

## » Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration

# In Focus: The Contraceptive Pill

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a representative repeat survey. A large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults was launched for the ninth time in the summer of 2019. It follows on from predecessor studies conducted between 1980 and 2014. The goal of the study is to acquire reliable data about the attitudes and behaviours of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regards to sexuality and contraception.

Currently, 28 percent of the adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 and 82 percent of the young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 say they have had sexual intercourse at least once. For the vast majority of the sexually active young people it is happily the case that using contraception is a self-evident choice from the very first time.

The contraceptive pill plays a central role in preventing pregnancy, especially with increasing sexual experience and in steady relationships. However, when looking at the trend, there is a fall in the use of the contraceptive pill that is correlated with a loss of trust in how well the pill is tolerated by the body.

This fact sheet presents the core results regarding the contraceptive behaviour around the pill for the group of sexually active adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25.

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Result 1

## As sexual experience increases, more young people are switching from condoms to the pill.

Young people alter their contraceptive behaviour with increasing sexual experience. The sexually active 14- to 25-year-olds surveyed were significantly more likely to use condoms in the early phase of becoming sexually active than later on in their sexually active lives. The contraceptive pill however is not yet used in the majority of cases for the first and second sexual intercourse. It is only when condoms become less significant over the course of a person’s sexually active life – e.g. in a steady relationship – that they are replaced by the pill: regarding their most recent sexual intercourse, the majority of adolescents and young adults with sexual intercourse experience state they used the contraceptive pill (58%). Figure 1 illustrates the current contraceptive behaviour of adolescents and young adults at three crucial points in time.

Figure 1



In trend terms this development is true for both sexes. Boys and young men prefer using condoms for longer than their female counterparts, however. Even in reference to their most recent sexual intercourse, 57 percent of them say they used condoms (girls/young women: 42%). For both sexes the majority of respondents used the contraceptive pill during their most recent sexual intercourse (male: 55%; female: 61%).

The combination strategy - meaning using both the contraceptive pill to prevent a pregnancy and condoms to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs) - achieves its highest value among the three points measured values for the second time (27 %). After this point, the exclusive use of the contraceptive pill increases up until the most recent sexual intercourse, even more so among girls and young women (only the pill: 43 %) than among boys and young men (only the pill: 31 %). Overall, 80 percent of adolescents and young adults who have had sexual intercourse multiple times have already used the contraceptive pill. Consequently, the pill is the second-most widespread form of contraception among the 14- to 25-year-olds (condoms: 93 %).

### **In relationships the contraceptive pill is the birth control method of choice.**

Result 2

The relationship status substantially determines how quickly the contraceptive pill starts being used when someone is sexually active. When the sexual partners were well acquainted during their first time, the contraceptive pill was used in 46 percent of cases. If the sexual partners barely knew each other, that figure was only 25 percent.

This difference remains in place even for the most recent sexual intercourse: among those who are not in a steady relationship, condoms are a more relevant form of contraception than among those in steady relationships (63 % versus 40 %). The latter group exhibits a clear preference for the use of this hormonal contraceptive method over condoms (65 % versus 49 %).

## Result 3

## The use of the contraceptive pill has fallen markedly in recent years.

The first Youth Sexuality survey was conducted in 1980. Consequently, we have trend data going back almost forty years - at least for adolescents between 14 and 17 without a migrant background. These data illustrate a significant shift in values. They do not just refer to a general attitude as to whether contraception is used at all during the first time and which partner feels responsible for this, but also to what contraceptive method is used.

Since 1998 the percentage of girls who (also) use the pill for contraception from the very beginning of their sexually active lives has steadily grown. In 2014 this figure reached 50 percent for the first time, which represents the peak to date.

One of the reasons why the pill (and also condoms) have seen increased usage is that other contraceptive methods have been pushed into the background over time: compared to 1980 chemical contraceptives play almost no role anymore; another reason is that contraceptive use in general has gone up.

In the past ten years in particular another phenomenon has presented itself. In the new millennium, the number of young people who did not just use condoms, but who combined several options - most frequently condoms and the pill - has grown. Such a double strategy has the advantage of protecting against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, along with providing additional protection in terms of birth control.

[See Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration - Fact Sheet 'In Focus: Condoms'](#)

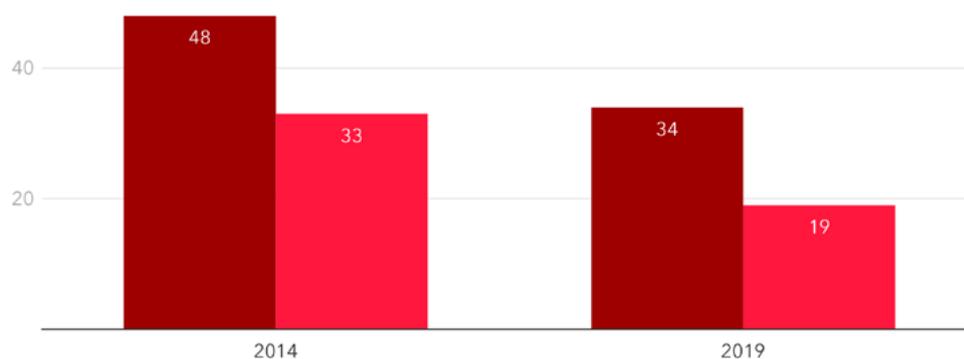


**Combined use of the pill / condoms as well as total contraceptive pill usage (5-year trend, girls)**

Question: What did you and/or your partner do during your first sexual intercourse in order to avoid a pregnancy?

Here: contraceptive pill, and combined use of the contraceptive pill / condoms

■ Pill overall ■ Pill and condoms



Basis: 14- to 17-year-old girls with heterosexual intercourse experience | multiple responses possible | figures in percent

Source: BZgA, dataset Youth Sexuality, 2014 and 2019 surveys

Figure 2

Currently, the long-term trends of the contraceptive pill being used more and more as the first method of birth control and condoms were increasingly used in addition to the contraceptive pill as a double strategy are broken. Between 2014 and 2019 the use of the contraceptive pill has fallen markedly. The combined use of the pill and condoms is making way more often to the exclusive use of condoms during the first sexual intercourse. This drop is most obvious among the sexually active girls between the ages of 14 and 17 (see Figure 2).

It is not just the percentage of girls combining condoms with the contraceptive pill that has fallen significantly since 2014; the pill is also being used substantially less often for the first time (both minus 14 percentage points). Among the young women who are older than 18 and who have, on average, had their first time longer ago, a similar development can be seen: even among the older women surveyed the use of the contraceptive pill as the first contraceptive has declined in recent years by a total of six percentage points compared to 2014 - though this is a less pronounced drop (2019: 42%). Even among the combined use with condoms there is a noticeable drop from 33 percent to 24 percent among the young women in the trend comparison.

## Result 4

## The assessment of the contraceptive pill: it is safe, easily available and easy to use.

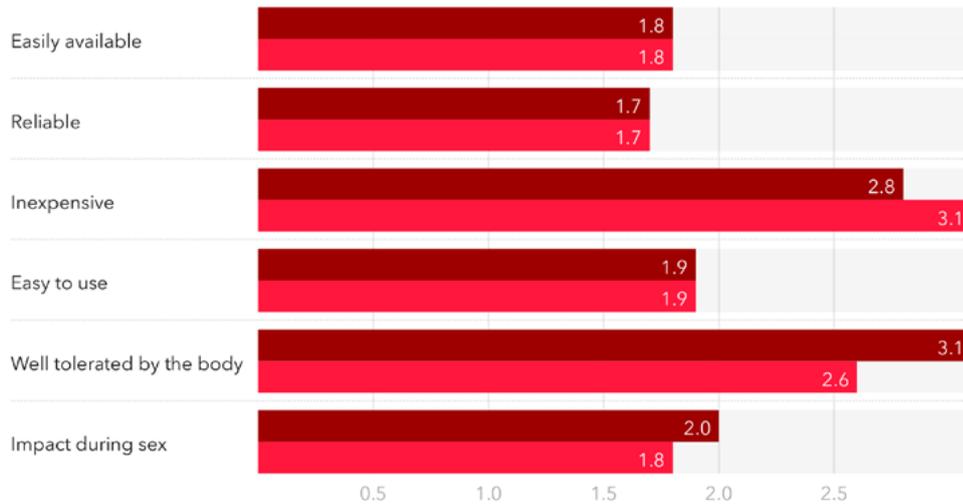
Adolescents and young adults who exhibit a certain level of sexual experience (those who have had sexual intercourse multiple times), were asked to evaluate the different contraceptive options. This section focuses on the evaluation of the contraceptive pill from the perspective of the (potential) direct users.

The evaluations based on the six criteria presented (availability, efficacy, ease of use, price, tolerability, and impact on sensation during sex) were done on a scale of 1 (very good) to 6 (very poor); the majority assessed the pill positively on this scale (see Figure 3). The pill achieved an overall grade of 2.22 across all evaluation criteria in 2019. Compared to condoms (overall grade of 2.05 among (potential) users), the pill got a slightly worse grade in 2019. That was not the case in 2014. At the time the overall grade for condoms was worse than today (2.22) and the pill achieved a slightly better evaluation than today (2.15).

### Assessment of the contraceptive pill (trend)

Question: We want to know how you assess certain qualities for different contraceptives. [...] Please evaluate the contraceptive pill.  
Scale of 1 'very good' to 6 'very poor'

■ 2019 ■ 2014



Basis: 14- to 25-year-old girls and young women who have had heterosexual intercourse multiple times | average figures on a scale of 1 to 6

Source: BZgA dataset Youth Sexuality, 2014 and 2019 surveys

Figure 3

Nevertheless the contraceptive pill is still considered particularly reliable, easily available and easy to use. A greater percentage of respondents see it as inexpensive today than five years ago (since 2019 the contraceptive pill has also been available for free to young women up until their 22nd year of life). On the other hand, a greater number of the 2019 respondents felt it had a negative impact on the sex than in 2014.

## Result 5

## Young women are more critical about the pill's tolerability than they were a few years ago.

Even though the pill is evaluated positively by sexually active girls and young women between the ages of 14 and 25, the evaluations also contain clues about the fact that the current decrease in the use of the contraceptive pill that can be observed is connected to a more critical attitude towards the pill's tolerability by the body. As Figure 3 illustrates, the average evaluation has fallen significantly compared to 2014, from 2.6 to 3.1 on the six-point scale. Around four in ten of the (potential) users thought the pill was tolerated well or very well by the body (39%). But one in five of the girls/women (19%) believed the opposite, saying the pill was bad or even very bad for their health. What is striking here is that the number of critical voices increases in line with the age of the respondents. While only 10 percent of the respondents doubt the tolerability of the pill among the sexually active 14- to 17-year-olds, that figure is 17 percent among the 18- to 20-year-olds and even 22 percent among the 21- to 25-year-old women.

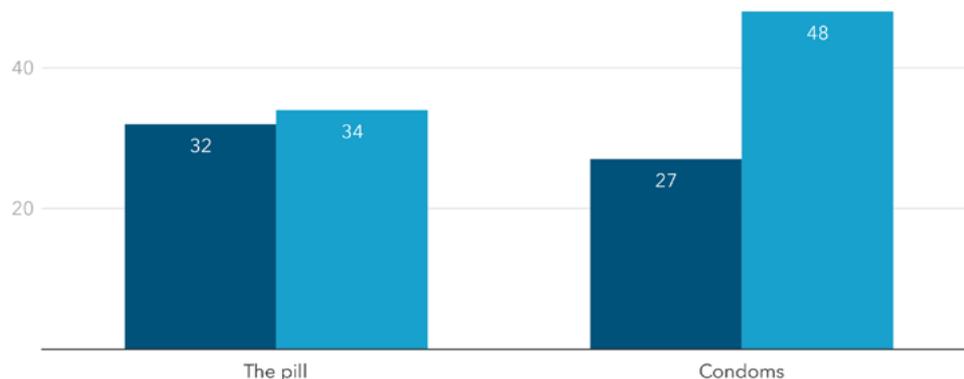
Furthermore, there is a clear educational impact: girls and young women with/pursuing higher educational qualifications are most likely to criticise the contraceptive pill for tolerability issues (25%). Among the respondents with a moderate or basic level of education, the figures are a mere 13 and 7 percent respectively.

As a result, how well the contraceptive pill is tolerated is not the main reason why girls and young women use it. The additional question as to the reasons for choosing the most recent contraceptive used was posed to the 18- to 25-year-old men and women (who are generally already sexually active at this point). In the overview of the usage reasons, a single justification dominates for the contraceptive pill: the sexually active 18- to 25-year-olds were particularly likely to cite the efficacy of the pill in preventing pregnancy (80%). That is without a doubt the crucial advantage of the contraceptive pill.

**Evaluation of the most recently used contraceptive as 'well tolerated' by contraceptive used (trend)**

Question: For what reasons did you and your partner choose this contraceptive / this method in particular?  
Here: 'well tolerated, no side-effects'

■ 2014 ■ 2019



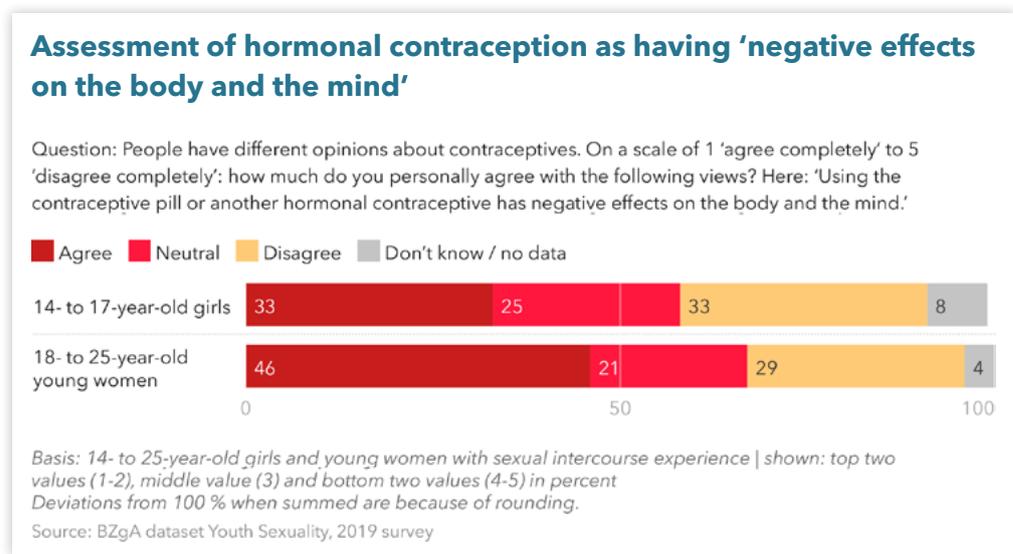
Basis: 18- to 25-year-olds who used the contraceptive pill (but no condoms) or condoms (but not the contraceptive pill) for their last heterosexual intercourse | multiple responses | affirmative responses in percent  
Source: BZgA dataset Youth Sexuality, 2014 and 2019 surveys

Figure 4

When looking at the trend for the usage reasons, the aspect of tolerability stands out again (see Figure 4). In 2014 the tolerability of the contraceptive pill and of condoms was judged as roughly equal by those who exclusively used one or the other. Currently, however, the tolerability of the pill is cited less often as a reason for its use. What is striking here is not just the drop in the percentage saying the pill is well-tolerated (minus 5 points); instead, it is the big difference in responses between the pill and condom users as to the respective contraceptive's tolerability. While almost half of the users felt condoms were well-tolerated (48 %), the same was true for only 34 percent of the pill users.

There are some indicators that the subject of tolerability has obtained a new relevance in recent years, as part of societal debates around ecology and sustainability as well as health-conscious lifestyles. This can also be seen in the current Youth Sexuality survey and the most recent statements about hormonal contraception. It is worth taking a more differentiated look, because the responses given by the 14- to 17-year-olds differ markedly from those given by the 18- to 25-year-old young women. The women aged 18 and above are significantly more critical about the subject of hormonal contraception than those under the age of 18 but with experience of sexual intercourse and contraception.

Figure 5



With regards to the negative physical and emotional effects (see Figure 5), the 14- to 17-year-old girls were balanced in their response percentages: a third of the girls said they worried about physical and emotional problems as a result of using the contraceptive pill or another hormonal contraceptive, while an equally high percentage of girls did not see a problem here. Among the 18- to 25-year-old women almost half were convinced of negative side-effects (46%). A similar picture emerged for statements such as 'Using the contraceptive pill or another hormonal contraceptive for years is harmless' or 'Using the contraceptive pill or another hormonal contraceptive is also suitable for very young girls'. With increasing age, the number of respondents who are critical about hormonal contraceptives such as the pill grows.

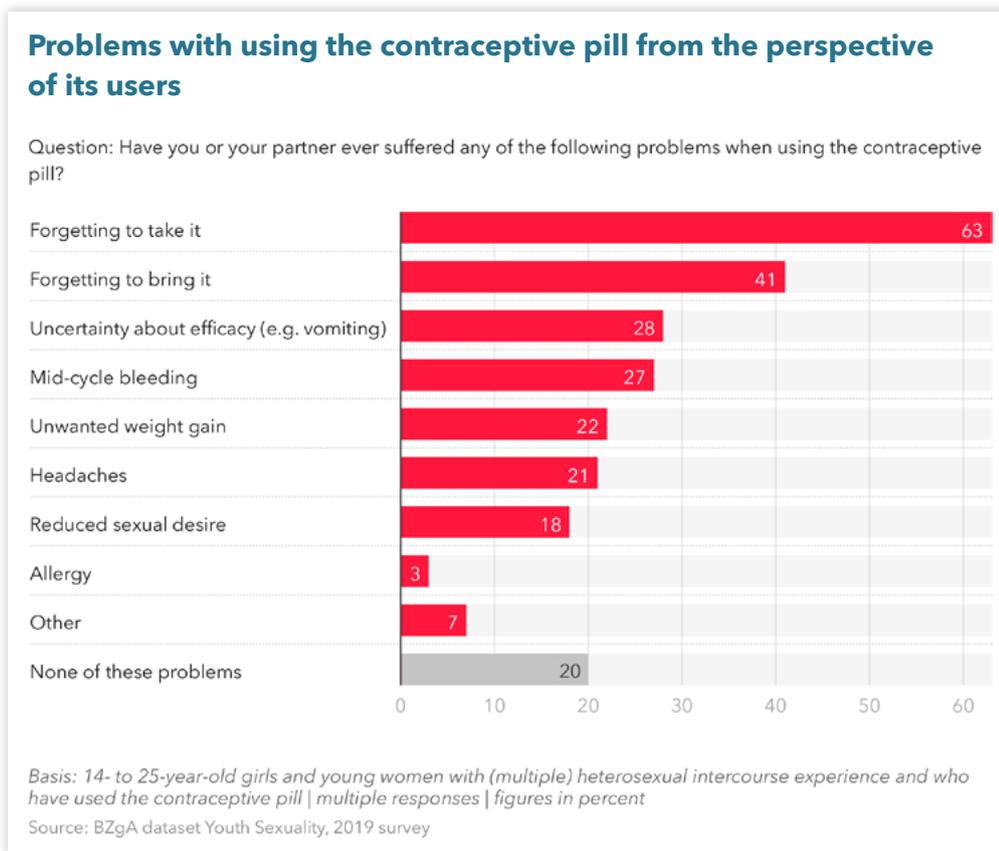
The same is true for level of education: the higher the (pursued) level of educational qualifications, the more likely girls and young women are to be critical of the contraceptive pill.

Result 6

## Forgetting to take the contraceptive pill remains the most common usage problem with the pill.

Taking a closer look at how easy girls and young women find the contraceptive pill to use, by asking for the specific problems with taking the pill, one main problem emerges: it must be taken regularly in order to provide reliable protection. According to the respondents' statements, almost two in three pill users have at times forgotten to take it on time (63%). A further 41 percent have also forgotten to take the pill with them when they have stayed away overnight (see Figure 6).

Figure 6



[See Youth Sexuality  
9th - Fact Sheet  
'In Focus: Condoms'](#)



[See Figure 3 in:  
Youth Sexuality  
9th Iteration - Fact Sheet  
'Emergency Contraception'](#)



An additional factor is uncertainty about the pill's efficacy because of vomiting or diarrhoea, felt by more than one in four users (28%). An equally high percentage of users reported mid-cycle bleeding (27%). Further side-effects, such as unwanted weight gain or headaches were cited as a problem by a good fifth of the users each.

Only one in five pill users reported no problems using the contraceptive. Compared to condom users, the direct users of the pill therefore report negative side-effects substantially more often (condoms: 30% no problems).

It can be said quite generally for the contraceptive pill (but also for condoms) that the sexually active users of these options who are under the age of 18 are less likely to report problems with their use than the users who are 18 or above. 82 percent of those aged 18 to 25 report problems using the contraceptive pill, while only 64 percent of the 14- to 17-year-old girls do.

In the event of a concrete problem with the contraceptive pill the 'morning-after pill' was used more often. 31 percent used emergency contraception because they had forgotten to take the contraceptive pill, 15 percent because the contraceptive pill could not work.

## References

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## Notes on the data

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- As the percentages shown has been rounded to whole numbers, it is possible that they may not add up to 100 percent.
- For the same reason the combined categories (e.g. 'very satisfied' and 'mostly satisfied') can deviate from the sum of the individual categories depicted.
- For questions where the respondents were able to pick several answers, the total figure can exceed 100 percent.
- Where data is available from previous surveys, the survey results are shown in a trend comparison. Because of how the samples were done it is possible to see the long-term trend covering almost 40 years for boys and girls between 14 and 17 without a migrant background.
- Participants are deemed to have a migrant background if they themselves or at least one parent was born without German citizenship; this definition is also used by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021).
- The level of education is determined by the (desired) qualifications the study participants were/are seeking at school based on the education system in Germany. Low: 9 years of school, most are around 15 years old when they leave (e.g. Hauptschule) Moderate: 10 years of school, most are around 16 years old when they leave (e.g. mittlere Reife). High: 12 to 13 years of school, most are 18 to 19 years old when they leave (e.g. Abitur).
- Because of the methodological design of the Youth Sexuality Study a further non-binary differentiation of gender has had to be left out. For this same reason, the term 'sex' (biological aspects, assigned by birth) continues to be used (in contrast to 'gender' in the sense of social construction, gender identity as personal internal perception of oneself) to enable statements on long-term trends (see also Census UK, 2019). This decision is purely a methodological necessity and not based on a lack of awareness of diversity here.

## Imprint

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## The Research Project: Background, Research Team, Methodology

The Federal Centre for Health Education's (BZgA) representative study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration is a repeat survey. In the summer of 2019 the ninth large-scale survey of young people, their parents and young adults began. A total of 6,032 interviews were conducted nationwide. Since 1980, the BZgA has been investigating the attitudes and behaviour of young people in the Federal Republic of Germany with regard to sexuality education, sexuality and contraception. This current study follows on from the previous years' studies with the explicit aim of illustrating trends.

### Project profile

<b>Client</b>	Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)
<b>Project lead</b>	Angelika Hessling, BZgA
<b>Survey institute</b>	Kantar GmbH
<b>Survey population</b>	Adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25
<b>Survey method</b>	Computer-supported combined oral-written survey; for the more intimate questions the questionnaire was to be filled out by the respondents without the interviewers being able to see.
<b>Selection method</b>	A disproportionately selected quota sample with regards to sex, age and migrant background
<b>Sample of young people</b>	6,032 interviews of which 3,556 were with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 and 2,476 with young adults between 18 and 25
<b>Sample: parents</b>	In the households of the 14- to 17-year-old adolescents without a migrant background one parent was also surveyed (2,422 interviews)
<b>Weighting</b>	All the data shown underwent a representative weighting in order to remove the sample's disproportionalities caused by the design.
<b>Survey period</b>	May to October 2019



### More information about the study Youth Sexuality 9th Iteration Central results and further fact sheets

<https://www.sexualaufklaerung.de/en/english/projects/detail/youth-sexuality-9th-iteration/>