

The Naked Truth: Meta's Censorship of Sexual Health Information and Advocating to Big Tech for Change

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Data collection was done in collaboration with six the Love Matters branded members of the RNW Media Network; Amour Afrique Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo), Love Matters Arabic (Egypt), Love Matters India, Love Matters Kenya, Hablemos de Sexo y Amor (Mexico), and Love Matters Naija (Nigeria).

16th November 2022

INTRODUCTION

Young people's lives are increasingly influenced by the social media platforms that have become their main channel to access information, express themselves, organise and mobilise. In 2020, 71 per cent of the world's youth (aged between 15 and 24 years) were using the Internet, compared with 57 per cent of the other age groups, highlighting how digital technologies play a central role in young people's access to information.¹

An UNESCO study on how young people learn about their bodies, sex and relationships found that 29 percent of young people identify digital spaces as their main source of information on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in comparison to 25% in schools. Moreover, a majority of young people access such content on social media.²

Social media platforms, such as Meta's Facebook³, play an ever-increasing role in the way citizens around the world access media content and are able to access diverse sources of information. Changing Facebook policies have significantly affected the ways in which organisations can reach their audience and the type of content they can offer. As Facebook has evolved into more of a paid marketing platform than an organic one, the newsfeed is an ever more competitive space that for-profit and non-profit organisations have to navigate in order to reach their audience.

The rise of online polarisation, hate speech and misinformation along with censorship have led to a lack of trustworthy sources of information and safe online spaces in which to exchange diverse viewpoints constructively. Content moderation policies often run the risk of censoring content and limiting the right to access information especially when it comes to topics such as SRHR. Within this context, independent media and media development organisations play a crucial role in ensuring young people have access to diverse, reliable and quality content.

RNW Media Network

¹ <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2021/11/15/youth-internet-use/>

² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373884>

³ Meta is the parent company of the social media channel, Facebook and this paper focuses only on this specific channel.

RNW Media is an international digital media organisation working for social change, that co-creates digital media solutions with changemakers to contribute to a world in which young people in all their diversity can confidently claim their rights, and drive social change. The RNW Media Network is a network of media-makers and media collectives who build, nurture and grow digital spaces for young people around a range of human rights issues. Currently, the RNW Media Network has 17 members hosting 19 digital communities in 15 countries⁴.

For the RNW Media Network, despite using an omnichannel strategy that includes multiple social media channels (including Instagram, WhatsApp and most recently TikTok), Facebook remains the most significant social media channel to reach young people around the world with diverse, reliable and quality content on issues that matter to them. To reach the widest cohort of young people via Facebook, our members have to rely increasingly on paid advertisements. Facebook's content moderation policies, which are based on their Community Standards, Terms of Service as well as Advertisement Policies, have led to the disapproval of certain advertisements focused on informing and educating young people about issues that matter to them.

Content moderation⁵ has become a much-debated issue in the context of freedom of expression and access to information. It has an impact on both user-generated content and on the advertisements of media organisations and independent media active on Facebook. Content moderation policies can violate freedom of expression and information.⁶ According to Ranking Digital Rights 2020, Facebook provided some information about the content moderation of advertisements, but it is still impossible to evaluate Facebook's process for rejecting specific ads.⁷ Moreover, content moderation seemingly has a disproportionate effect on silencing the voices of already marginalised groups, including women.⁸

1. METHODS :

Data on ads rejections 2015-2022 from Love Matters Digital Communities on Facebook

Within the RNW Media Network seven organisations run Love Matters branded digital communities in China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, India, Kenya, Mexico, and Nigeria. Collectively to date, the Love Matters members have an audience in excess of 10million young people. The network members independently implement the unique Love Matters model to support safe, healthy, pleasurable sex, love and relationships for young people. Although the different organisations adapt their content and ads to the local context, the topics addressed are relatively consistent and are all focused on SRHR. This research and data collection was undertaken in two phases (initially in August 2020 and updated in October 2022) to gather insights into how Facebook's ads rejections affect young people's access to information about their SRHR across the different country level platforms.

⁴ October, 2022

⁵ Content moderation is the practice through which social media platforms make decisions about whether to host certain content (<https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/05/AccessNow-Preliminary-Recommendations-On-Content-Moderation-and-Facebooks-Planned-Oversight-Board.pdf>).

⁶ <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/its-not-just-content-its-business-model/>

⁷ <https://rankingdigitalrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/pilot-report-2020.pdf>

⁸ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/096/72/PDF/G1809672.pdf?OpenElement>

The research team employed a mixed method approach to data collection. The quantitative data on ad rejections was harvested and analysed using Meta Business Suite and Tableau from six of the seven Love Matters digital pages between the period of January 2015 to October 2022.

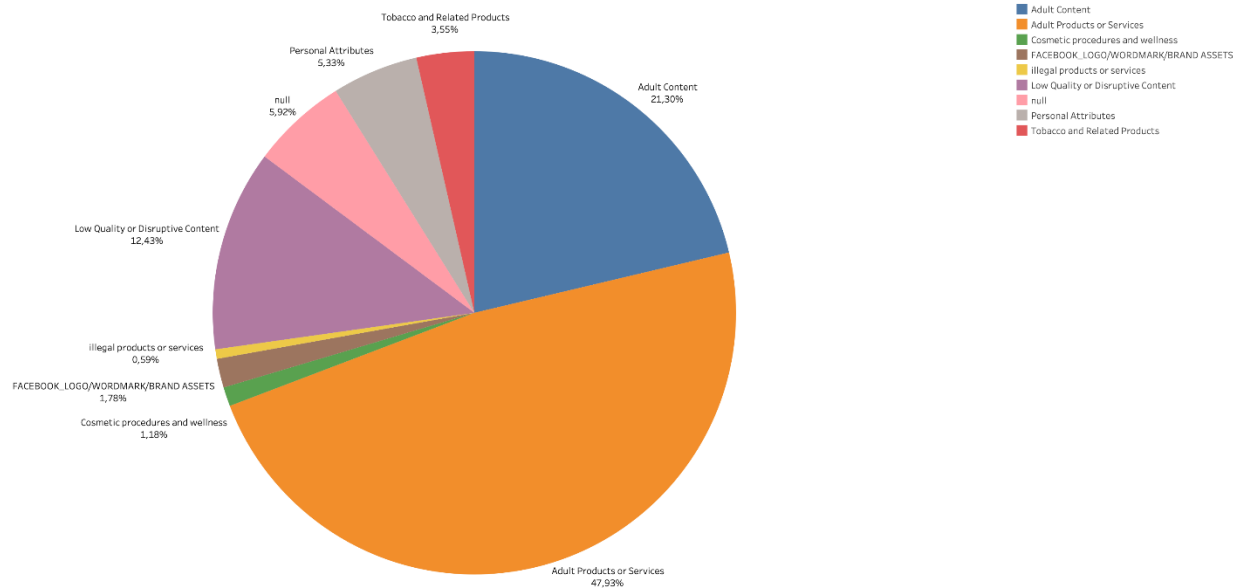
The qualitative data collection was collected via two rounds of semi structured interviews with online social media editors from the six participating Love Matters digital communities. The first round of interviews were held in August 2020 and the second in September 2022. The purpose of the interviews was to triangulate qualitative and quantitative data, and complement the quantitative information with more contextualized and in-depth insights. Interviews were conducted online, via Microsoft Teams platform and lasted around 1 hour. The interviews were recorded upon the consent of the participants, and later on, transcribed. At the analysis stage, the qualitative thematic analysis approach was employed and core themes were identified.

2. RESULTS

From 2015 until October 2022, a total of 2,131 ads across the Love Matter platforms were rejected. This equates to almost one third of all ads published being rejected for a variety of reasons. Facebook’s categorisation naming system produces in one or two words the ‘reason’ for ad rejection. As shown in graph 1; of all rejected ads between 2021 and 2022, 47.93% are categorised as ‘adult products and services’, 21.3% ‘adult content’ and 12.43% as ‘disruptive / low quality content’.

Graph 1: To show the breakdown of the reasons stated by Facebook for ad rejection in 2021-2022.

2022 error type



Error Type and % of Total Count of full data-adjust. Color shows details about Error Type. The marks are labeled by Error Type and % of Total Count of full data-adjust. The data is filtered on Created Year, which keeps 2021 and 2022.

When looking at Facebook’s categorisation of ads, a major issue seems to be that the different ‘sexual content’ categories conflate content such as pornography and explicit nudity with SRHR content that

⁹ Love Matters China could not be included in this study due to censorship restrictions on Facebook. However, Love Matters China is also affected by censorship on the Chinese social media platform WeChat.

has an educational or informative purpose. In general, mis-categorisation is a significant issue. Below examples (figure 2 and 3) are clearly not pornographic nor are they sex publications. Similarly, the examples in figure 4 and 5 are both classified as adult content, while the extent to which sexuality is addressed differs greatly. The example from Love Matters Arabic (figure 4) definitely does not illustrate adult content. These examples also suggest that Facebook is not applying their standards consistently across the different Love Matters platforms.

Love Matters India
Sponsored · ⚙️

Sexual harassment has become part of daily conversations following the media coverage of a few high profile cases. How much does it affect women's daily lives?

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK: WOMEN SPEAK OUT

WWW.LOVEMATTERS.IN

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK: WOMEN SPEAK OUT

Learn More

Like Comment Share

Figure 2: Facebook classified this ad as “sex publications”.

Hablemos de Sexo y Amor
Sponsored · ⚙️

¿Sabes en qué consiste la pastilla de emergencia y cuáles son sus efectos secundarios?
Pues, mira:
See Translation

Algunos efectos secundarios de la anticoncepción de emergencia

Learn More

110 37 shares

Figure 3: The post says “Do you know about emergency contraceptive pills and their side effects?” Facebook classified this add as “porn”.





Figure 4: The post says: #Discussion question How does the spread of the Coronavirus affect your sexual and emotional life? Facebook classified this ad as “adult content”.




Figure 5: The post mentions “sex positions” Facebook classified this add as “adult content”.

Although Facebook’s Advertising Policy seems to suggest that every advertisement is reviewed individually, our data suggests otherwise. Regularly when one advert is flagged, other ads will be turned down automatically for the same reason, without being reviewed. This is likely due to Facebook’s ad-serving algorithm, which is not trained to identify and navigate the nuances of sexuality education content and has been shown to be discriminatory based on gender and race¹⁰, as the machine-learning model is misaligned with the need to avoid discrimination. The example below shows four different ads addressing varying topics which were turned down on the same day, with the classification: “Services Escort”.


¹⁰ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/04/05/1175/facebook-algorithm-discriminates-ai-bias/>




 **Love Matters Kenya**  Sponsored · ❄️ ...



Lungula is all you think about ukiwa young. What happens, then, after an accident that changes your life forever? [...see more](#)




LOVEMATTERSAFRICA.COM
Rediscovering Intimacy after disability
Doing 'it' is all you think about when you're hormo...

 95 4 comments



 Like  Comment  Share




 **Love Matters Kenya**  Sponsored · ❄️ ...



The two of you flirted. You started dating. And then things got more serious: you agreed to be in a relationship. What does this mean for the two of you?
#Relationships




LOVEMATTERSAFRICA.COM
Being in a relationship
The two of you flirted. You started dating. And the...

  153 19 comments 1 share



 Like  Comment  Share




 **Love Matters Kenya**  Sponsored · ❄️ ...



In this day and age, you'd think that everyone knows what consent is, but from the multiple assault cases reported daily, that's definitely not the case.
#MakingLove




LOVEMATTERSAFRICA.COM
Consent: all the facts
In this day and age, you'd think that everyone kno...

  90 6 comments 2 shares



 Like  Comment  Share

 **Love Matters Kenya**  Sponsored · ❄️ ...

Three words that paralyze, solidify or make people flee relationships. But why does it have to be so awkward to say [...see more](#)



LOVEMATTERSAFRICA.COM
When should you say 'I love you'?
Three words that paralyze, solidify or make people...

  71 8 comments




 Like  Comment  Share

Figure 1: 4 different ads flagged as “Services Escort” on the same day. Facebook error message says, “we don’t allow ads that promote escort services”.

3. DISCUSSION

To share fact based information on SRHR, it is essential to ensure that social media platforms are a safe space for freedom of expression. This is especially relevant in light of the major role digital spaces play in sexuality education among young people.¹¹ Yet the data above show that SRHR content in

¹¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000264649>

digital spaces is consistently restricted by commercial gatekeepers such as Facebook¹² Below the myriad of consequences and challenges this censorship leads to are discussed in detail.

Blocking ad accounts

Love Matters platforms encounter many challenges when publishing their SRHR-related content and promoting it through ads. On several occasions, the ad accounts of some Love Matters platforms have been blocked for months. Love Matter Kenya's ads account, for example, was blocked from August 2019 to March 2020. The ban was only lifted after written appeals were made to Facebook in December 2019 and January 2020. During this period, Love Matters Kenya had to rely on the organic reach of their Facebook page in order to be able to inform young people on their SRHR. Amour Afrique Congo (AAC) also recently experienced tremendous trouble when their account was disabled earlier in 2022 and they were forced to open a new ad account which meant creating a new professional email address and user profile in order to be able to continue advertising on Facebook.

The fear of multiple rejected ads leading to accounts being disabled is a constant and very real worry for the Love Matters members that use Facebook as their main channel to communicate sexuality education information.

Self-censorship

Several of the Love Matters platforms' social media editors perceive that many of the topics they work on cannot be addressed in Facebook advertisements. According to Love Matters Kenya's social media editor this is up to 80% percent of the content, especially when it comes to topics such as sex, sexuality and and LGBTQ+-related content. The Love Matters Arabic social media editor says. "If Facebook did not have these restrictions, I would be able to reach more people and make more impact.[...] In order to create change, I need to talk to people who are not aware of these topics and who are not on the same page as me."

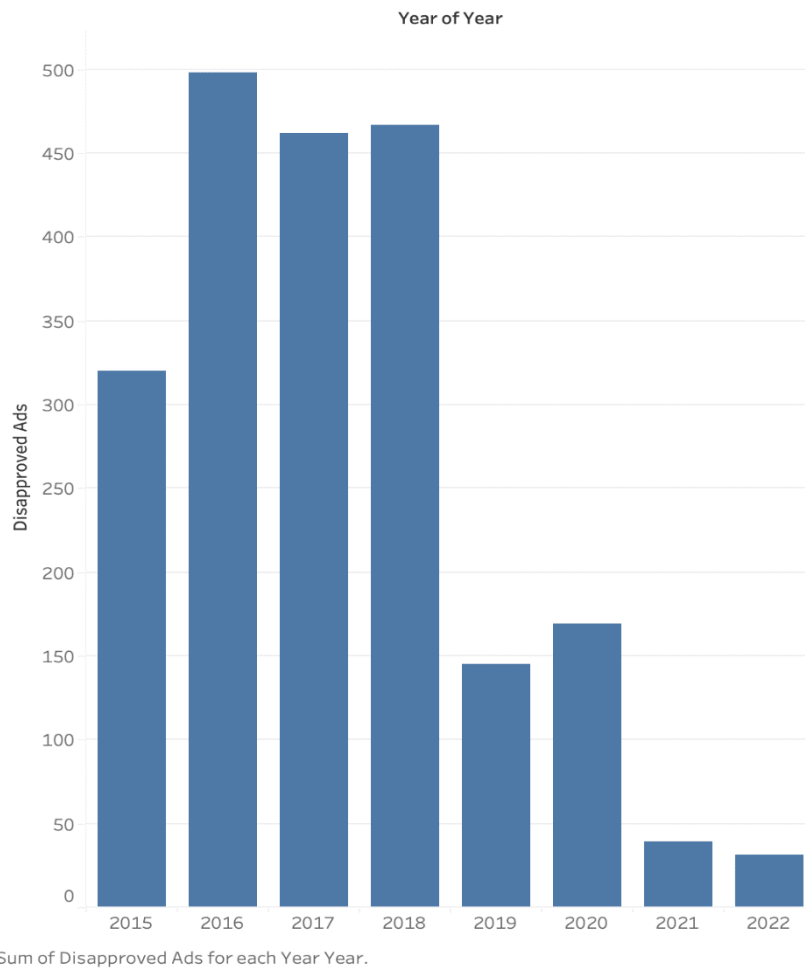
Adverts are essential to increase content visibility, reach beyond the echo chamber¹³, discuss more progressive, comprehensive SRHR topics and ignite wide spread social change through the exposure to new ideas and diverse viewpoints. Across all Love Matters pages there has been a substantial decrease in the ads being rejected in the last two years (See graph 1 below) but this is largely due to the fact that the Love Matters Facebook pages are relying less on advertisements and when they do, self-censoring the content to avoid rejection.

Graph 2: shows the total rejected ads from 2015 to October 2022

¹² Oosterhoff et al. 2017 as cited in <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000264649>

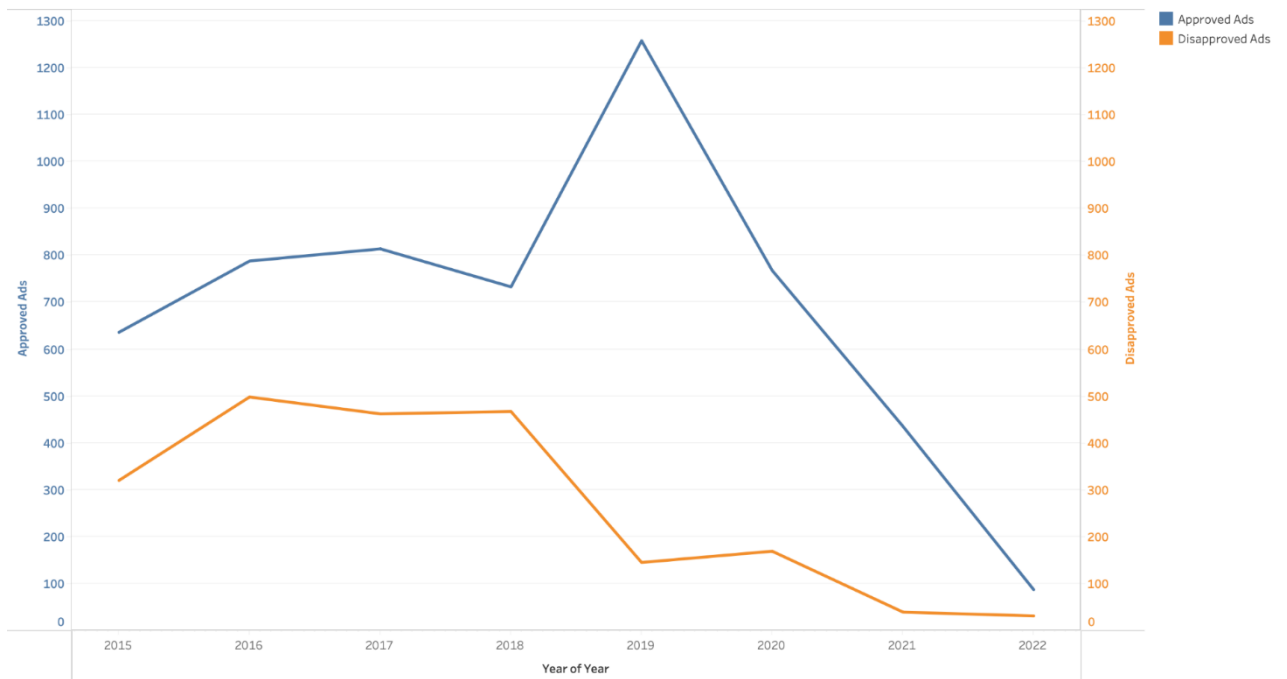
¹³ <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/digital-media-literacy/what-is-an-echo-chamber/1/>

Total rejected ads



Graph 3: shows the ratio between approved and rejected ads from 2015 to October 2022

approved Vs rejected_total



The trends of Approved Ads and Disapproved Ads for Year Year. Color shows details about Approved Ads and Disapproved Ads.

Several studies suggest that Facebook regulations on sexual and adult content disproportionately affect women and result in censorship of marginalised populations.¹⁴ This was echoed in the finding that a direct consequence of the consistent rejections has meant that the editors are often forced to avoid using advertising to discuss more progressive topics such as abortion or reach out to marginalised communities eg LGBTQ+ youth as these topics are more likely to get censored. Digital platforms can play an important role in reaching those who either have no access to other forms of information and education, such as out-of-school youth, or those whose needs are not met by the information and education on offer, which is still often the case for LGBTQ+ youth especially in relation to their health.¹⁵

Challenges: No talk about pleasure

Love Matters uses the *pleasure approach* to share information on love, sex and relationships. The pleasure approach recognises that young people are lived sexual beings that want to experience love, sex and relationships that are both enjoyable and safe. Sexuality education information using the pleasure approach covers the full scope of sexual experience and pleasure, and not exclusively topics related to the reduction of sexual health risks. By doing so, pleasure is recognised as a key factor of human sexuality as well as that all people are sexual beings with sexual rights, regardless of their age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, HIV status or (dis)ability.

WHO and the Pleasure Project jointly published in February 2022 a systematic review and meta-analysis that demonstrated how interventions that incorporate sexual pleasure could have better sexual health outcomes than those that do not. WHO's Dr. Lianne Gonsalves, co-author of the research, published in PLOS One journal, said: *'programmes which better reflect the reasons people have sex — including for pleasure — see better health outcomes. The hope is that these results galvanize the sexual and reproductive health and rights community to promote services that educate and equip users to engage in sex that is safe, consensual, and pleasurable.'*¹⁶

However Meta, even in the most recent ad policy update¹⁷ explicitly bans any 'ads promoting sexual and reproductive health products or services, such as contraception and family planning, must be targeted to people aged 18 or older and must not focus on sexual pleasure'¹⁸. The explicit exclusion of sexual pleasure in relation to sexual health reinforces existing inequalities in power, privilege and opportunities caused by social injustice, also cause inequalities in opportunities for sexual decision-making, expression and pleasure. This exclusion directly *'impedes adolescents' and young people's ability to be empowered, make their own decisions about their sexuality and claim their rights.'*¹⁹

¹⁴ <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2017/12/adult-content-policies-textbook-private-censorship-fail>;
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373885>

¹⁵ RNW Media's Digital rights Agenda

¹⁶ <https://www.who.int/news/item/11-02-2022-redefining-sexual-health-for-benefits-throughout-life>

¹⁷ <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/ad-standards/content-specific-restrictions/adult-products-or-services/>

¹⁸ <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/ad-standards/content-specific-restrictions/adult-products-or-services/>

¹⁹ <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-022-13919-x>

This was a point of frustration for all the Love Matters editors, the social media editor from Love Matters Arabic mentioned; being able to ‘... so I avoid doing ads on pleasure as they just don’t get published and I’m afraid of getting the account banned or blocked or anything like this, so you have to tone down how you speak. You have to tone down the pictures. So there is sort of like intentional toning down of everything, just to make it pass.’”

Circumnavigation tactics

Self-censorship is not the only mitigation tactic, the editors of the Love Matters platforms are constantly adapting to find creative ways around potential disapproval of their ads and continue to inform young people on their SRHR. To be able to continue to publish ads the social media editors avoid certain topics or images and apply a range of mitigation strategies: “sometimes, we play with words. Instead of saying sexual relationship we would for example, say marital or intimate relationship. I use different words that will not be recognised by the algorithm,” Love Matters Arabic’s social media editor says. Love Matters Kenya’s editors also play with words and use Swahili or Sheng (Swahili-English slang) to avoid automated recognition of certain terms by Facebook. Similarly, Love Matters Naija often experiment using Pidgin English to avoid detection. Love Matters Arabic is not able to employ such a strategy as their community depends on them using the most accessible form of Arabic to ensure the content is inclusive beyond Egyptian borders to the wider MENA region, but the editor also adhere to ‘using spaces between words, between letters, or use another signs instead of words (in order to) not to get blocked...’.

Another tactic is to play with the images used in the ads; pictures depicting human bodies were changed into pictures of fruit and vegetables as representation of the human genitals (e.g., banana as a penis, peaches or grapefruits as vulvas etc.). Such tactics, while useful to avoid censorship can create confusion and obscure useful information that could directly impact young people’s SRHR.



In addition, as outlined by Love Matters Naija, it seems the algorithm has caught on to this approach. Instead, the team play trial error using a/b testing as the Digital Engagement Lead shared; ‘now we always create two sets of ads, what we call the risky, and the basic. This means the team launch a pioneer version of ads first while preparing another version in case of censorship.’ In the example shared, initially the team used a cut-open grapefruit to represent the female vulva; this was censored, so the less risky back-up ad was used, which included an image of a rose instead (image 9).

Despite such strategies, the reoccurrence of content takedown and ad disapprovals severely limits the opportunities to promote SRHR-related content for many organisations working in SRHR in the digital space. This is a widespread, global issue and many other SRHR organisations have experienced similar issues²⁰, directly impacting young people’s ability to find and source comprehensive sexuality education online.

²⁰ <https://www.devex.com/news/how-social-media-censorship-is-impacting-sexual-health-101949>

Impact on content creators themselves:

Frequent rejection of ad content can have negative impact on the mental health of content creators, firstly because they are under the stressful impression that they cannot do their jobs as they would like; moreover, in some cases they have to do double work either to create alternative versions of ads, or following the endless appeal process with Facebook mostly without desired result.

This was cited by all the interviewees and the online editor at Amour Afrique Congo mentioned that constantly navigating possible censorship when advertising SRHR content means *'more work and more stress.'* The editor of LM Arabic explained that *'less ads, means less exposure, less reach, less engagement, So we actually put extra efforts in ensuring the organic content extremely visually attractive to attract young people without relying on paid ads. So you put in extra pressure, extra work on trying to push your content without going using ads.'*

Impact on young people

"Ad disapprovals really limit the ability of women to get information. For some women, social media is the only channel to access information. They would go to a cybercafé just to look at Facebook, because they don't have phones," according to Love Matters Kenya's social media editor.

In terms of regional differences, cultural norms and Facebook's understanding of the region appears to impact the ways in which women's health content is disapproved or taken down. It seems that ads reported on by users based on existing cultural norms are subsequently rejected more often. "In the Middle East, the topics we talk about on our platform may be considered sensitive. People are very resistant to talking about sex and women's rights. Facebook is a business, and it follows the trends and shows what people want to see on their platform," adds Love Matters Arabic's social media editor.

The Head of Love Matters India also confirms the understanding that "Facebook's algorithms on content moderation are influenced by their understanding of the region. Obviously, if the majority of Facebook users in India are men, Facebook uses algorithms that attend to the needs of men."

If young people don't find the information that they want, need and the right to access then they will turn elsewhere and run the risk the encountering mis – dis – and mal- information on topics that could severely impact their health and lives.

For instance, as the editor from Amour Afrique Congo pointed out that on less censored social media platforms such as Tik Tok, the SRHR related content might not be of high quality or even reliable. However, with the limited capacity of reaching audience, especially young people on Facebook, more and more young people will eventually turn to platforms like Tik Tok for guidance and if that information is not evidence based then it could have tremendously harmful effects on their physical health and mental health. Medical experts have warned that women may not be getting enough—or correct— information via TikTok. For example, videos related to the term "rhythm method" on TikTok have had more than 905 million views, many of which contained out dated or misinformation on fertility awareness methods.²¹

This was similarly echoed by the Editor from Love Matters Kenya *"So for us, our target audience is majorly young people, so by suppressing or censoring ads ... they're denying the young people the right to access SRHR information and according to the Kenyan constitution, the right of information is a*

²¹ <https://fortune.com/well/2022/09/03/tiktok-birth-control-advice-videos-rhythm-method-rack-up-millions-of-views-experts-warn-not-to-trust-them/>

human right. So they are denying these young people lifesaving information which can help them make informed decision and choices in their day-to-day lives.”

Lack of transparency and possibility to appeal of Facebook’s content moderation policy

Are there any clear conclusions we can draw from these insights - on how and when advertisements get disapproved based on Facebook’s policies? Not really – but that is partly the issue. There is a lack of clarity and transparency around these content moderation policies.

First of all, there is a lack of clarity around the content moderation policies, including the application of the Community Guidelines, Terms of Service and Advertising Policy. “If you read community guidelines of any social network, you can find them very vague and vast. What is nudity, in their opinion, for example? Is it a completely nude person or it is a person in a swimming suit? It is very generic and unspecific, so it is hard to know what Facebook means,” Love Matters Arabic’s social media editor says. Facebook should ensure their policies are sufficiently clear and in line with international human rights standards.

It is clear from this body of evidence that Meta is engaging in ‘economically motivated content control and restriction of freedom of expression – in corporate censorship’²² on Facebook.

Policies are intentionally vague and therefore are very difficult to follow in order to avoid ad rejection and censorship. The language used in Facebooks advertising and content moderation policies is semantically or epistemically unclear, meaning that even when explicitly complied to the inherent vagueness allows Facebook to perform arbitrary censorship with limited justification.

There is a need for more transparency around Facebook’s content moderation policies regarding the application of their Advertising Policy. There is a need for transparency on why advertisements are rejected and the role certain tools, such as user reporting, algorithms, and human content moderation play in this process. Currently, it seems that existing biases around sexuality in general and women’s health in particular, play a role in the ad approval process, whether automated or by human review. This can possibly further reinforce inherent biases. Transparent reporting on these decision-making processes and detailed information on content removals, ads rejections and appeals received would create more insight around this.

Responsive appeals process:

Finally, the appeals process for Facebook’s advertisements is complicated and time-consuming. According to the RDR Index 2019, Facebook had one of the lowest scores of any tech company in the Index for its appeals mechanisms.²³ In 2018, Facebook kickstarted a new process for remedying wrongful takedowns,²⁴ but it is unclear “if the scope of this appeals mechanism includes any type of violation to its Community Guidelines”.²⁵ “The appeal process is not very straightforward. Every time our content is taken down, I send a direct email to our Facebook contact person, that’s how we manage to get attention for the problem and put in requests to resolve the issue,” says the Head of

²² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448221077354>

²³ <https://rankingdigitalrights.org/index2019/companies/facebook/index/>

²⁴ <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/04/comprehensive-community-standards/>

²⁵ <https://rankingdigitalrights.org/index2019/companies/facebook/index/>

Love Matters India. Thus, there is a need for a clear and transparent appeals mechanism that provides a timely response.

However not all editors have contacts at Facebook to reach out and therefore this cannot be seen as the only way to get around the problems. The experience of the Love Matters has shown that attempts to appeal decisions are time consuming and complicated and Facebook often fails to respond. For most editors it is difficult to reach Facebook, and according to Amour Afrique Congo Editor, more than 60% (of the time), it's not useful to appeal and Love Matters Naija have stopped appealing entirely due to lack of response. Both editors have tried calling to follow up on the online appeal process but mentioned often waiting in queue for hours to speak to an actual human, which is time-consuming and frustrating.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, as SRHR practitioners it is crucial to look at possible solutions to the challenges this form censorship brings, one is that there should be more information on how advertising standards are applied in practice. Especially with regard to SRHR content, it should be clear how Meta/Facebook distinguishes between 'harmful sexual content' and content with an educational purpose. A clear recommendation to Meta is to co-create community guidelines with the community themselves by gathering input from stakeholders from across different sectors and contexts.

Another idea proposed by the Head of Love Matters India is to create a whitelist of SRHR organisations so there can be a process for SRHR organisations to follow in order to be externally validated as an organisation providing evidence based SRHR content that does not need to be censored. This could be fairly simple to implement and would mean that the entire algorithm wouldn't need to be adapted for all users. If protecting young people is the main reason for the censorship as stated in the ad policy, perhaps another suitable solution could be to create a separate, age-appropriate platform where censorship would function as a more positive implementation.²⁶

Global gender justice issue:

This issue also goes beyond SRHR organisations and the non-profit sector; RNW Media's collaborator, the Center for Intimacy Justice (CIJ) studied 60 businesses that focus women's SRH and people of diverse genders that had attempted to advertise on Facebook/Meta. Of the 60 businesses, 100% experienced Meta rejecting an ad and 50% had had their entire ad accounts suspended²⁷. According to CIJ; 'blocking ads for sexual health and wellness for people based on gender holds back female sexual health and equality -- whereas allowing them could help countless people and their partners access tools and information improving their lives'²⁸

In January 2022, the CIJ published this evidence in an investigative report with evidence from 60 health businesses and nonprofits (including RNW Media and partners) showing sweeping ad rejections. US government officials took action, using this evidence.

²⁶ <https://www.scidev.net/global/opinions/online-censors-sex-education-porn/>

²⁷ <https://docsend.com/view/phfstt65wzta5nw7>

²⁸ <https://www.intimacyjustice.org/ad-equality>

At the time of writing, Meta has rewritten its global ads policy for Facebook, allowing sexual health, wellness and reproductive ads. Meta states that “ads that promote sexual health, wellness and reproductive products and services” are allowed, and cites several new examples e.g. menopause, pain relief during sex, sex education etc).²⁹ However a key question is whether Meta enforces this policy in its algorithms.

To follow up on this, CIJ will survey businesses and nonprofits including RNW Media to determine if Meta’s algorithmic processes, appeals practices and moderator training are consistent with the new policy, or if further action is needed.

Therefore to conclude, it is essential to acknowledge that a balance needs to be struck between public safety and freedom of expression, measures taken by tech companies such as Facebook risk excessive censorship of content and thus reduce young people’s access to diverse viewpoints and nuanced educational information, especially in relation to their SRHR.

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, reaffirms the mutually reinforcing nature of gender equality and the right to freedom of opinion and expression and underlines the vital importance of their inclusive realization for the achievement of peace, democracy and sustainable development. ‘There can be no trade-off between women’s right to be free from violence and the right to freedom of opinion and expression.’³⁰ To move forward there is the imperative need to create an enabling environment and safe digital spaces for women’s equal enjoyment of freedom of opinion and expression.

Jointly with the RNW Media network, we will strive to ensure that technology enriches the lives of individuals and communities as a whole, including the most disadvantaged, to ensure no one is left behind. We will continue to advocate for accountability, transparency and the adherence to human rights standards in the use of technology and content moderation, including addressing, together with tech companies, the embedded biases in machine learning and AI, to ensure that young people have the right to freedom of expression and can access pluralistic, evidence-based information. The fact that tech corporations can control so much of the information ecosystem is ominous for young people's digital rights, access to information and services, as well as the health of democracy. Therefore, RNW Media echoes the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur as well as various international organisations and NGOs, and calls upon social media platforms to ensure their policies are human rights based, clear and transparent and that they have an effective appeal system in place.³¹

²⁹ <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/ad-standards/content-specific-restrictions/adult-products-or-services/>

³⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/gender-equality-freedom-expression-remains-distant-goal-un-expert>

³¹ HRC, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression report A/HRC/17/27, 2011; <https://santaclaraprinciples.org/>.

