crises through omission, posing substantial health and well-being risks to a vulnerable demographic. In addition to health-related issues, the research revealed intricate difficulties LGBTQ+ youth encounter in managing relationships and developing identities. The lack of realistic and positive examples for LGBTQ+ relationships leaves many young individuals grappling with establishing boundaries and comprehending healthy relationship dynamics. Additionally, confusion about sexual roles, internalised homophobia, and clashes between same-sex attraction and cultural expectations present significant obstacles to self-acceptance and identity development.

However, this study also reveals concerning digital vulnerabilities that must be addressed alongside curricular reform. The findings demonstrate that while online platforms provide essential support and community for LGBTQ+ youth, they also expose young people to risks including misinformation, age-inappropriate content, and potential exploitation. The reliance on peer advice and unmoderated online forums can perpetuate dangerous misconceptions about sexual health, consent, and relationships. This dual nature of digital spaces as both empowering and potentially harmful underscores the complexity of contemporary LGBTQ+ youth experiences and the urgent need for comprehensive support systems that bridge online and offline environments (Döring et al., 2022; McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

These findings carry crucial implications for the welfare of LGBTQ+ youth and underscore the pressing need for comprehensive, inclusive sexuality education in South African schools. The

dependency on anonymous online forums for fundamental information on sexual health, identities, and relationships highlights the failure of formal educational institutions to cater to LGBTQ+ learners' needs. Although online spaces such as "Secrets in the Gay Hive" offer vital support and community, they cannot substitute comprehensive, real-world education, and support systems.

Mbembe (2016) highlights the importance of adopting a "decolonial approach" to curriculum design, emphasising the need to recognise and rectify the enduring colonial influences impacting educational content and methods in South Africa. In line with Tamale (2020), genuine inclusivity in sexuality education within African settings requires integrating indigenous knowledge with modern global perspectives on sexual and gender diversity, rather than merely adopting Western education models. Building on this foundation, Mulaudizi (2023) demonstrates how addressing LGBTQ+ educational needs requires confronting the ongoing coloniality of gender in South African institutions, necessitating fundamental epistemological shifts in how sexuality and gender are understood and taught.

Addressing these concerns necessitates a multi-faceted approach to sexuality education. Schools should incorporate LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula that transcend pathologisation, encompassing the intricate social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of sexuality and relationships. This education must equip young people with the vocabulary and frameworks to understand and express their desires and identities, challenging heteronormative expectations while affirming diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions. Furthermore, cultural competency training for both educators and healthcare professionals is crucial for fostering environments where LGBTQ+ youth feel safe to explore their identities and seek assistance. Online resources, while valuable for providing anonymous support and peer connection, must be complemented by digital literacy education that helps young people critically evaluate online information, recognise potential risks, and navigate digital spaces safely. This includes developing educational programs

that address both the benefits and dangers of online information-seeking, while providing young people with skills to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources (McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Döring et al., 2022).

This research emphasises the crucial need for curriculum scholars and teacher educators to engage with what Giroux (2024) terms the "ideological work" behind curriculum development. It is imperative to consider how educational content mirrors and perpetuates social hierarchies and power structures. Crafting genuinely inclusive sexuality education necessitates a thorough critique of the underlying ideological assumptions of current methods, such as heteronormative tendencies, colonial influences, and traditional gender and sexuality binaries. The study also underscores the importance of involving marginalised communities in the process of curriculum development, ensuring their involvement in knowledge creation. As argued by Francis (2023), LGBTQ+ youth should be seen not just as curriculum recipients but as significant contributors whose personal experiences can enhance the effectiveness and relevance of educational content. By bridging these significant gaps in education and support, we can strive toward a future where LGBTQ+ youth in South Africa are endowed with the knowledge, resources, and affirmation to confidently and proudly navigate their sexual health, relationships, and identities.

Disclosures

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no competing interests

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