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GIRLS' PEER SEX COUNSELING IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

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Introduction and Objective: Online discussion forums offer peer education/counseling for a broad spectrum of health related topics including sexual health. One example is the website “maedchen.de” (maintained by the commercial girls' print magazine “Mädchen”) that provides home for Germany's most frequented online discussion forums for girls and young women (2.84 Mio website visits per month; about 5,000 health-related discussions with more than 35,000 postings from 2012 to 2014 alone). Which sexual health related problems do girls present in these online discussions? How are these problems discussed among girls? Do these sexual health related online discussions sexually empower girls?

Methods: A random sample of N = 600 health-related discussion threads (containing 6,020 postings) was drawn from the maedchen.de forums “health” and “frustration” (2012–2014). The online discussions were subjected to quantitative content analysis. The codebook for the content analysis was developed both deductively from the literature

and inductively from the material. A pretest (n = 60) revealed high inter-coder-reliability of all 43 categories (mean Cohen's kappa coefficient = .78; mean intra-class correlation = .89).

Results: Of the 600 health-related discussion threads in the sample, 10% addressed sexual health issues like unplanned pregnancy, sexual violence, sexual double standard, HPV vaccination, menstruation, or first gynecological exam. Most topics were related to insecurities, distress, and fear. Threads gathered more answers and views if the initial poster kept being involved in the discussion. In most of the threads girls provided each other informational (95%) and/or emotional (65%) support. Initial posters were very seldom confronted with online hate but usually received empathetic answers – indicating empowering effects.

Conclusions: Girls and young women use online discussion forums to openly discuss their sexual health related questions and problems. While indicators of sexual empowerment exist, many research questions remain open (e.g. accuracy of shared information; predictors of active online forum participation).

Keywords: peer sex counseling, girls' sexual health, sexual empowerment