

# Sex, Relationships... and you?



## Sexuality and Sexual Transactions involving Young People in Switzerland

### Summary of Research Results

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This document presents a summary of results for the research project “Sex, relationships... and you?”<sup>1</sup>. This research project, carried out from 2015 to 2017 by the HES-SO - HETS-FR and financed by the OAK Foundation, focuses on young people in Switzerland participating in sexual transactions, that is, in sexual experiences involving a financial, material and/or symbolic exchange. It sought the views of young people aged 14 to 25 across the three linguistic regions of Switzerland, as well as the views of health professionals involved in the field. The study firstly sought to clarify young people's social representations through an online survey; secondly, to better understand the sexual transactions some of them had experienced; and, thirdly, to identify professional practices and requirements in response to such transactions.

Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this study is made up of three complementary components:

- 1) A survey using an online questionnaire in French, German and Italian, available from June to December 2015 via the websites [www.sexe-et-toi.ch](http://www.sexe-et-toi.ch), [www.sex-und-du.ch](http://www.sex-und-du.ch); [www.tu-e-il-sesso.ch](http://www.tu-e-il-sesso.ch), which resulted in 6500 valid survey responses. The questions related to social representations of sexuality and sexual transactions involving young people, as well as their sexual practices.
- 2) Individual semi-guided interviews of one to two hours regarding the reasons young people have for entering into such practices: 37 young people more or less closely involved in sexual transactions in different regions of Switzerland were interviewed.
- 3) Focus groups (5) and an individual interview were carried out with allied health professionals, in relation to their practices and requirements for providing support: 34 health professionals working with young people from various fields (youth centres, schools, residential children's care, police, youth protection, gynaecology, sexual health, social and psychological support, social work in the field) took part.

The study adopted a comprehensive approach emphasising subjective logic and the representations underlying sexual practices. The data collected from these three components was analysed from a theoretical standpoint bring together concepts from the sociology of social representations, the sociology of sexuality and in particular the theory of “sexual negotiations”, from juvenile sociology and anthropology, as well as the sociology of social transactions. Underlying this research is the position put forward by sexuality sociology, in which sexuality does not constitute a separate “social area”, but is instead an area in which specific social and power relationships are manifested. Sexual transactions were defined as a **range of sexual experiences involving a financial, material and/or symbolic exchange**. The concept of sexual experiences refers both to sexual practices and to what they signify and allows for the inclusion of diverse sexual practices. The concept of exchange is preferred to that of remuneration, as it better accounts for the dynamic and rarely single-sided nature of these transactions.

In order to highlight the meanings given to sexual transactions by the various participants who were interviewed, the data was analysed in the light of three questions: how do these

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<sup>1</sup> All the theoretical and empirical references on which this summary is based can be found in the full research report.

participants see sexual transactions, how do they judge them and how do they see themselves in relation to them?

#### A. Survey by online questionnaire: highlighting representations rather than prevalence

This quantitative survey made it possible to examine tendencies in representations of sexual transactions among young people in Switzerland, whether they are involved in them or not. The results therefore give an account of subjective logic and not of the prevalence of such practices. It is important to indicate that the survey sample was not representative of the young population of Switzerland with regard to several variables (age, canton, linguistic region), although it was for others (gender, training, occupation and rural/urban distribution). In addition, great care must be taken when comparing these results to those of other epidemiological studies carried out in this field in other countries (questionnaire completed on a voluntary basis or not, other uncontrolled variables; broader definitions of sexual experiences adopted or study population not limited to schools).

With regard to the representations that participants had of **sexuality in general**, it seems that it constitutes an important dimension of their life, especially for the older respondents. For them, pleasure is a central element of sexuality. However, the qualitative interviews showed that the importance given to pleasure can be ambiguous: it appears both as a value which gives meaning to these experiences and as an injunction to which young people feel subject (they "have to" experience pleasure/ give pleasure).

More exactly regarding **sexual transactions**, the majority of young people in our sample had a negative representation of them. "Sexual experiences in exchange for something" are largely associated with marginalized and stigmatised practices such as prostitution, drugs and pornography. Their judgement of these practices was systematically negative, as much in a normative sense (bad rather than good, abnormal rather than normal, forbidden rather than allowed), as in a sense of power relationships (subject to rather than free, weak rather than strong, humiliating rather than respectful); as much with regard to safety (risky rather than sure) as with regard to feelings (unpleasant rather than pleasant). For a vast majority of participants, the problematic is the association between exchange and sexuality. In other words, the problem in their eyes is not so much what is exchanged (a gift rather than money, for example) or the relational dynamics (the boy who suggests and the girl who accepts, rather than the opposite), but the fact that there is an exchange of a sexual service for something. In this context, sexual transactions appear repellent, an act from which young people wish to distinguish themselves.

*For a vast majority of participants, the problematic is the association between exchange and sexuality*

The results emphasise, on one hand, the differences in representations between young people who have had sexual transactions and those who have not and, on the other, the importance of gender in representations of sexual transactions. Young people who say they have tried sexual transactions have more positive representations of these experiences than those who say they have not. This tendency is more marked in people who say they have had several

experiences of this type. With regard to gender, girls' judgement of sexual transactions is systematically more negative than that of boys'. However, if we consider only the girls who have tried sexual transactions, their judgement is more positive than that of the boys. This apparently contradictory result could be interpreted as a more marked need among girls who have not experienced sexual transactions to distance themselves from transgressive practices, in a society which seeks to control their sexual behaviours more than it does those of men. It could be supposed that, for this same reason, they give an even more positive meaning to these experiences once they have engaged in them and/or maintain satisfactory self-esteem once they have been involved in sexual transactions. The qualitative results show a similar direction.

These results can be linked to **the practices reported by the respondents**. Young people who say they have tried sexual transactions represent a very small minority of respondents and the proportion is even lower when only transactions involving sexual relations with penetration are taken into account. It could be surmised that the proportion would be even lower in a representative sample. Among young people who say they have tried sexual transactions,

*The involvement of young people in sexual transactions is never completely free, nor completely forced*

there are more boys than girls and more homosexuals and bisexuals than heterosexuals. These young people show a higher than average incidence of having left the family home and of living in major urban centres; they indicate a little more often than the average that they regularly consume alcohol, drugs and pornography and are more numerous in indicating that they generally feel bad or very bad. Lastly, the average age of the first sexual relationship is a little lower among these people and the number of declared sexual partners a little higher than the average.

It would, however, be hasty to consider these transactions as homogeneous and entirely negative experiences. In fact, analysis reveals there to be two types of experience. On one hand, an experience of transactions considered “non-problematic” and, on the other, of experiences considered “problematic”. For the former, a majority, the respondents have quite positive representations of sexual transactions: they declare they feel good after the experience or experiences (repeated, in several cases). They do not feel a need to seek support following the experience and a number envisage having further experiences. For the latter, it is usually a case of a single experience, followed by negative feelings and a need for support, together with quite negative representations of these transactions. The data resulting from the qualitative interviews makes it possible to further analyse these results.

*Young people who say they have tried sexual transactions formed a very small minority of respondents*

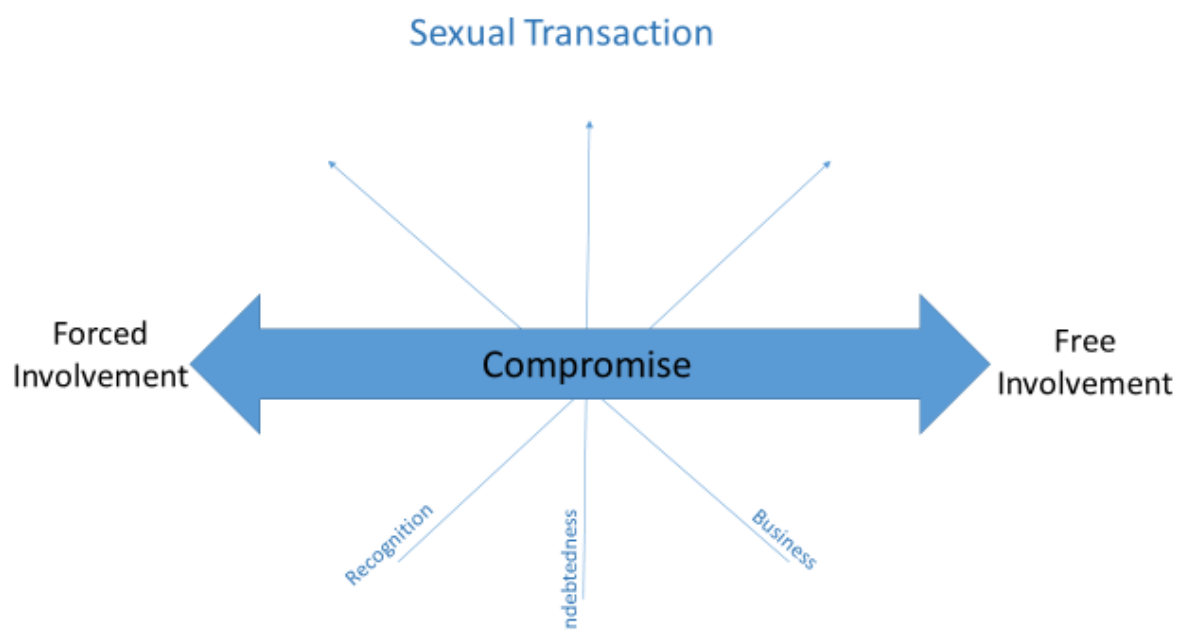
**B. Interviews with young people: between free involvement and forced involvement, the subjective logic of negotiating exchanges**

Data collected through interviews with young people reveals a diversity of situations and meanings given to their **sexual experiences** and particularly to those associated with an

exchange. Analysis clearly shows that the sexual nature of the experiences and the meanings they carry are always subjective and contextualised. The young people in the study feel a tension between the way in which they see their sexuality and the representations that adults have of it. They associate sexuality above all with pleasure, experimentation, love and affection, self-fulfilment, play and freedom. They have however the impression that adults see young people's sexuality as risky, irresponsible, unrestrained, dirty, even perverse. Another tension which can be identified from their comments is that between an apparent liberalisation of discourses around sexuality and the persistence of social taboos around sexuality. The sometimes abrupt, even provocative, discursive register in which they express their views on sexuality contrasts with an obvious sensitivity and modesty, sometimes even naivety, expressed in connection with their personal experiences, often together with a fear of being judged. They also emphasise how sexuality is still associated with many taboos, for example in certain family contexts and/or, sometimes, in sex education courses received at school, which are often very centred on questions of medical prevention, whereas the emotional aspects and questions of identity seem more important to them.

More closely with regard to **sexual transactions**, young people's comments are often ambivalent, mostly because the transactions are negatively represented and associated with prostitution and the social stigma which it carries. Analysis leads us to understand their involvement (more or less active and/or conscious) in sexual transactions as the result of a compromise in the push-and-pull between freedom and constraint, one in which young people may have more or less room to negotiate the terms of trade, both with themselves and with others. This involvement is never completely free, nor completely forced, even if in certain cases the constraint, or the emancipation, seems to dominate. Therefore, even if it is considered "consensual", involvement in a sexual transaction can be influenced by certain forms of pressure, from physical coercion to less visible forms of pressure or social, moral or psychological imposition. In a seeming contradiction, situations which appear to clearly show an asymmetrical relation between a dominant partner and a submissive one can prove to be more complex. Similarly, certain situations where there appears to be clear coercion are not always interpreted as such by young people, in particular when the young person did not show resistance or considers he/she contributed to the transaction by his/her acts. In this sense, young people negotiate a certain leeway within these transactions, but there are always some kinds of constraints, with a more or less significant coercive element, according to their position on the continuum between forced and free involvement. These negotiations result in "compromises", for themselves and in relation to others, which are negotiated according to subjective logics articulated within the transaction itself.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, we have identified three subjective logics which stand out overridingly from the interviews. We have entitled them, empirically: the logic of business, the logic of indebtedness and the logic of recognition. This is represented in the diagram below. These three logics are not exclusive and can combine within participants involved in a sexual transaction. They are also dynamic and can change or be articulated in a different way during a transaction. The fact that young people do not necessarily give the same weight to the same logics explains why sexual transactions which may first appear similar do not take on the same meaning for each of them.



### *Logic of Business*

The majority of young people associate sexual transactions with prostitution. This association occurs particularly when the transaction is seen as remuneration for sexual services, in a logic which can be called one of “business”. There are two “variants” on the logic of business, which are not exclusive: a logic of financial independence and a logic of survival. Whereas the **logic of survival is** present mostly in young people in a situation of great precarity, who practise street prostitution, the **logic of financial independence** is found among students or the unemployed who receive none (or very little) money from their parents. For the latter, the rates for sexual exchanges offer an opportunity to earn more money than they could in small jobs alongside their studies, for example.



The activity is considered strictly professional, without (in theory) any feelings of love and it does not always exclude having a life as a couple. However, even when the “business” dimension dominates, issues to do with experimenting, feelings, recognition and pleasure can arise without necessarily being experienced in the same way by girls as by boys. It seems that the separation between “sex” and “feelings” is more difficult for girls. This leads them to put strategies in place to keep the logic of business at the forefront, enabling them to maintain separation between intimacy and feeling, on one hand, and “professional” activity on the other. In this context, money, as well as the contractual nature of the transaction, act as the guarantee that the transaction stays within a framework of trade.

In any case, the figure of the “whore”, particularly linked to the logic of business, seems to be repellent for young people, who try to distinguish themselves from it, either by hiding their activities, or by highlighting advantages other than monetary benefits that they gain from it, or yet again, by taking on the image of “prostitute”, while limiting it to a particular framework which does not interfere with other dimensions of their identity.

*The figure of the “whore”, to which the logic of business refers in particular, is repellent*

These cases only represent a minority of the young people encountered. In the majority of cases, the idea of receiving money is refused, sometimes virulently, because it seems too close to prostitution and is associated with feelings of shame, “dirtiness” and lack of respect, whether with young men or young women.

### *Logic of Indebtedness*

The logic of indebtedness frequently appears in comments made by the young people in the study, principally among girls and especially within the framework of heterosexual relationships. A great number of respondents explain that they have agreed to sexual experiences through feeling indebted to a man who bought them a drink, a meal or offered a place to stay after a night clubbing, for example. These favours are not always explicitly offered for this reason, but young people on the receiving end may feel an obligation to reciprocate, to restore a certain equality to the transaction and not to seem like a freeloader. In this case, the terms of trade are seldom explicitly negotiated in advance, which makes evaluating the degree of constraint and the degree of freedom young people experience during these transactions more difficult. In addition to this lack of clarity it can be added that, in most cases, the turn of events is not planned in advance and may take those involved by surprise; that games of seduction (especially in a festive setting) and the partners' interests/desires form a complex - and not always conscious - knot; and that there is always much which remains implicit, which can lead to misunderstandings. Nonetheless, there seems to be a clear difference between the genders, with girls being more likely to engage in undesired or partially desired transactions, out of feelings of indebtedness. However, not all girls seem to have the same resources to allow them when reconciling themselves with feeling indebted and imposing their own limits in the relationship.

*Girls seem more likely to engage in transactions which they do not desire when feeling indebted*



In addition, occasionally this logic of indebtedness can be mixed with a logic of recognition and/or a logic of domination, which may make it more difficult for them to express their desires.

### *Logic of Recognition*

The recognition of others, in particular of peers, is particularly important during adolescence, while young people are building their adult identity. Sentimental and loving relationships, especially with their peers, are highly significant because they allow young people to gain independence from their parents. This can explain why certain young people agree to reveal, and even to engage, their body in transactions of a sexual nature. In the experiences reported by young people in the study, there are two patterns of the search for recognition which can combine: the search for recognition from a partner within a close relationship on one hand and, on the other, the valorisation of intimate relationships as a resource which allow a gain in popularity within the group of peers.

*Being able to show that you have shared intimate experiences with friends or lovers makes it possible to gain social prestige within the peer group*

Certain young people, especially when very young, can end up agreeing to some practices, such as sending nude photos or videos, performing fellatio or penetrative sexual intercourse, not because they want to, but in order to obtain the recognition of their partner. However, in these experiences, young people are not so much exposing their body as presenting themselves, which goes beyond sexuality and falls into a broader pattern of forming their identity, allowing for both recognition and self-discovery. This tendency has always existed, but the digitalisation of social relations has made it more obvious and sometimes riskier, in the sense that the sanctions resulting from overly transgressive behaviour can quickly escalate. For this reason, when some young people have already committed a significant part of themselves to these relationships (sending photos, having feelings for the other, etc.), it can be more difficult for them to end things, especially as feelings of shame and guilt may have led them to keep these experiences secret. Still, in the majority of cases, young people's experiences are part of relationships where both partners feel recognised and respected. Consequently, these experiences can be seen as forming part of their sexual socialisation and of building their independence. For example, the reciprocal exchange of erotic photographs between partners can contribute to establishing confidence in their growing intimacy. Sometimes, these experiences can form part of a logic of initiation, or of experimentation, that is, to test performance or sexual orientation, or both.

Intimate experiences can also be used to gain in popularity among peers. Being able to show that you have shared intimate experiences with friends or lovers makes it possible to gain social prestige within the peer group. This is why certain young people may accept sexual practices without really wanting to (fellatio, early penetrative sexual intercourse, etc). Others show chosen elements of their private life in a strategic and selective way, in particular through social media, for example by showing photographs of themselves as a couple or by posting screen shots of exchanges with a friend or lover. In this sense, these practices should not so much be seen as renouncing intimacy, or lacking consciousness or modesty, but as seeking recognition. When the strategic sharing of intimate elements is handled in a

controlled manner and in a way which remains acceptable to the young people concerned, it can contribute positively to building intimacy between lovers and/or friends, to self-discovery and to the process of becoming an adult. For example, sending and being sent intimate photos of parts of the body or the way girls tell each other about their intimate experiences can be forms of sexual socialization between peers.

However, sometimes, the search for popularity can lead young people to “use” an intimate experience without the other's knowledge, such as when a girl having performed fellatio on a boy finds herself being filmed by his friends, who then share the video widely among their peers. This kind of example shows that even if the logic of recognition can be identified both among girls and boys, the stakes are not necessarily the same for both sexes, in particular because of the risk of “a bad reputation” which girls have to cope with more.

### C. Crossovers in negotiations between freedom and constraint: family, peers, gender and the digitalisation of social relations

The experiences reported by young people show that sexual transactions are not “a world apart”, but are becoming part of young people's social relations and of the dynamics that form part of their passage into adulthood. Furthermore, it seems that different subjective logics can occur in sexual transactions and that these logics can interrelate. No logic is in itself problematic. However, it is clear that involvement is situated on a continuum between freedom and constraint, sometimes mixed together in complex ways, even for young people themselves, who may have difficulty distinguishing their desires from social expectations and pressures to conform, which can weigh on them.

It can be observed however that certain young people feel they are able express their desires and limits, whereas others feel they have very little room for manoeuvre in negotiating the terms of the exchange in which they are involved, if at all. The context the transactions occur in certainly plays a part, as not all the situations reported are comparable. It can still be seen however that young people do not all have the same resources in affirming their rights, their needs and their desires in their relationships, or even in planning to be able to do so. It should be noted that individuals develop sexual behaviours through social lessons, which can be passed on explicitly as standards to conform to, but which are most often absorbed by “impregnation”: through stories, ways of relating to each other or social interaction. Without claiming to be exhaustive, our analysis allows the identification of a number of crossover issues which can affect the capacity of young people to position themselves independently and freely in their intimate relationships, shaped by their relationships with adults and in particular within the family, relationships with their peers and gender issues, as well as the digitalisation of social and intimate relationships.

### *Relationships with adults and the family*

The first site of socialisation is in the family or with the young person's key adults. Accounts given by the young people in the study show that the norms and prohibitions in relation to sexuality begin to make sense in relationships where the young person feels more or less recognised and can build a more or less positive rapport with him/herself. The recognition received during childhood is part of building identity and of the capacity of young people position themselves with regard to others, particularly in their close relationships. In adolescence, young people simultaneously express a need to be recognised by adults for their sexual independence and need for intimacy, but also need to be supported in making sense of the experiences they have had, to sort through all the information to which they have access and to become aware of their limits and the risks that they may encounter. The results show that there are still many taboos around sexuality which affect communication on this subject within families. However, what is important for the development of young people's sexuality is not so much privileged communication, which can take on many forms, but the fact that adults recognise the legitimacy of them living their sexuality in a way that is adapted to their age.

*What is important for the development of young people's sexuality is that adults recognise the legitimacy of them living out their sexuality*

However, in several of the young people's families - as in society in general - adults who want to avoid the detrimental effects of a moralizing speech instead choose a hygienic approach, focused on preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmissible diseases. This kind of discourse can tend to reduce sexuality to its technical and biological aspects, obscuring its emotional and identity-defining aspects, which become more important during sexual socialisation.

### *Gender issues and the spectre of the "whore"*

Our results confirm other research which shows that sexuality is a field in which gender differences take on a greater dimension. Even if the requirement for sexual protection has become generalised, the responsibility for risks related to sexual and reproductive health seems to fall largely to girls, right from their initiation to sexuality. Girls very quickly interiorise the requirement of being responsible for themselves, but also take on responsibility for the other, which could explain why the logic of indebtedness was chiefly identified among girls in the study. This requirement also explains why several girls, more so than the boys, imagine their sexual beginnings within a relationship and in love. On the boys' side, the sexual beginning is more framed as an individual learning journey of self-discovery. Indeed, in the comments of several of the young men studied, a certain detachment from the effects of their acts upon their partner can be observed, especially in heterosexual relationships.

If gender issues appear in such a marked way in young people's experiences, it is because what plays out in close relations and sexual behaviours has a much broader influence on identity building and rapports with others. As shown in other research, the spectre of the “whore”, omnipresent in the comments of the young people interviewed, functions principally to dissuade women from acting in a way different to that which is expected of them. Demonstrating how serious a relationship is or saying they are in love can, for example, be strategies used by girls to show that they are “serious”. Exchanges involving sexuality are often associated with prostitution and thus reveal in a particularly marked way how girls involved in sexual transactions risk being stigmatised as a “whore”, a label which sticks, especially if it publicised and becomes a “reputation”. It is interesting to note that the homosexual boys interviewed also refer to the stigma of the “whore” in relation to themselves. Being both homosexual and involved in sexual exchanges, they doubly transgress the heterosexual order: they represent both the figure of the “fag” (repellent figure of men's sexuality) and of the “whore” (repellent figure of women's sexuality). These double stigmas can make them isolated, and lead them to hide their relationships or develop them in semi-protected circles, such as networks of men having sex with men (for example, homosexual meeting sites on the internet).

*Exchanges involving sexuality are often associated with prostitution and thus reveal in a particularly marked way how girls involved in sexual transactions risk being stigmatised as a “whore”*

Adults, as parents or health professionals for example, can also contribute to reaffirming heteronormativity through their spontaneous reactions, without it necessarily being deliberate or conscious. The stories of the young people interviewed show that, in certain families, the reactions of parents who are anxious to preserve their children's reputation or that of the family contribute more to reinforcing gender stereotypes and the divisions between the sexes than to allowing the difficulties which their children are experiencing to emerge, in order to help them. In addition, certain studies have shown that the spontaneous reactions of health professionals, which may at first appear anodyne, can in fact be a vector for normativity.

This threat of stigmatisation explains why several young people who spoke up within the framework of this study had only told very few people about their experiences, if anybody at all. The weight of secrecy, often associated with shame and guilt, can be heavy to carry. Several young people raised the point that they still felt the consequences several years after the event, even when the incident may seem fairly innocuous, as in the case of a girl who agreed to let someone touch her knee in exchange for money. In this context, it appears paramount to ensure that young people have safe spaces in which to express themselves, where they can 'unload' when needed, in order to avoid the situation worsening or them suffering from the consequences. These findings also emphasise the importance of increasing awareness around the harmful effects of imposing heterosexual order and the need to create measures which attenuate both institutional incidents of such assumptions and seemingly anodyne daily interactions.

### *Peer group relations*

Evidence from our investigation shows significant verbal violence between young people, which seems aimed at pulling into line those who do not conform to standards of heteronormativity. It is more often peers rather than adults who employ insults such as “whore”, “slut” or “fag”, just as it is within the peer group that the “bad reputation” of the girls who have transgressed the norm is spread. This verbal violence can be seen as a strategy which young people use to manage their anxiety around sexuality and relationships with others, things which they are just discovering. However, our results join with those studies

*Evidence from the young people in the study shows that friendly and loving relationships have a protective effect, with alliances and a sense of mutual responsibility balancing out social pressures*

which have shown that often young people say more than they do: speaking out loud and strong enables them to avoid “doing”. As we have seen though, seeking recognition and popularity among peers can still sometimes lead to taking action. For girls especially, but to a certain extent also for homosexual boys, it is a question of finding a difficult balance between being able to demonstrate experience and sexual autonomy together with a capacity to form a close relationship, in order to gain prestige in the peer group, all without slipping into behaviours likely to be sanctioned by the label of “whore”. Furthermore, comments from the young people interviewed show that situations where drugs or

alcohol are present increase the chances of becoming involved in undesired relationships. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to only attribute negative influences to peer groups. Evidence provided by the young people in the study shows that friendly and loving relationships have a protective effect, with alliances and a sense of mutual responsibility balancing out social pressures. Even more fundamentally, relationships between peers are essential for socialisation and identity building when transitioning to adulthood, as long as they are imprinted with mutual respect and recognition.

### *Issues with the digitalisation of social relationships*

Social media form a new field of experimentation with regard to young people asserting their independence from their parents. The fact that adults did not grow up themselves with social media, and do not know it well or at all, can give them feeling that part of their children's activities escapes them. This kind of anxiety can give rise to all kinds of speeches on the harmful effects of social media on young people. However, a number of studies show that the way young people use new information and communication technologies falls primarily within practices of sociability. The results of our research show that the “digitalisation” of social relations can better be seen as a reconfiguration of social modes, moving from “direct” modes of sociability to “mediatised” ones. Mediatised modes of sociability are not better or worse than direct sociability, but they do carry risks which require a suitable accompanying framework. Even if there are several studies which indicate that young people seem to be adopting increasingly responsible behaviour online, the role of adults remains significant. On

one hand, young people need limits to be set for them and to be taught the rules of social media usage. On the other hand, by showing more interest in the nature of the exchanges their children are having than in the channels they go through, adults can show they are available for the young people in their lives when necessary, while still respecting their privacy.

Another fear adults have about the digitalisation of social relations and sexuality is the influence of pornography on young people's sexual practices. Simplified access to the internet has facilitated access to pornographic websites and the generalisation of mobile phone ownership at an increasingly early age has also facilitated the circulation of pornographic images. However, even if several respondents mentioned having had access to pornographic content, the influence on their behaviour seems to require much closer examination. Studies show that if the traditional sources of socialisation have lost some of their influence, the new sources of information and norms regarding sexuality are in fact varied and not limited to pornography.

Internet, the media, popular psychology, easier access to family planning, sex education at school, prevention campaigns, etc. all constitute sources for the sexual socialisation of young people. The current concern of young people is not so much how to find information, but how to sort through it. It is important that adults grasp this new reality and provide references for young people to help them to select and adapt relevant information for themselves, rather than giving in to anxiety.

*"Mediatized" modes of sociability are not better or worse than direct sociability, but they do carry risks which require a suitable accompanying framework*

#### D. The position of allied health professionals: between protection and support

An analysis of the comments from health professionals shows that **their professional position can be situated on a continuum between two seemingly opposed logics**: a logic which could be described as protective and a logic that could be termed supportive. Both these logics are present in all the comments provided, but health professionals tend to favour one pole or the other, depending on which makes more sense at a given time in their career, according to their values and representations, and also their mission, the institutional framework in which they work as well as the social-political context, among other things. These positions, which illustrate the subjective logics typified below to facilitate comprehension, in reality often manifest in a more nuanced and complex way and can change over time.



## Professional attitudes to young people involved in sexual transactions



The **logic of protection** is founded on a depiction of young people involved in sexual transactions as being the casualties of incomplete socialisation, which is considered not to have given them reference points needed to build “normal” sexuality, or perhaps given confused reference points, or even put forward models which encourage them to develop deviant sexual behaviours. This failed socialisation is explained by the fact that these young people have grown up in a society many consider hypersexualised; in addition to which, some also experience a de-structured family environment, where absence is a factor or where the parental role is not adequately filled. This type of discourse tends to emphasise risks, of which young people become the victims. Whether because of failed socialisation, their immaturity or their influenceable nature, or even of a combination of these factors, young people who engage in problematic relationships

*The logic of protection is founded on a depiction of young people involved in sexual transactions as being the casualties of incomplete socialisation*

are considered unable to give their consent or to respect the consent of others. In this pattern of logic, the role of health professionals is to protect young people from the risks that menace them. These young people (and also their families) are regarded as vulnerable, lacking in resources and experiencing difficulty in finding solutions by themselves and making reasonable choices. Therefore, it is the responsibility of allied health professionals to offer the necessary resources to young people and their families, to enable them to better manage the risks. Sexuality as a theme is associated with private responsibility: it falls largely to parents to take on the task of setting limits and providing guidance for young people on questions of sexuality. The intervention of health professionals is regarded as being complementary, perhaps even subsidiary, to that of the parents. In this sense, health professionals who follow this logic feel justified in intervening when necessary to protect young people from potentially damaging situations and when their families are not capable of protecting them.



This protective posture is founded on various legitimations, which can often combine or take on larger or smaller degrees of importance depending on the areas of intervention and the purposes of the institutions involved: a legitimation which could be termed "hygienic" (providing protection against the risks of disease), a "legal" legitimation (providing protection against the risks of abuse) and a "moral" legitimation (providing protection from bad influences and deviant behaviour). In this perspective, sexuality is to some extent understood as "a world apart", a field of specific intervention which requires specific, specialised expertise. Consequently, health professionals who do not consider themselves as specialists in this field do not always feel qualified to intervene. Citing arguments such as neutrality or the importance of not confusing roles, they express the feeling that they are not best placed to tackle these questions and that there is a need to delegate treatment to specialist professionals.

The **logic of support** considers sexuality as a theme with its own issues and problematics, as a responsibility which is shared between public and private spheres. Even if the health professionals who subscribe to this logic consider that young people's privacy should be respected, it is completely legitimate, in their eyes, to raise such questions when working directly with them. This logic is founded on a representation of young people who are involved in transactions as participants equipped with resources and with a certain amount of room for manoeuvre, even if the situations they are in may appear shocking to adult eyes or asymmetrical in terms of the balance of power. Their involvement in sexual transactions is not seen as problematic in itself: even if they may sometimes cause adults some incomprehension, a number of these experiences are regarded as constructive for the young people in question (in terms of experimentation, self-assertion or the quest for an identity). However, several of these situations remain ambiguous in the eyes of these health professionals, who swing between a tendency to downplay behaviours seen as part of "youth culture", which adults don't understand, and the feeling that some of these situations could nonetheless hold risks and cause suffering for young people.

In this context, the role of the allied health professional is to offer a space for listening, in which young people can find solutions by themselves, to guide discussion and to answer questions of an informative nature while avoiding taking decisions for them, by squarely placing the emphasis on young people's freedom and the relativity of value systems. The relationship with young people and the creation of a trusting relationship is the focus of the intervention and takes first place, before procedures and regulations. The term "benevolence" often recurs, generally associated with "non-judgemental", in an attitude opposite to a moralising position considered as potentially inhibiting. However, such a position can meet with resistance from hierarchical structures or from professionals who prefer a logic of "protection" of young people; as they may be seen as intrusive on subjects considered to be a private responsibility; or even as not giving sufficient or adequately timed

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protection to young people, perhaps even as encouraging behaviours considered deviant. One difficulty which appeared in the interviews is the risk of confusion between the “non-judgement” of young people and the “non-judgement” of situations, which may lead to health professionals doubting their legitimacy in guiding young people or offering them assistance, even if the young people themselves have asked for it, more or less directly. By placing too great an emphasis on young people's resources, this logic can sometimes cause adults to forget that young people are still in the process of building their identity and that they sometimes need adults to play the part of “ferryman”, accompanying them as they cross into adulthood.

## CONCLUSION

The results of our research clearly contradict the thesis that sexuality is becoming trivialised among young people, or that there is a “hyper-sexualisation” of their behaviours particularly linked to the “tyranny of porn”. While the representations that the majority have of sexual transactions are rather negative, only a minority had actually experienced them. For the majority of those who had had experiences like this, they did not seem to be problematic and even included constructive elements, although perhaps in an ambiguous, paradoxical and/or precarious way. However, there are certain situations that prove to be truly problematic and require appropriate support. It should be noted that gender norms, as well as the significant social stigma this type of practice carries and the omnipresent “spectre of the whore” may restrict young people from speaking out about it or seeking the assistance and support which they may need.

Our analysis shows that it would be misleading to think that some practices or situations are dangerous in themselves. It thus appears fundamental to identify the subjective logics at work in order to build, with young people's participation, ways of supporting them which make sense for them and meet their needs. Given the alarmism of certain discourses on young people's sexuality, it can be easy to forget the issues of recognition and identity-building which underlie the sexual behaviours of young people.

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