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Young people's affective-sexual education: the gap between the 'affective' and the 'sexual' dimensions in formal and non-formal/informal educational settings

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted nature of affective-sexual education (ASE) among adolescents and young people, focusing on the interaction between formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings. It presents the interdisciplinary project TRANSGELIT, carried out in Barcelona (Spain), through a qualitative ethnographic methodology, involving participatory and media-related workshops and interviews with more than 200 young people. Findings indicate that formal education often inadequately addresses the emotional dimensions of sexuality, with non-formal and informal settings, especially peer groups and media, playing crucial roles in sexual and gender learning. The study advocates for the inclusion of the emotional aspects of sexuality in ASE, to go beyond the sanitary and scientific aspects of sexuality through experiential learning methods and trustful spaces, as well as for a comprehensive teacher training, and the integration of media literacy in the learning process, in order to address the diverse needs of young people.

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Introduction

Affective-sexual education (ASE) is one of the significant needs of adolescents and young people in today's modern society, which Bauman (2003) defined as 'liquid', referring to the lack of predictability and fixed social structures of current times, which did exist in the 'more solid' traditional modernity. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) understands ASE as *Comprehensive Sexuality Education* and defines it as 'a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2024). Similarly, the World Health Organisation (WHO), which also refers to it as *Comprehensive Sexuality Education* states that it involves equipping 'children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that can help them to protect their health, develop respectful social and sexual relationships, make responsible choices and understand and protect the rights of others' (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2023).

Various international bodies, such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the European Council, concur in emphasising the importance of promoting effective ASE, particularly in relation to gender equality. If this integration is to occur, educational institutions may be the most appropriate place to design a curriculum that incorporates the subject matter in a transversal and interdisciplinary way.

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In fact, governments have generally sought to integrate ASE within formal educational settings (UNESCO, 2024). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that ASE is not a unilateral endeavour but part of a broader process that requires collaborative efforts across various systems in which it operates, including family, educators, peer groups, schools, media, and others (Quiroz & Sepúlveda, 2016).

Therefore, it is not only the agents (adolescents and young people) and educators who are important, but also the types and settings in which potential educational proposals unfold (Contreras & Chiclana, 2015). These include: formal educational settings, where proposals are typically part of an overall conceptualisation and appear in the curriculum; non-formal settings, which are intentional and planned but usually occur sporadically, such as in youth organisations or vocational training institutes; and informal settings, where learning happens casually and without planning throughout life, such as in libraries, museums, or through social media and online forums.

In Spain, the new Education Law, LOMLOE (España, 2020), is currently being implemented. One of its fundamental objectives is to promote education in equality and ASE, adapting the content to the students' maturation level and proposing an inclusive approach that respects diversity and sexual orientation. Specifically, during the stage of compulsory secondary education, LOMLOE stipulates that both scientific aspects of sexuality (such as the concepts of sex and sexuality, diversity, sexually transmitted diseases, and responsible sexual practices) and aspects related to managing emotions, respect for diversity, and LGBTQIA+ rights should be covered (Clavijo-Toledano et al., 2024; Villarroya & Boté-Vericad, 2023). Furthermore, in the non-compulsory high school, LOMLOE aims to consolidate personal, affective-sexual, and social maturity, enabling students to act respectfully, responsibly, and autonomously.

In addition, LOMLOE considers that teachers play an essential role in addressing the subject matter based on respect and equality. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training has been offering only non-mandatory training proposals since 2022, 'to guide the pedagogical interventions of teachers in this field, to foster balanced affective and emotional development and healthy self-esteem among students' (España, 2022).

The project TRANSGELIT is situated precisely at this complex juncture, and involves interdisciplinary research conducted from the fields of Communication and Education with a gender perspective. The primary objective of TRANSGELIT was to develop media-related educational proposals to address ASE, across formal, non-formal, and informal settings, since previous literature pointed out the effectiveness of media-related activities in young people's education (e.g.: Albury, 2013; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Churchill et al., 2019; McKee, 2012; Ward et al., 2019). Educational proposals are structured plans outlining objectives, content, and methods to achieve specific learning goals in various settings.

Within the framework of TRANSGELIT, this article focuses on analysing the perceptions of adolescents and young people regarding their affective-sexual learning, in formal, non-formal and informal settings. This general objective is broken down into the following sub-objectives:

- Identify the Pathways: Determine the formal, non-formal, and informal settings and channels through which adolescents and young people learn about sexualities and genders.
- Analyse the Role of Schools: Examine the role of formal settings in the ASE of adolescents and young people.
- Correlate Learning Across Settings: Explore the relationships between formal (school), non-formal, and informal settings (family environment, peer groups, media), in the youth learning process about sexualities and genders.

Thus, the aim is not only to detect what and how adolescents and young people learn about sexualities and genders, but also, and more importantly, to identify potential gaps and suggest improvements for existing educational proposals.

Affective-sexual education in formal and non-formal/informal contexts

A review of the literature on ASE conducted in formal settings, both nationally and internationally, reveals that certain characteristics of sexual education and sexual health training do not differ significantly around the world. The findings from studies such as those by Burns (2023) and Pound et al. (2016) indicate a shared need to reassess the methods used to teach young people about sex and sexuality (Alekseeva et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2011; Zafra-Agea et al., 2024). Participants in these studies associate feelings of discomfort with sexual education programmes and express a general sense that these programmes do not adequately prepare them for the lived experience of sexuality.

Regarding the content of ASE, most programmes carried out within formal education systems focus exclusively on health-related aspects, such as the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancies (Gavidia et al., 2013; Vega Fuente et al., 2015). Crucial aspects such as affectivity are not adequately addressed, leading to proposals that do not consider sexuality in its full scope. However, there are some exceptions. The study by Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) includes topics such as appreciating sexual diversity, preventing dating and intimate partner violence, developing healthy relationships, preventing child sexual abuse, improving social/emotional learning, and developing greater media literacy. Similarly, the research conducted by Molina et al. (2015) found that 76.8% of participants felt they had received good sexual education at school. Despite this, participants also noted that ASE content was sometimes erroneous, insufficient, or even non-existent concerning specific behaviours or contraceptive methods.

In addition, it is important to highlight studies that have focused on those responsible for teaching sexuality and affectivity, such as educational agents or teachers (e.g.: Fallas Vargas et al., 2012; Grossman et al., 2013; Martínez et al., 2011; Shtarkshall et al., 2007). Unfortunately, teacher training is still an unresolved issue, as most educators have not had adequate training at any stage of their education or professional career and typically do not have access to 'official' educational resources or materials to develop effective proposals (Anguita Martínez, 2011; Manzano-Pauta & Jerves-Hermida, 2018; Plaza-Del-Pino et al., 2021; Preston, 2016; Rebollar Sánchez, 2013; Rubio Fernández et al., 2024).

Regarding ASE conducted outside formal settings, some studies have focused on the family and interpersonal domains, while many others have examined the role of the media. Several studies have highlighted that non-formal and informal education is useful for addressing issues such as sexism and LGBTphobia (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2024; Faustino et al., 2022), gender inequalities (Llño et al., 2024; Tindowen et al., 2017), gender identities (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2023), and sexual and reproductive health (McKee, 2012; Stein et al., 2022; Young et al., 2024). In particular, Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2023) emphasise how alternative educational spaces can foster a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender identities, enriching the educational experience of participants.

Research by Young et al. (2024) further reveals that non-formal education is a primary source of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, highlighting parents and family members, along with peers and friends, as key educators on sexual intimacy and reproductive hygiene. Stein et al. (2022) emphasise the significant role of informal learning through social movements in shaping individuals' understanding and attitudes towards sexuality. Similarly, McKee (2012) stresses the crucial role that non-formal environments, such as peer groups, online communities, and media, play in forming attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about sexuality. These environments offer opportunities for social learning and information exchange, though they do not always guarantee the accuracy or positivity of the messages about sexual health. McKee suggests that while these interactions can reinforce stereotypes and myths, they also have the potential to foster a deeper and more empathetic understanding of sexual issues, highlighting the importance of integrating these non-formal experiences into broader strategies for promoting sexual health.

In this regard, several studies indicate that young people and adolescents often learn more about sexuality and gender through the media than from school or family (e.g.: Albury, 2013; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; L'Engle et al., 2006; Mady & El-Khoury, 2022; Masanet & Dhaenens, 2019; Ward et al., 2019). The media appeal to this demographic in a way that is relevant to them and provide sexual education information that interests them (McKee, 2012).

Some research has specifically examined how sexually explicit content, such as pornography, can influence the sexual learning of children and adolescents (e.g. Colom et al., 2024; Idoiaga-Mondragon et al., 2024; Litsou et al., 2021; Martin-Palomino et al., 2024; Masanet et al., *in press*; Massey et al., 2021; Pathmendra et al., 2023). These studies yield contradictory results, highlighting potential negative effects on sexual behaviours versus the possibility of accessing useful information about physical and mechanical aspects of sex. They underscore the need to delve deeper into the complex relationship between pornography and (mis)education on sexual matters and advocate for the development of porn literacy (Dawson et al., 2020).

Finally, more recent studies, conducted not only in Western countries and frequently employing qualitative approaches, highlight the often positive role of social media, alongside peer groups, as alternative and more effective sources of learning for adolescents and young people on issues related to normative and non-normative genders and sexualities (Byron & Hunt, 2017; Churchill et al., 2019; Fedele et al., 2025; Masanet & Soto-Sanfiel, 2024; Mcharo et al., 2021; Thianthai, 2019; Tse et al., 2023).

Scott et al. (2020) emphasise the need to integrate young people's digital context into research on 'Relationships and Sex Education', which is mandatory in schools in England. They stress the urgent need to focus on young people's online agency and their development in self-expression and sexuality, addressing the pleasures, harms, risks, and rewards in digital intimacies. They advocate for interdisciplinary collaboration to better understand how young people interact with these technologies. This is precisely one of the goals that TRANSGELIT pursues.

Materials and methods

Participants selection and data collection

The project TRANSGELIT employed a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach, grounded in short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013). This method, ideal for understanding everyday experiences and practices, has become well-established in studies on young people and media (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Scolari et al., 2018, 2020) because of its intrinsic qualities and its strategic, structured, intensive and adaptive capacity to address specific aspects of the phenomenon studied. In this study, this technique was considered especially useful to deal with adolescents and young people's perceptions of affective-sexual learning, gender and sexualities, making it possible to explore how participants learn about these topics, and to identify cultural patterns and models.

The project methodology adhered to the ethical and data management protocols of the University of Barcelona and was approved by its Bioethical Committee before the beginning of the field work (IRB00003099), which was conducted between March 2022 and November 2023.

The study engaged 220 adolescents and young people (aged 14–23, $x = 18.037$), who self-identified themselves as male (34.6%, $n = 76$), female (64.1%, $n = 141$), non-binary or neutral (1.5%, $n = 3$). Participants were selected using non-probabilistic sampling. First, for the workshops of the first phase of the workfield, a convenience sampling was used to select adolescents and young people from four educational centres in the province of Barcelona, Spain: a public university faculty (73.2% of participants, $n = 161$), a public and a semi-private school (19.5% of participants, $n = 43$), and a youth association (7.3% of participants, $n = 16$), ensuring diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds. Recruitment was facilitated through direct contact with the centres. Second, within the participants of the first phase, a subset was selected using a purposive sampling for the second phase, the in-

depth interviews, in order to ensure varied perspectives. In particular, the profiles were selected to attend the following criteria:

- difference in gender identities, sexual orientations, ages and origins;
- differences in media uses and opinions about gender and sexualities;
- difference in the attitude during the workshops: a) especially active and participating, or even conflictive, b) especially quiet or reserved during the workshops, c) with particular conservative speeches, and d) with particular open-minded and inclusive speeches.

Participants could opt in by voluntarily agreeing to participate in workshops and interviews, with the right to opt out at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants or legal guardians, with clear explanations of the study goals, data use, and withdrawal rights. While obtaining informed consent, demographic information was collected, including: age, self-reported gender identity and sexual orientation, place of residence and place of birth, education and occupation of their parents or legal guardians.

Methods: workshops and in-depth interviews

In the first phase, a total of 64 hours of workshops were conducted:

- participatory workshops focused on gender, sexualities, and media, with adolescents and young people (including university students), which included play-based activities, debates, and media analysis;
- co-viewing sessions with adolescents and young people from the schools and the youth association, on gender and sexualities portrayals, which consisted of the co-watching of media products such as TV series;
- media-creation activities with adolescents and young people from the schools and the youth association to produce media content on issues related to sexuality and gender. Participants were asked to work in teams to create a podcast about a theme related to gender and sexualities, working on different stages: the idea, the research, the script, the recording.

The workshops aimed to determine the origin of affective-sexual education among adolescents and young people and the influence of different educational settings on the topic, as well as to explore their interests and needs, and to promote self-awareness.

Participant observers from the research team took notes on paper during the workshops, and then transcribed them into a Word format to be shared with the rest of the team. The instrument for the field notes was a datasheet which included the following sections:

- name of observer;
- centre of observation;
- date and hours;
- type, description and results of the dynamics proposed;
- participants' description (number, gender, etc.) and actitud/behaviour. In this section, observers had to record behavioural patterns and group dynamics, focusing on understanding how participants engaged with media, shared their experiences, and expressed views on gender and sexuality during group activities.

Participants also provided written reflections, which offered further insights into their personal experiences with ASE and media.

In the second phase, 47 in-depth semi-structured interviews explored how participants engage with media and obtain information on gender and sexuality. In this phase, 61.9% ($n = 29$) of participants were attending the public or the private school, 25.5% ($n = 12$) belonged to the youth association, and 12.8% ($n = 6$) were university students. Also, 51.1% ($n = 24$) of participants in the interviews identified themselves as male, 46.8% ($n = 22$) as female, and 2.1% ($n = 1$) as non-binary. As for their sexual orientation, 59.6% ($n = 28$) defined themselves as heterosexual, 19.1% ($n = 9$) as bisexual or pansexual, 6.3% ($n = 3$) as heterosexual 'at the moment', 8.4% ($n = 4$) as fluid or exploring or not knowing yet, 4.2% ($n = 2$) as gay/lesbian, while 2.1% ($n = 1$) preferred to not share it.

The semi-structured interview (Boté-Vericad, 2023) process was divided into two different sets of questions:

- (1) Media and content they used, how they used them, and for which purposes. The script included more open questions and more specific examples: traditional media such as television; smartphones; social media like Instagram or TikTok and their influencers; streaming platforms; specific media content such as movies or TV series; dating apps; their daily media routine; which the preferences were and why; which the media uses, gratifications and motivations were;
- (2) Learning, sexualities, and gender, including their previous life experiences on these topics as well as their experiences in obtaining, using and/or sharing information on these topics through different sources, such as school, family, peers and media. Again, the script included more open questions and more specific examples: their interests in the themes dealt with during the workshops; how they had previously learnt about those topics; which the role played by media in the affective-sexual learning and experiences had been; how they interacted with such media content; if they shared that content with peers or family, how and why; how they interacted with peers, family and school regarding those topics; their gender and sexual identities; their affective-sexual experiences and sexual practices; their experience with pornographic content and media sexual content and practices.

The interviews were conducted by a researcher from the project team, and took place in a quiet, private setting within the educational centre, to encourage open and honest discussion. The participants were given ample time to respond to the questions, and the interviewer used follow-up questions as needed to explore their answers more deeply. The in-depth interviews were conducted according to the principles of data saturation for qualitative studies (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Audio recordings were made to ensure accurate data collection for later analysis.

Data analysis

These varied data sources were cross-referenced and triangulated to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the project themes. All personal data were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used, ensuring privacy and ethical compliance throughout the study.

The interview transcripts, the field notes and individual reflections were coded using Atlas.ti 24. The codification followed the guidelines indicated by McDonald et al. (2019) and O'Connor and Joffe (2020) for qualitative research, and was organised in two phases. The research team was made of thirteen researchers from different backgrounds (Spain, Mexico, France, and Italy), "ranging in age from 24 to 45 years old. Seven identify as women, five as men, and one as non-binary. Eight define themselves as heterosexual, and five as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (M.-J. Masanet et al., *in press*). In both phases, to ensure reliability among the coders, several meetings were held before, during, and after the analysis, in which the research team debated until a consensus was reached. In the first phase, the research team split into subteams and conducted an initial inductive open coding of the same materials, to capture emerging patterns across the data, creating a series of categories related

to a particular theme (e.g.: 'LGBTIQ+ community', 'affective-sexual learning' or 'pornography'). Through several meetings, each subteam refined these codes into broader categories, based on recurrent ideas, perspectives, and cultural patterns observed in the participants' responses, as well as in previous literature, mixing the initial inductive analysis with a more deductive one. These categories were discussed until consensus was reached, ensuring that the selected themes were both reflective of the participants' experiences and aligned with the research objectives. So, the coders could agree on a definition for each code, created sub-codes when needed, and grouped the codes into code groups and families (for instance: 'Learning' was a family code, 'Directionality of learning' a code group, 'Top-down learning' was a code, and 'Top-down learning: from media' was a sub-code). During the second phase, all the materials were analysed following the coding guide established in the previous phase, that is, through deductive coding, also with the option to add new sub-codes. Finally, further meetings were organised to assure the agreement between coders in this phase, involving the whole team, while the constant communication among coders was secured through the use of the memo tool of Atlas.ti. At the commencement of the discussions to obtain consensus, the rate of disagreement between coders used to be more moderate. The initial inter-coder reliability checks, consisting of the comparison between the coding carried out by different coders, revealed some variance in the interpretation of certain codes and themes. The final coding process was completed with a high level of agreement, with any remaining differences resolved through collaborative dialogue and a shared understanding of the research objectives.

This article presents the results derived from the analysis of the interviews and the individual written reflections of participants; all quotations are identified using pseudonyms assigned to the interviewees, along with their age, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Results

According to the paper main objectives, the results are organised around three key themes, which can be summarised as following:

- (1) **Pathways of Affective-Sexual Learning:** Peer groups, digital media (social media, the internet, and pornography), and family were identified as the main sources of learning about sexualities and gender.
- (2) **Role of Schools in ASE:** Schools played a limited role, offering mostly sexual health information, focusing on contraception and menstruation, with little emphasis on emotional or relational aspects.
- (3) **ASE in non-Formal and Informal Learning:** Informal settings, especially media and peer groups, played a critical role in ASE, often filling gaps left by formal education.

These findings highlight the importance of peer-to-peer and media-based learning alongside traditional school-based education.

Pathways of affective-sexual learning

From the analysis of interviews with young people and their written reflections, it is evident that the ASE of participants encompasses various topics, some addressed in formal educational settings and many others sought out and/or researched in non-formal and informal environments.

Among the topics related to ASE, participants mention sexual practices or sexuality in general, and specifically aspects such as first experiences, masturbation, virginity, and penetration. Notably, the topics of consent and toxic relationships also generate significant interest. These are typically subjects that participants tend to explore in non-formal or informal settings. In contrast, topics inherent to sexual health (protection, sexually transmitted infections, menstruation, or reproductive health) are generally associated with informative activities conducted by experts within the school

environment. Finally, issues related to gender perspective and/or sexual orientation are linked to formal, non-formal and informal environments. This indicates that there are various educational initiatives on gender perspective within schools, often in connection with specific dates such as International Women's Day on the 8th of March.

However, the two most frequently mentioned pathways for learning about sexualities and genders by participants are peer groups (friends, schoolmates, and other young people who they interact with online in digital environments) and the media, especially social media, the internet, and pornography, and to a lesser extent, traditional media.

The family is mentioned secondarily, with the maternal figure standing out. Finally, the school is acknowledged as an educational institution that provides some knowledge about sexualities and/or genders. Participants refer to learning received through specific teachers (especially during tutoring hours) or external experts. Within this context, participants also mention the participatory and media-creation workshops conducted as part of TRANSGELIT as a positive source of learning.

It is important to highlight that in most cases, these learning channels are hierarchical. They can be either 'imposed' (sources that theoretically have more knowledge about the subject and/or place themselves in a superior position, such as schools or families) or 'sought/selected' (such as media, where they look for information of interest that is not provided by other means). In contrast, the peer group channel represents a type of peer-to-peer learning, 'chosen' (like the media), which facilitates 'co-learning' among individuals with a similar level of (mis)knowledge.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the general perception among participants is that they do not have sufficient knowledge about topics related to gender and sexualities. In some cases, they even state that they have not learned from sources from which they expected to receive ASE, whether it be pornography or talks by experts in the school environment. This perception is stronger among adolescents, while university students tend to relate this perception to their adolescent stage. Older young people acknowledged having learned more about these topics from the media and peer groups, as well as through personal experience. Indeed, many participants affirm that learning ultimately occurs 'by doing', that is, through personal experimentation, either alone or with one or more partners, to discover what they like and do not like, and by practising.

The role of schools in the ASE of adolescents and young people

The results show that schools play a limited role in the ASE of adolescents and young people because they tend to be occasional transmitters of knowledge related to sexual and reproductive health in a very generic sense, focusing on topics such as menstruation, pregnancy, and contraceptive methods. Instead, young people advocate for expanding knowledge about the emotional education aspect related to affective-sexual learning:

In school, they talked to us more about sexuality, but in a sexual way—more about sex itself, about protection, yes, about how to take care of yourself during the act and all that. But they didn't talk to us about how you feel, about what it means to feel like yourself. (Leo, 15 years old, male, heterosexual)

Since in most cases the talks are given by an 'expert' external to the education centre, the learning is often predetermined, decontextualised, and does not correspond to the students' real needs. It is interesting to note how the participants themselves perceive this type of teaching, given as isolated sessions, not regularly as ASE:

Because in school, we don't have any subject specifically on sexuality. We've had talks, but very few. And no, they don't explain what sexuality is; they explain how to put on a condom, which is fine, but I mean, I don't think that's sexual education, you know? (Clara, 15 years old, female, heterosexual)

In the same vein, participants agree that they would prefer to have spaces in school (both physical and temporal) where they can generate debates and explore different proposals related to ASE. They express a need for experiential and trusting environments. One older participant (Anna, 21 years old,

female queer, bisexual) noted that these forums are usually found more in university settings, by which time a crucial stage of initiation regarding affective-sexual matters has already passed. Therefore, there is a strong emphasis on the need for classroom methodologies that allow students to ask questions without fear of judgement (Oriol, 16 years old, male, heterosexual), so that they do not have to seek answers from, for example, pornographic content.

Given this, it is very interesting to consider the specific methodologies employed in TRANSGELI workshops to address the content, as participants value experiential and active learning very highly. Participatory activities such as interactive dynamics, podcast creation, or co-viewing series to work on topics are seen as effective strategies for engaging young people and addressing the content in a more motivated way:

The traffic light activity is the one I liked the most out of all the activities we did in the workshops. I felt comfortable because I could express myself and share my opinions on topics that I don't usually talk about. And it led to some very interesting debates. (Yessica, 14 years old, female, unsure)

It is important to consider that factors such as origin and, consequently, religion, lead some participants to express reservations about the topics analysed during the fieldwork.

ASE in non-formal and informal settings

As indicated above, adolescents and young people learn about sexuality and gender in a variety of informal and non-formal settings.

Firstly, they do so through peer and family learning. Within peer groups, there is a noticeable tendency among young people to discuss topics of sexuality informally. This reveals the need for formal educational approaches that align the seriousness of the subject with the comfort of addressing it in informal contexts.

Same-sex friendships are still essential for establishing conversations not only of trust but also of understanding, at least among heterosexual participants. Discussing these matters with members of the opposite sex poses a barrier due to differing ways of thinking, an element that should be considered for educational proposals in formal settings:

I don't talk about it with the boys, because of course, I already know the point of view of all the boys. So then. . . Sure, with this friend I talk to, I mean, I ask her things and she answers them, but because she's already had sex. (Clara, 15 years old, female, heterosexual)

On the other hand, education on sexual matters within the family environment is not predominantly detected. However, mainly girls and those participants who openly identify as non-heterosexual do report receiving it, mentioning trust as a key element since they believe their families will support them. Within the family nucleus, better environments of trust are usually established with mothers:

[. . .] If I have a problem or something, I prefer to tell my mother, as she is the one who will truly help me, or the teachers can help too. (Jorge, 15 years old, male, heterosexual)

[. . .] All the problems I have, I tell my mother because, to me, my mother is, well, she is the best thing that has ever happened to me. (Leo, 15, male, heterosexual)

[. . .] My mother is my source of information [. . .] She sends me lots of podcasts with web links, videos, and she often says, 'Well, now I'll explain something to you', and then she explains it to me. (Yessica, 14, female, unsure)

Secondly, the results suggest that participants primarily engage in affective-sexual learning through the media. This includes media representations such as pornography, certain TV series and films, and content on social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok. In addition, they look for information through the internet, particularly in Google, and through interactions on social media and applications, such as flirting on platforms like Instagram.

In the media, they seek information that is lacking in formal educational channels and family environments, which pertains to sexual orientation or specific sexual practices, both

heteronormative and non-heteronormative. This highlights the importance of the media, and the internet and Google in particular, as sources of self-directed learning:

Yes, [I have searched on the internet] to find out, for example, what asexuality is or things like that. There was a very large list of types of genders, and I wanted to understand a bit because I either didn't remember or didn't know about them. (Camila, 17 years old, female, heterosexual)

It is worth mentioning that some participants have an interest in learning through direct and reliable sources to form their own opinions. This type of inquiry may indicate a desire for more active participation in non-formal settings:

There was a time when I was very interested in feminism and other social issues, like everything related to the queer community. [...] I remember asking a friend who knows a lot about these topics, 'How do you get all this information? Because I think it's super cool that you explain it to me, but I would also like to have those primary sources, you know? To form my own opinion as well'. (Núria, 22 years old, female, bisexual)

On the other hand, in some of the interviews, particularly those with girls, there was an emphasis on the socialising effect of fictional products such as films and TV series, as well as social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. These products can influence affective and romantic relationships and certain aspects such as first experiences, identity, and sexual orientation:

And the first time, people kind of have it very idealised. I include myself because I have it super, super, super idealised. But it's obviously not going to be perfect, like the movies where, well, the penetration, then they lie in bed, talk and fall asleep. (Aina, 15 years-old, female, she's exploring her sexual orientation)

[On the show] Glee, there was a girl who was very straight but she was actually in the closet and then she fell in love with her best friend. And then it hit me because I thought, 'The same thing's happening to me!'. And then I also saw how this relationship evolved. And I said to myself 'Well, that means it's not that bad'. I think that this influence of the series made me free myself a little from the fear of showing my sexuality. (Paula, 15 years old, female, lesbian)

Pornography is also frequently mentioned as a source of learning, more so by boys than by girls, regarding how to practise sex and specific sexual practices, both before engaging in them and during their initial experiences with partners:

I think the vast majority of learning I have had has been through pornography. Well, I think all of it has been through pornography. (Dani, 16 years-old, male, heterosexual)

[In pornography] for instance, in relations between women that don't, they don't have just 'scissors' sex, there are many ways ... [...] I don't know, I felt as if I had learnt, as if I was ready, but deep inside I was not. (Claudia, 16 years-old, female, bisexual)

In this regard, pornography functions almost like the tutorials they sometimes consult on the internet. Generally, the participants acknowledge pornography's contribution to learning the mechanics of sexual practices, but they also highlight its limitations as a reliable source of learning:

I think that porn is not the best way to learn. I think it's a good way to learn about some things because, at best, in a video, you see things you didn't know they could do to you, and so, you see it and you'd like to do it in the future. (Oriol, 16 years-old, male, heterosexual)

Yes, I learned technical things. [...] Yes, yes, I have learned a lot. Things I didn't know, for example how to put my legs, and everything, I didn't know [...] When I put it into practice, when I liked having sex, I realised that those [pornographic] videos are surreal. (Bru, 17 years-old, male, heterosexual)

They express that while pornography is not the best way to learn about sexuality, it is the most accessible. It is important to highlight the critical positions that some individuals, particularly girls, hold regarding pornography. According to these participants, pornography depicts unrealistic scenarios or teaches a type of heteronormative sexual practices linked to male satisfaction and the use of a certain level of aggression:

That's how relationships go, at least in my environment, that's how they go, because all the boys who are with my friends have seen porn and [...] they're like very aggressive, they're very aggressive, it's because... [...] because of the way they hold them, for example, or whatever, they're very aggressive. They have no scruples. [...] And on top of that they haven't been... they haven't been watching porn since just now [...] since last year, they've been watching porn since they were eight. (Lucía, 16 years-old, female, heterosexual at the moment)

Lastly, it is important to highlight that adolescents and young people integrate technology not only into their practices of searching for information, but also of forming affective-sexual relationships, demonstrating the role of digital platforms in the dynamics of flirting and dating among young people. Furthermore, as the age of the participants increases, there is a greater predisposition to using dating applications, both those specifically created for this purpose (used by older individuals) and more commonly used platforms like Instagram or TikTok (which tend to be the first applications experimented with for this purpose).

It is worth highlighting a perceived normativity in the development of romantic relationships through applications, which provides insight into the process of forming intimate relationships at this age, which is learned 'on the go' or 'by doing', or with the help of peer groups. It is precisely this learning 'by doing' in which various positive experiences are found, particularly from the first and second affective-sexual relationships. Some participants report discovering sexual pleasure through practice with partners, including positions, actions, and other elements of sexual practices:

Yes, it's like with everything you do, you basically do something and she tells you, 'No, this', or 'I don't like that', or something like that. So, you adjust and say, 'Okay, I'll do it this way'. (Dani, 16 years old, heterosexual)

This once again highlights the complex interrelationship that is woven between different educational settings, an element that must be taken into account when educational activities are designed, particularly in formal education.

Discussion and conclusions

As explained in the introduction, the main objective of this article was to analyse the perceptions of adolescents and young people regarding their affective-sexual learning in formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings.

The results presented above confirm and evidence the importance that participants attach to ASE. Both adolescents and young people emphasise the need for adequate ASE that addresses the needs of today's young people. This necessity aligns with prior literature (Alekseeva et al., 2015; Burns, 2023; Martínez et al., 2011; Molina et al., 2015; Pound et al., 2016), the guidelines of international organisations (UNESCO, 2024; WHO, 2023) and also with LOMLOE (España, 2020), the current Education Law of Spain, the country where the study was carried out.

Regarding the first sub-objective, to identify the pathways (formal, non-formal, informal settings) of learning, it is broadly observed that the participants' ASE is based on channels other than formal education. Media and friendships are the main spaces for learning and self-learning, corroborating findings from previous studies (e.g.: McKee, 2012; Young et al., 2024). Specifically, participants refer to social media and the internet as fundamental agents, as they are spaces where they can easily and specifically search for what concerns or interests them. However, these spaces are not ideal for this purpose, as some of the content they find can be unreliable, invalid, or even contradictory, such as pornography. This aligns with Litsou et al. (2021), who note that pornography is frequently used for sexual learning, though it provides limited and often harmful information about sexual health. Similarly, Pathmendra et al. (2023) found that pornography influences earlier sexual behaviour and risky practices. These findings highlight the reliance on unreliable media sources and reinforce the need for formal education systems to address critical media literacy, equipping students to navigate contradictory or misleading content about sexuality.

On the other hand, conversations with peer groups are essential, as they create an environment of trust and safety that fosters discussions in which they can share concerns and insecurities about sex,

sexuality, and gender. This informal peer education is a crucial component of their overall learning experience, highlighting the complex interplay between different educational settings. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of integrating comprehensive and reliable ASE into formal educational curricula, while also recognising the significant roles that non-formal and informal channels play in the learning processes of adolescents and young people. For instance, peer-counselling could be involved in ASE, as suggested by Udoh and Ekott (2014).

Regarding the second sub-objective, namely, the role of schools, the results indicate that participants clearly see schools as a secondary means of affective-sexual education, despite the provisions of the aforementioned LOMLOE (España, 2020). Participants are aware that ASE is carried out in educational centres; however, it is not effectively contextualised or adapted to the specific realities of the students in each school. Furthermore, it is approached solely from a health and prevention perspective, which is consistent with previous studies (Gavidia et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2015; Vega Fuente et al., 2015).

Lastly, in relation to the third sub-objective, that is, to relate formal contexts with non-formal and informal settings in youth learning about sexualities and genders, the study confirms that there is a gap between learning in formal settings and (often) self-learning in non-formal and informal settings. As pointed out also in previous studies (e.g.: McKee, 2012; Stein et al., 2022; Young et al., 2024), non-formal and informal education settings are generally the primary source for ASE during adolescence, and they can be used in a positive way to improve young people's sexual-affective learning (e.g.: Byron & Hunt, 2017; Churchill et al., 2019; Masanet et al., *in press*; Mcharo et al., 2021; Thianthai, 2019; Tse et al., 2023). In addition, our study identifies a mismatch between the interests of young people and what is offered to them in school, which must be addressed by the formal education system, involving the families as well. As it has been previously observed, young people in our study learn particularly from media representations (e.g.: pornography), social media interactions (e.g.: flirting on social apps), and sharing with their peer group. Most of them build their gender and sexual identities 'by doing', that is, experimenting with their sexualities to understand what they want and what they like. The family environment is relegated to a secondary role. Most of the interviewees consider that they do not have enough trust to discuss these topics with their families, although those who do have this trust focus on their mothers as the primary figure with whom they can share their affective, sexual, and emotional issues. This finding indicates that it is necessary to also work on new masculinities, and with families.

Taking this into consideration, it is necessary to adopt new strategies and educational tools that include the critical use of media and the topics of interest for young people (e.g.: masturbation, non-heteronormative sex practices, or pleasure), especially in formal education environments. In addition, it is crucial to support families and young people, helping them feel they are not alone in their gender and sexual socialisation process. An example of this approach is the participatory workshops and media creation activities of TRANSGELIT, a participatory tool that the participants value positively. The activity sheets for these workshops are available in an open-access educational kit (Masanet et al., 2024). These activities originate from non-formal or informal contexts and can be adapted to the formal educational setting and used by young people and families. Therefore, they have the potential to effectively address gender and sexuality topics, as previous studies have highlighted regarding non-formal and informal education (Faustino et al., 2022; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2023; McKee, 2012; Stein et al., 2022; Tindowen et al., 2017; Young et al., 2024).

Our study is not without limitations. Due to the inherently qualitative nature of the ethnographic approach, and the circumscribed territory where the research was carried out, the results cannot be generalised, even though they align with previous quantitative studies carried in the same country (e.g.: Colom et al., 2024; Rubio Fernández et al., 2024; Zafra-Agea et al., 2024), as well as with the international literature quoted above. Moreover, despite the advantages offered by short-term ethnography, especially valuable for approaching the object of study in this research, this technique could inadvertently inhibit the exploration of other potentially interesting parallel aspects, not included in the design of the workshops and the

interviews. A very important point, to be considered for further research, is that the perspective of other collectives involved in the affective-sexual education of adolescents and young people, such as educational agents and families, must be addressed. Finally, future studies could also concentrate on other aspects that were not the main focus of our research, as for instance the differences that can emerge among young people due to age ranges, body types or disabilities.

However, if previous studies have already highlighted the need to rethink the ways in which young people are taught about sex and sexuality (Alekseeva et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2011), then the results of TRANSGELIT make it possible to examine in detail what adolescents and young people need from schools: to incorporate a new perspective that takes into account the various contemporary sexualities, including affective and emotional aspects, not only in the content but also in the interpersonal interactions among members of the educational community. To this end, there is a demand for the creation of spaces that foster an environment of trust and mutual respect, generating opportunities to listen to others, ask questions freely, and feel respected without judgement or prejudice.

To implement an ASE programme that resonates with students and takes into account the elements discussed, it is essential to have a committed, aware, and well-trained teaching staff in this area. Therefore, one of the challenges arising from this research is the creation of a comprehensive, continuous, and structured training programme, both within university curricula aimed at teacher training and in the centres where teachers work, moving away from isolated and decontextualised training sessions provided by health agents. In this regard, particularly in the Spanish context, it is necessary to correctly and effectively implement the Education Law LOMLOE (España, 2020) in Spanish education institutions. This includes, firstly, equipping teachers with appropriate tools through mandatory training in ASE and gender perspective, and creating safe and trusting spaces to work on ASE with students, possibly counting also on peer-counselling. Secondly, it involves adequately focusing on the 'affective' aspect of ASE, in addition to expanding the content related to the 'sexual' aspect, to address both the sexual and gender diversities that today's young people encounter and their varied interests in the lived experience of sexuality. In this endeavour, academic research such as TRANSGELIT can serve as support and guidance for governmental and educational institutions to implement improvements in ASE as envisaged by the LOMLOE (España, 2020), and as advocated by studies such as Scott et al. (2020). This study's findings underscore the gap between formal education and adolescents' actual sources of sexual knowledge, especially media and pornography. Studies such as Litsou et al. (2021) and Pathmendra et al. (2023) demonstrated how pornography impacts adolescent sexual behaviour and identity formation, often providing inaccurate information. Thus, formal education must incorporate (trans)media literacy (Scolari et al., 2020), enabling students to critically assess the sexual content they encounter. Bridging formal and informal education with comprehensive discussions on pornography will mitigate the risks associated with media reliance and foster a more informed and balanced understanding of sexuality.

Finally, it is necessary to continue monitoring and analysing in depth the media's treatment of sex, sexualities and gender, both in fictional content that can create aspirational and identification models for young people, and in content available on the internet that aims to inform and educate about sex and sexuality. It is also important to consider the direct treatment of these topics in pornographic content, taking into account its influence on young people, as this work and previous studies have shown (Dawson et al., 2020; Litsou et al., 2021; Massey et al., 2021). Based on research in communication and education, we therefore must continue to insist on the need to implement mandatory transmedia literacy subjects in school curricula, which contribute to developing a critical spirit in students and their own training as future free citizens, for a fairer and more diverse society.

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