

Social Construction of Sexuality in Adolescents in the Digital Age: Implications for Risky Sexual Behavior and Its Impact on Reproductive Health

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Abstract. The digital era has transformed the way adolescents access information, including information about sexuality. Gadgets and social media have become primary agents of socialization, displacing the conventional roles of parents and schools. This phenomenon has shaped new and distinct understandings of sexual norms and behaviors among the younger generation. This study aims to analyze the social construction of sexuality among adolescents in the digital era and identify the digital factors that influence the formation of these concepts. This research used qualitative methods with a phenomenological approach. The results indicate that adolescents' understanding of sexuality is formed through three stages of sociological dialectics in cyberspace. The externalization process occurs when adolescents express their curiosity and bodily expression online through anonymous accounts to avoid real-world moral censorship. Next, objectification occurs through the work of timeline algorithms and online peer group validation, which institutionalize sexual narratives into objective reality and trigger the normalization of risky behaviors such as sexting and cyber-dating. Ultimately, at the internalization stage, these free and permissive cyber values are fully absorbed into life principles and personal sexual identities. The digital era has structurally altered the landscape of adolescent sexual socialization by taking over the authority of traditional social control. The lack of adequate digital and sexual literacy filters ultimately gives rise to the phenomenon of dualism of consciousness, where adolescents physically live within conservative family rules, but mentally, their thinking has been completely constructed by the liberalization of digital values.

Keywords: *Social Construction, Sexuality, Adolescents, Digital Era, Social Media.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the digital era has fundamentally transformed the social and cultural landscape of society, especially for adolescents growing up as digital natives. For this generation, cyberspace is no longer merely a communication tool or secondary entertainment source, but has become their primary living space where they spend the majority of their productive time (Ariningrum & Aliyah, 2026). Unlimited internet access through smartphones facilitates massive information exchange, gradually redefining how adolescents consume knowledge and build social interactions. In this digital ecosystem, various information stimuli, including material related to sexuality, are constantly present and influence their subconscious and daily thought patterns (Adiarti & Fadhilah, 2025).

Traditionally, understandings of sexuality, the body, and romantic relationships are instilled through conventional socialization agents such as the family, religious institutions, and schools. However, in the contemporary era, the dominance of these formal institutions is beginning to be displaced by the presence of digital media, which offers sexual narratives more quickly, more graphically, and without religious or cultural filters (Amaianita et al., 2024). Teenagers tend to turn to cyberspace to satisfy their curiosity due to the lack of bureaucratic barriers and moral censorship on the internet. This phenomenon positions social media and online communities as new authorities holding central control in disseminating new understandings of sexual values among the younger generation (Susiana, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, human sexuality is never solely biological, but rather a dynamic reality that is continuously socially constructed by the environment in which individuals interact. Digital space provides a new interactive platform where the processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization of sexual values occur simultaneously and massively through timeline algorithms (Musarrofa & Sa'adah, 2024). Trend culture, content visualization, and the ease of sharing messages on social media have gradually institutionalized certain perceptions of what is considered normal, attractive, or taboo in adolescent sexual behavior. The new constructions born of these digital interactions often create a sharp clash with the traditional moral value structures and local cultures upheld by their physical environments (Nurmala et al., 2025).

The free flow of sexual information in the digital space has complex psychosocial consequences for adolescent character development. On the one hand, digitalization opens access to inclusive reproductive health education; on the other hand, this space is also filled with exposure to online pornography, cyber-dating culture, and even sexual messaging (sexting) (Murniati et al., 2025). The phenomenon of uploading content that emphasizes sensuality for digital popularity demonstrates a new standardization in how the body is viewed. Without critical filters, adolescents are highly vulnerable to adopting biased concepts of sexuality, which in turn can trigger the normalization of risky sexual behavior in the real world (Yati, 2024).

Although the topic of adolescent sexuality has been widely discussed in sociological and health literature, most previous studies have tended to frame this phenomenon within a medical-clinical approach. Academic research tends to view digital technology as a passive object, thus overlooking the social dialectic of how adolescents actively negotiate their sexual identities behind their devices (Amir et al., 2022; Purnama et al., 2020). This lack of focus underpins the importance of qualitatively examining the mechanisms of value internalization to understand the extent to which social media algorithms can shift adolescents' moral awareness of their own sexuality.

To unravel this complexity, this study applies the Social Construction of Reality Theory by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (2016) as the primary theoretical framework. This theory is highly relevant for examining how adolescents' subjective realities regarding sexuality are shaped by objective realities deliberately produced in cyberspace. Through this approach, the dynamics of adolescents absorbing digital stimuli, transforming them into social justifications within their peer groups, and ultimately integrating these cyber values into personal life principles can be systematically mapped and explained (Tenri Awaru, 2020).

The novelty of this study lies in its analytical depth, which integrates features of the modern digital ecosystem—such as the anonymity of cyberspace and viral culture—as key instruments in shaping sexual awareness. The urgency of this research is based on the pressing need to understand the perspectives purely from the perspective of adolescents themselves amidst the onslaught of 21st-century technology. By understanding the reconstruction of their thinking, this study is expected to provide new theoretical contributions to digital sociology and serve as a practical foundation for formulating more relevant and adaptive sexual education methods.

Based on the background of the problems outlined, this study specifically aims to analyze in depth the process of social construction of sexuality among adolescents in the digital era and identify the dominant cyber factors interfering with this thinking. To provide a comprehensive understanding, this article is systematically structured, beginning with an explanation of the qualitative research methods used. The discussion section then presents field findings contextualized within sociological theory, and concludes with conclusions and strategic recommendations for stakeholders.

B. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological approach to deeply explore the lived experiences and awareness of adolescents in constructing an understanding of sexuality in cyberspace. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with inclusion criteria including adolescents aged 15–18 who actively use social media (such as TikTok and Instagram) for a minimum of 3–4 hours per day and who have committed to providing informed consent. The research took place in Cimahi City, chosen for its high internet penetration and rich contrasting values. This region presents a unique dialectical space for adolescents to negotiate local traditional moral norms, which tend to be taboo on sexuality, with the freedom of the cybercultural values they consume daily through their mobile devices. The research data was collected through three main techniques to achieve triangulation: semi-structured in-depth interviews on body perceptions and digital romantic relationships, gender-based focus group discussions to examine value validation within peer groups, and digital observation (netnography) of the informants' cyber content trends. The raw data, in the form of verbatim transcripts and field notes, were then analyzed interactively using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model. The analysis process began with data condensation to group findings based on the themes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization in Social Constructionism theory. The data were then presented in a structured narrative matrix before valid conclusions were drawn through member checking.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Dynamics of Sexual Behavior and Access to Information on Adolescent Sexuality in Digital Media

The massive development of information and communication technology in the contemporary era has brought about radical changes in the structure of social life, particularly among adolescents. As a generation born and raised alongside the technological boom, often referred to as digital natives, adolescents no longer view digital technology merely as a secondary communication tool. Smart devices and internet connections have transformed into a new, inseparable part of their daily lives, dominating both productive and leisure time, and serving as their primary window into the outside world. Within this cyber ecosystem, adolescents encounter a wide variety of information stimuli, including material related to the body, gender, and sexuality.

The global flow of information brought about by the internet provides adolescents with unlimited access to all kinds of content that was previously difficult to access due to strict social and legal censorship. Popular social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and other instant messaging apps are now filled with visual and textual narratives containing sexual content, both educational and recreational-commercial. The constant and repetitive presence of this content in adolescents' digital spaces occurs through the work of timeline algorithms designed to consistently present material according to users' predispositions. As a result, adolescents are surrounded by a massive influx of sexual information, which slowly but surely begins to infiltrate their subconscious and influence how they think about sexuality.

This situation is exacerbated by significant cultural barriers in the real world, where traditional social institutions such as families, religious institutions, and schools still view sexuality as a taboo topic. Parents and teachers tend to avoid open discussions about reproductive health and sexuality, fearing that such discussions will encourage adolescents to engage in such practices. This blocked, rigid, and judgment-laden communication within the domestic environment creates a wide gap between parents and children. When adolescents cannot find satisfactory answers from moral authorities in the real world, they experience

confusion in understanding the biological and psychological changes occurring within themselves.

This limited space for discussion in the real world ultimately drives adolescents to migrate their information seeking to cyberspace, which offers absolute freedom. The internet has become a primary escape and is considered a safe space for teenagers because it offers anonymity, allowing them to explore anything without feeling embarrassed or afraid of judgment. Through anonymous accounts or online discussion forums, teenagers can freely ask questions, read about others' experiences, and even consume the sexual material they need. In this context, search engines and social media have taken over the educational role that should have been held by parents and formal educational institutions as the primary sources of knowledge for teenagers.

The types of sexual information consumed by teenagers in the digital space are highly heterogeneous and span a very broad spectrum. On the one hand, there is positive content packaged in an engaging manner by health education content creators, psychologists, and non-governmental organizations focused on adolescent reproductive health. This educational content typically discusses puberty, reproductive rights, preventing sexual violence, and the importance of maintaining consent in relationships. This type of information contributes positively to improving adolescent health literacy, which they have not received comprehensively in school due to limited curricula.

However, on the other hand, cyberspace is also filled with a flood of pornographic content, bodily exploitation, and the commodification of sensuality for the sake of digital popularity. Teenagers, intentionally or unintentionally, are often exposed to videos, photos, or fictional stories that exploit aspects of human sexuality in vulgar and unrealistic ways. The use of search features, deceptive advertising links, and posts from other users in online communities make exposure to pornographic material extremely difficult for teens to avoid. This content presents a biased standardization of sexual behavior, often separating sexual acts from moral responsibility, emotional responsibility, and real-world health consequences.

This mixture of education and exploitation of sexual information has slowly led to the normalization of various new sexual behaviors among teens. One of the most prevalent phenomena in the current digital era is sexting, which is the act of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos through messaging apps. This activity initially begins with curiosity, experimentation, or coercion and persuasion in a relationship. Among contemporary teenagers, sexting is no longer viewed as a serious moral violation or high-risk behavior, but rather as a commonplace part of modern romantic relationships.

In addition to sexting, the phenomenon of digital dating, or cyber-dating, has also become a new behavioral trend dominating romantic interactions among today's teenagers. Through video calling, teenagers can establish physical intimacy visually with their partners despite being in different geographic locations, which often leads to sexual video calls. Romantic relationships in this digital era rely heavily on screen interaction, where expressions of affection are measured through the intensity of text exchanges, mutually intimate social media posts, and even fulfilling a partner's visual demands. This pattern of interaction creates a new definition of intimacy that is entirely mediated by digital technology and blurs the boundaries of personal privacy.

Another crucial phenomenon is the standardization and commodification of adolescent bodies on social media for the sake of digital validation. Trend culture on platforms like TikTok and Instagram indirectly demands that teenagers, especially girls, display their bodies in ways that are considered aesthetically pleasing but often emphasize sensuality. Wearing tight clothing, performing viral sensual dance moves, or using face- and body-altering filters are all done to gain likes, followers, and positive comments. In the eyes of teenagers, the body is no

longer viewed as a biological entity that must be maintained for its health, but has shifted to a visual commodity judged by standards of online popularity.

This shift in values and the normalization of risky behavior does not occur individually, but is reinforced through interactions and consensus within online peer groups. Peer groups have a very dominant influence in adolescent development because it is during this period that adolescents seek group recognition and identity. When permissive values regarding sexuality are agreed upon and practiced collectively within their digital friendship circles, initially hesitant teenagers tend to adopt them to avoid being considered old-fashioned or ostracized. This online peer group solidarity creates a self-sufficient cyber ecosystem, validating every digital sexual act as a cool lifestyle trend.

The psychological state of teenagers, still in an immature stage of emotional development, makes them highly vulnerable to the dynamics of this cyber world. Teenagers tend to have weak self-control and limited foresight, often ignoring the long-term risks of their digital activities. They are unaware that any digital data they send, such as intimate photos or videos in sexting, leaves a permanent digital footprint and can potentially be misused. The lack of critical information filtering leads teens to blindly accept what they see on their devices as absolute truths to be imitated.

The impact of this normalization of digital sexual behavior has complex psychosocial consequences, often detrimental to the future of adolescents. Cases of online gender-based violence, such as the non-consensual distribution of intimate photos as revenge after a breakup, are now a widespread phenomenon, causing profound psychological trauma for victims. Adolescent victims often experience social anxiety, depression, decreased academic performance, and even thoughts of self-harm due to the harsh social sanctions imposed by digital media. This phenomenon demonstrates that freedom in the digital space poses a real threat that can destroy adolescents' real-world lives.

Beyond the threat of online violence, misconceptions about sexuality on the internet also have the potential to trigger increased risky sexual behavior in the real world. Adolescents who perceive casual sexual activity on social media as normal are more likely to try to implement these digital fantasies into their physical relationships. This can lead to premarital pregnancies and an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections due to a lack of understanding about contraception and reproductive health. Biased digital narratives have obscured adolescents' understanding of the biological and medical responsibilities of each sexual act they engage in.

The presence of digital media as a new center of reference for values ultimately creates a confusing dual reality for adolescents. Physically, they must still live and obey the strict, conservative rules of family, school, and local community norms. However, virtually, their thoughts and attention are completely absorbed in a cyberspace that is extremely liberal, open, and permissive regarding sexuality. This wide gap between physical and virtual reality forces adolescents to lead a dual life, where they present a compliant facade to their parents but hide their digital sexual identities behind their device screens.

Closed communication patterns between adolescents and their parents exacerbate this duality and minimize the opportunity for early moral intervention. Adolescents tend to hide their digital activities from their parents due to fear of physical punishment, device confiscation, or intense anger. Many parents, on the other hand, experience technological ineptitude and don't understand how social media algorithms influence their children's minds. As a result, parents often assume their children are safe in their rooms, unaware that they are simultaneously exploring a cyberspace rife with sexual risks.

These field conditions, as a whole, confirm that the digital era has structurally and fundamentally changed the landscape of adolescent sexual socialization. Traditional

institutions no longer have sole authority in controlling the moral behavior of the younger generation, as the boundaries between home and school have been breached by the internet. Social media is no longer simply a medium for conveying messages but has become an active socialization agent, producing, packaging, and disseminating new sexual values on a massive scale. The shift in adolescents' perspectives on the body, intimacy, and romantic relationships in this digital era is a clear depiction of the breakdown of conventional social controls in the face of the power of technology.

Through all these dynamics of information access and manifestations of cyber behavior, it is clear that adolescents' understanding of sexuality is currently formed through a highly complex social dialectic in the digital space. Adolescents are no longer passive consumers of information but rather active actors co-producing and celebrating cyber sexual culture with their peers. This empirical reality provides a crucial foundation for further examining how the sociological processes involving the absorption of these digital values play out in adolescents' personal consciousness. Ultimately, the presentation of this field phenomenon demands a more in-depth theoretical analysis to map the stages of social construction occurring behind the screens of their devices.

2. The Dialectic of the Social Construction of Sexuality: Externalization, Objectivation, and Internalization

The sociological processes underlying the formation of adolescents' understanding of sexuality in the digital age can be comprehensively analyzed through the analysis of the Theory of the Social Construction of Reality, proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. This theory views social reality as not a static or mechanistic entity of nature, but rather a product created, maintained, and continuously transformed by humans through dynamic social interactions. In the context of contemporary life, cyberspace presents itself as a new social structure that brings individuals together with a variety of powerful, digitally organized external stimuli. Through three simultaneous dialectical moments: externalization, objectivation, and internalization, adolescents actively construct new definitions and meanings regarding sexuality, intimacy, and bodily morality.

This dialectic of social construction begins with the moment of externalization, which is the process by which individuals actively pour themselves, their thoughts, and their activities into the social world outside themselves. During adolescence, the biological and psychological drive to seek self-identity and understand sexuality constitutes an internal energy that requires a channel for expression. When traditional social institutions like family and school block these channels through taboo labeling, adolescents externalize these channels into the freedom and limitlessness of the digital space. Teenagers project their curiosity, anxieties, and expectations into cyberspace through keyword searches, posts, and comments on various social media platforms.

Through this externalization in digital space, adolescents are not merely passive consumers of information but active producers of cyberculture, actively participating in creating new realities. They express themselves by uploading photos, creating trending videos that emphasize body aesthetics, and even openly discussing sensitive topics regarding romantic relationships. The anonymity and privacy provided by smartphones lowers the psychological barriers adolescents face in externalizing their sexuality, which has been suppressed by real-world social controls. This process is the first step in adolescents' personal, subjective ideas and thoughts about sexuality being expressed and communicated within the permissive cyber ecosystem.

The subjective ideas externalized by millions of teenagers in the digital space then move into the second moment of Berger and Luckmann's dialectic: the process of objectivation.

Objectivation occurs when the products of human activity, initially subjective, become institutionalized, crystallized, and begin to be viewed as an objective reality external to their creators. In the digital space, mass-produced sexualized content, casual dating styles, skimpy clothing trends, and even sexual messaging are no longer considered deviant behavior by individuals. All of these digital manifestations crystallize into a distinct reality that appears tangible, established, and has the authority to influence public perception.

Artificial intelligence plays a crucial role in accelerating the process of objectification in this modern era, in the form of structured social media timeline algorithms. The algorithms record every teenager's digital footprint, measure their screen time on specific content, and then consistently present similar sexually charged content over and over again. This repetition of visual and narrative exposure creates a powerful social illusion in teenagers' minds that the phenomena they see on their screens are inevitable. When screens constantly display certain patterns of sexual behavior as popular, teenagers perceive this as a social consensus or objective reality that is normal in the world.

This objective reality formed in cyberspace then gains social legitimacy within peer group interactions mediated by digital technology. Through likes, comments, follower counts, and content re-shares, peer groups collectively validate these digital sexual values as the new, legitimate norm. Within these online communities, an act contrary to conventional morality can be redefined as a symbol of modernity, maturity, and a legitimate expression of affection. The institutionalization of these new values establishes digital reality as a counter-institution that exerts powerful social pressure on its members.

Once the reality of sexuality in the digital era crystallizes into an objective reality institutionalized in cyberspace, the construction process continues to the third stage: internalization. Internalization is the process of reabsorbing the constructed objective world into each individual's subjective consciousness, thus adopting it as a personal life principle. At this stage, adolescents no longer view sexual values on social media as foreign or external to themselves, but rather as internal structures of consciousness. The standards of intimacy, concepts of romantic relationships, and perceptions of bodily propriety they see online are fully absorbed into their own sexual identities.

Through deep internalization, adolescents practice these cyber values in their everyday actions without perceiving anything wrong or deviating from traditional morality. They adopt styles of dress, body language, and even risky interaction patterns like sexting because their internal thought structures validate these actions as part of a modern lifestyle. The old moral structures instilled by parents and religious institutions are slowly being eroded and replaced by a new moral compass originating from the digital world. This internalization marks the success of digital technology in reconstructing human consciousness at the most fundamental level, namely subjective perspectives on one's own body and sexuality.

The dialectic of these three moments of social construction does not proceed linearly, but rather rotates in a spiraling cycle that continuously influences each other in adolescents' daily lives. The subjective thoughts internalized by adolescents are then externalized in the form of actions and the production of new content on social media, which in turn reinforces the objectification of cyber norms widely. Every time teenagers post their sexual expressions for digital validation, they reinforce the structure of objective reality on the internet, which will then be internalized by other teenagers. This massive and relentless sociological cycle explains why shifts in sexual values among young people are occurring at such an exponential rate in the digital age.

A crucial impact of this cyber social construct is the emergence of the phenomenon of dual consciousness, or split personality, experienced by the majority of contemporary teenagers. On the one hand, in the physical environment of home and school, they are expected

to present themselves as individuals who adhere to the objective reality of conservative local society. However, on the other hand, their subjective consciousness behind their devices has been completely internalized by the liberalization of open cyber values. Teenagers are forced to adapt complex identity negotiation strategies, separating their real lives from their secret digital identities to avoid direct conflict with parental moral authority.

The intergenerational gap in communication and understanding within the family significantly reinforces this isolated space of adolescent digital consciousness. Parents who experience technological incompetence tend to be able to control only the physical aspects of their children's behavior, such as their presence in the home, but fail to reach their conscious space in cyberspace. The absence of equal interactive dialogue at home makes the objective reality of the family lose its emotional and ideological hold for adolescents. In contrast, cyberspace offers acceptance, the warmth of a peer group, and instant answers that make digital value constructions feel much more relevant to their psychological needs.

The collapse of traditional social control authority demonstrates that conventional institutions no longer hold sole control in producing social values and norms in society. Social media, with its algorithmic systems, has taken over as a primary socialization agent, far more powerful, interactive, and persuasive than parents or teachers. Through aesthetic visualizations and entertaining narratives, permissive sexual values are infiltrated into adolescents' consciousness without their awareness as a form of cultural indoctrination. Cyber reality has succeeded in creating a new value system that redefines previously established boundaries of decency, privacy, and sexual morality.

This sociological situation is complicated by the fact that adolescents often internalize these digital sexual values without adequate digital and sexual literacy skills. They reject the authority of traditional values, yet at the same time lack the critical analytical tools to filter the truth of information online. Adolescents readily accept the commodified body standardization and biased and exploitative concepts of intimacy from the pornography industry and social media trends. As a result, the internalization that occurs is a form of pseudo-value absorption, placing adolescents in a highly vulnerable position to sexual exploitation and online gender-based violence.

Theoretically, this analysis asserts that sexuality in the digital age is not a fixed biological reality, but rather a fluid social construct that continually negotiates with technological developments. Cyberspace has expanded the social laboratory of human interaction, where new meanings are collectively produced across national, cultural, and religious boundaries. Adolescents are the first group of social actors to experience the direct impact of this reconstruction of reality due to their existential proximity to technology. Their understanding of the body and romantic relationships is an honest reflection of how the contemporary digital environment dictates twenty-first-century human consciousness.

Therefore, resolving problems related to risky sexual behavior among adolescents in the digital age can no longer be achieved using conventional, one-way and repressive moral indoctrination methods. Intervention efforts must be directed at influencing the dialectical process of this social construction, particularly during the internalization stage of adolescent awareness. Family and school institutions must be able to transform into adaptive agents of dialogue, capable of breaking down taboos and providing spaces for rational, healthy, and literacy-based sexual discussions. Without improvements to socialization strategies in the real world, teenagers will continue to allow their consciousness to be completely constructed by the interests of algorithms and the liberalization of the cyber world.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the social construction of sexuality among adolescents in the digital age is formed through a massive, systematic, and technology-mediated sociological dialectic cycle. Cultural barriers in the real world, in the form of parental and school attitudes that tend to view sexuality as taboo, have pushed adolescents to externalize by migrating to cyberspace to satisfy their curiosity. Through the work of social media algorithms and peer group validation, repeatedly consumed sexual content is objectified into a new reality that is considered normal, thus triggering the normalization of risky behaviors such as sexting and cyber-dating. Ultimately, these free and permissive cyber values are internalized into adolescents' subjective consciousness, becoming life principles and personal sexual identities. This construction process, which occurs without adequate digital and sexual literacy filters, ultimately gives rise to the phenomenon of dualism of consciousness, where adolescents physically obey conservative family rules, but mentally their perspectives on the body and intimacy have been completely constructed by the liberalization of digital values.

From a public health perspective, this socially constructed normalization of permissive sexual values may also increase adolescents' vulnerability to adverse reproductive health outcomes. The acceptance of risky online and offline sexual behaviors can contribute to a higher likelihood of unprotected sexual activity, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly when adolescents lack comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health literacy. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy, comprehensive sexuality education, and family-based communication is essential not only to address the sociocultural dimensions of adolescent sexuality but also to reduce the associated reproductive health risks in the digital era.

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