

**VOL. XI ISSUE I, WINTER (MARCH-2026)**

# GSR

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW  
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW (GSR)

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**Keywords:** Digital Sexuality, Social Media, Sexual Desires, Identities, Behaviors

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Pages: 13-21

DOI:10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026\(XI-I\).02](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02)

Article link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/digital-sexuality-exploring-social-media-influence-on-adults-sexual-desires-identities-and-behaviors>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/digital-sexuality-exploring-social-media-influence-on-adults-sexual-desires-identities-and-behaviors>

Pdf link: <https://www.gsrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2.pdf>

**Global Sociological Review**

p-ISSN: [2708-2091](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2708-2091) e-ISSN: [2708-3586](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2708-3586)

DOI(journal):10.31703/gsr

Volume: XI (2026)

DOI (volume):10.31703/gsr.2026(XI)

Issue: I Winter (March-2026)

DOI(Issue):10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I)

**Home Page**

[www.gsrjournal.com](http://www.gsrjournal.com)

Volume: XI (2026)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/Current-issue>

Issue: I-Winter (March 2026)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/issue/11/1/2026>

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### Citing this Article

<b>Article Serial</b>	02
<b>Article Title</b>	Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors
<b>Authors</b>	Muhammad Intizar Raza Amber Javed Suleeman Hussain
<b>DOI</b>	10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02
<b>Pages</b>	13–21
<b>Year</b>	2026
<b>Volume</b>	XI
<b>Issue</b>	I
<b>Referencing &amp; Citing Styles</b>	
<b>APA</b>	Raza, M. I., Javed, A., & Hussain, S. (2026). Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , XI(1), 13-21. <a href="https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02">https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02</a>
<b>CHICAGO</b>	Raza, Muhammad Intizar, Amber Javed, and Suleeman Hussain. 2026. "Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> XI (I):13-21. doi: 10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02.
<b>HARVARD</b>	RAZA, M. I., JAVED, A. & HUSSAIN, S. 2026. Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , XI, 13-21.
<b>MHRA</b>	Raza, Muhammad Intizar, Amber Javed, and Suleeman Hussain. 2026. 'Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , XI: 13-21.
<b>MLA</b>	Raza, Muhammad Intizar, Amber Javed, and Suleeman Hussain. "Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> XI.I (2026): 13-21. Print.
<b>OXFORD</b>	Raza, Muhammad Intizar, Javed, Amber, and Hussain, Suleeman (2026), 'Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , XI (I), 13-21.
<b>TURABIAN</b>	Raza, Muhammad Intizar, Amber Javed, and Suleeman Hussain. "Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> XI, no. I (2026): 13-21. <a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02">https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).02</a> .

## Digital Sexuality: Exploring Social Media Influence on Adults' Sexual Desires, Identities, and Behaviors



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### Abstract

The paper investigates the approaches of adults to social media in all its aspects: perception, interpretation, and bargaining of the impact of social media on their sexual desires, identities, and behaviors. Existing literature on the topic of digital sexuality has mostly focused on adolescents and emerging adults, neglecting adulthood as a persistent location of sexual negotiation. The qualitative interpretive design was adopted through which semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 11 adult social media users (18-30) in Punjab, Pakistan. The thematic analysis of data was conducted in terms of the sexual scripts theory and performativity. The results indicate that social media strengthens sexual awareness and, at the same time, supports cultural ideas of modesty, respectability, and surveillance. Individuals participated in strategic self-representation, gendered containment, and selective use of personal digital space to assert hidden sexual agency.

**Keywords:** *Digital Sexuality, Social Media, Sexual Desires, Identities, Behaviors*

### Introduction

The digital media have turned into an inseparable part of the modern organization of sexual life and transformed the ways desire, identity, and intimacy are constructed, represented, and fought. Instead of being a neutral technology, social media platforms are cultural space, organized around the visibility, surveillance and normative demands, according to which sexuality is produced and assessed on a continuous basis (Albury, 2018; Burgess et al., 2016; van Doorn, 2011). In these spaces, sexuality is made visible, insistent, and socially trackable, and sexuality becomes a process of negotiation between agency and constraint, and it is continuous (Adams-Santos, 2020).

Sexuality has been a longstanding concept in sociological scholarship as socially constructed and experienced in power, gender, and embodiment relationships. Online spaces enhance these dynamics in particular by facilitating novel modes of sexual self-presentation and at the same time amplifying desirability, respectability, and legitimacy normative discourses (Marwick, 2013; Hilton-Morrow and Battles, 2015). The distribution of sexualized images, stories, and relationships of social media not only increases the opportunities of sexual self-representation but also enforces dominant sexual hierarchies, especially gender, age, and sexual identity (Ringrose, 2011; Perloff, 2014).

Majority of the current studies of digital sexuality have centered on adolescents and young adults, with the focus on sexual socialization, risks and identity development (Eleuteri et al., 2017; Maes et al., 2022; Wright, 2016). These works have revealed the way in which youth turn to social media to experiment with the desire, negotiate intimacy, act on sexual identity in peer-managed digital cultures (Bhana et al., 2025; Cooper et al., 2021). Although this work has been very important in breaking down moral panics about youth sexuality, it has also resulted in a literature that implicitly assumes sexuality in digital space as a phase in development as opposed to a long-term characteristic of adult sexual life.



In comparison, the interactions of sexuality and adult people in the social media are still relatively under-theorized in the sociological and sexuality research. However, recent studies indicate that online platforms still influence adult sexual subjectivities through the mediation of desire, intimacy and sexual self-understandings throughout the life course (Beato et al., 2024; Jovanovic and Williams, 2024). The exposure to social media has been associated with changes in sexual confidence, body image, and expectations of relations in adults, with the issue of digital presence and sexual well-being still being entangled (Medina et al., 2026; Talbot, 2022). What has not been so widely studied, however, is the way in which these influences are interpreted and negotiated by adults themselves in their daily lives.

In terms of Sexualities, it is important to go beyond the instrumental explanations of the effects of media and focus on how people are active in interpreting the cultures of digital sexuality in the larger social realms. Digital sexuality is not merely imitated but experienced in an embodied situation, emotional investment, and moral exchange (van Doorn, 2011; Adams-Santos, 2020). The likes, follows, and algorithmic visibility affordances of the social media platforms mediate the production of the sexual norms what sorts of sexual expression are made legible, desirable, or marginal (Gilroy and Kashyap, 2021; Burgess et al., 2016).

This article is added to the sociological and interdisciplinary arguments on digital sexuality through the qualitative study of how adults conceive the impact that social media has on their sexual desires, identities, and behaviors. Using the narratives of the participants, the study will examine the process through which adults negotiate sexual agency, authenticity and constraint in digitally mediated places. This study puts into question age-restricted models of digital sexuality and provides a more complex understanding of the collective production, dispute, and experience of sexual subjectivities in the social media era by focusing on adult experiences.

## Theoretical Framework:

### Sexual Scripts in Digital

The conceptualization of sexuality in sexual scripts theory, states that sexuality is structured by culturally accessible discourses that shape the way desire is interpreted, manifested and performed (Brown et al., 2001). These scripts occur in several layers, namely, the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic ones, and they provide the foundation not only of sexual behavior but also of fantasies, identities, and emotional meanings. Sexual scripts do not merely replicate as they are being restructured using mediated interaction, visual culture, and algorithmic amplification in digital environments (Adams-Santos, 2020; Ross, 2005).

Social media platforms serve as potent locations of the reproduction and mainstreaming of sexual scripts, including providing the patterns of what is desirable, acceptable or transgressive sexual expression (Albury, 2018; Marwick, 2013). Likes, comments and shares serve as the forms of validation that reward certain sexual performances at the expense of others and solidify dominant gendered and heteronormative expectations despite seemingly providing space of experimentation (Burgess et al., 2016; Ringrose, 2011). In adults, such scripts overlap with life-course projections concerning maturity, respectability and sexual legitimacy and this makes the negotiation of desire and identity online more complex.

### Performativity, Visibility, and Sexual Identity

Digital sexuality is performative in nature and individuals are forced to showcase their sexual identities via edited images, text and communication (van Doorn, 2011). Using sociological and feminist knowledge, sexuality on social media can be perceived as a continuous performance that is shaped by the awareness of the audience, platform affordances, and desired surveillance (Marwick, 2013). Sexual identity is not merely an object of being, as it is a repetitious object of doing in relation to others and within the particular limits of technology (Hilton-Morrow and Battles, 2015).

Literature shows that disclosure and visibility are core to the meaning making of sexual identity within the digital arena especially when it comes to non-normative sexualities (Gilroy and Kashyap, 2021; Filice et al., 2023). Nevertheless, visibility is hetero normed and unequally distributed and appreciated, organized through gender and age, body norms, and sexual orientation. Adults on social media can thus find themselves in conflict between authentic and strategic self-presentation, between the wish to gain presence and a consequent risk of being stigmatized, misinterpreted, or even morally judged.

## Research Objectives

1. To examine the ways in which adults perceive and respond to sexual scripts shared on the social media sites.
2. To understand how adults act and discuss sexual identities and desires on social media in the framework of visibility regimes, surveillance, and platform regimes.
3. To explore the role of sexual scripts mediated by social media in influencing the experience of embodiment, sexual agency, and intimate behaviors of adults in real life.

## Literature Review

Sexual scripts have also shown us that sexuality is structured in terms of culturally shared discourses (narratives) that construct desire, identity, and conduct (Brown et al., [2001](#)). These scripts are being mediated in digital contexts by visual culture, algorithmic visibility, and peer validation systems, which spread normative expectations of attractiveness, intimacy, and sexual legitimacy (Adams-Santos, [2020](#); Albury, [2018](#); Marwick, [2013](#)). The social media research lays down particular stress on the functioning of like, comments, and follower indicators as informal systems of control rewarding particular sexualizing performances and punishing others (Burgess et al., [2016](#); Ringrose, [2011](#)).

Nevertheless, the available literature has majorly investigated these mechanisms in adolescents and young adults, with the focus being sexual socialization and identity formation (Eleuteri et al., [2017](#); Maes et al., [2022](#); Wright, [2016](#)). Although this literature confirms the existence and strength of digital sexual scripts, it does not provide a lot of information on how adults perceive, digest or resist the digital sexual scripts in the framework of adulthood where the question of sexuality intercepts with the age-related norms of respectability and legitimacy. To close this gap, the current study focuses on how adults interpret digital sexual scripts and how they construct meaning on normative and challenged sexual representations being perpetuated through social media.

An emerging literature frames sexuality on social media as performative, focusing on the creation of sexual identities via repetition of self-presentation based on audience consciousness and perception of imagined surveillance (van Doorn, [2011](#); Marwick, [2013](#)). Sex in cyberspace is not seen as a given property but rather as has always been created by mediated interactions on the platforms (Hilton-Morrow and Battles, [2015](#)).

The research on internet disclosure accentuates that visibility is central to the salience and the recognition of sexual identities, especially to people with non-normative sexualities (Gilroy and Kashyap, [2021](#)). Other studies of bisexual and queer users also show how online space provides both validation and limitation and allows one to express identity and recreates marginalization and normative forces (Filice et al., [2023](#)). However, much of this work focuses either on younger users or particular sexual minorities by overlooking how adults as a more general group negotiate sexual visibility in connection to their professional roles, expectations of family and morality.

This study builds on the literature available on the sexual self-presentation negotiations of adults by addressing the relations of performativity and visibility over the adult life course through the prism of the authenticity, recognition, and risk tension in the digitally mediated sexual identity work.

The embodiment and social media studies indicate that the digital sexual cultures have a concrete impact on the way people engage their bodies, desires, and sexual value. Research indicates that the social media use that is concerned with appearance may contribute to an escalation of body consciousness and the impact on sexual confidence and well-being (Perloff, [2014](#); Medina et al., [2026](#)). Visual sexual standards that are shared on the internet tend to favor young people, thinness, gender conformity, and support hierarchies of desirability embodied (Falbot, [2022](#)).

Simultaneously, qualitative research also emphasizes the ambivalence of a sexual agency online. Social media may offer avenues of enforcing want, bargaining, and experiencing intimacy, and also subjects the user to critique, comparison, and limitation (Cooper et al., [2021](#)). The available literature, though, focuses mostly on these processes in teenagers and young adults, which is why the lived and embodied experiences of adults are underrepresented (Beato et al., [2024](#)).

This research is an extension of this literature in the sense that it foreshadows accounts of sexual agency and embodiment by adults, in the sense of how digital sexual scripts are experienced, understood, and made in real-life intimate environments outside of the screen.

## Methodology

In this research, a qualitative, interpretive research design was employed in order to learn the way adults perceive and negotiate sexuality in social media. The data were created by using semi-structured and in-depth interviews where participants were left to narrate their experiences, meaning and thoughts on digitally mediated sexuality in their own words. Purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify adults who used the social media platforms frequently and were ready to share their issues regarding sexual desire, identity, and intimacy. The sample finally included 11 adult participants and represented a diversity of experiences rather than attempted a statistical representativeness. The interviews were based on the interactions of the participants with social media, their understanding of sexual norms in an online environment, sexual self-presentations practices, and their perception of online and offline intimate lives overlaps. All transcripts were recorded and analyzed through audio-taping, word-to-letter, and the thematic analysis based on the sexual scripts theory and sociological ideas of performativity and visibility. The analysis was iterative and interpretive by focusing on patterns of similarities and areas of tension in the stories of participants, taking care of the power relations, embodiment and construction of sexual meaning in the digital space.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Qualification / Education	Living Settlement	Primary Social Media Platform
P1	19	Male	Intermediate	Urban	Instagram
P2	21	Male	Undergraduate	Urban	Instagram
P3	22	Female	Undergraduate	Urban	Instagram
P4	23	Male	Undergraduate	Semi-urban	Facebook
P5	24	Male	Graduate	Urban	Twitter/X
P6	25	Female	Graduate	Urban	Instagram
P7	26	Male	Graduate	Rural	Facebook
P8	27	Male	Postgraduate	Urban	Instagram
P9	28	Male	Postgraduate	Semi-urban	Twitter/X
P10	29	Female	Graduate	Urban	Instagram
P11	30	Male	Graduate	Rural	Facebook

Eleven adult social media users (18-30 years) who were living in Punjab, Pakistan were included in the study. The participants were diverse in their education level, place of residence and use of social media, but were united through a common set of socio-cultural beliefs, due to collectivism family setups, religious principles and strict demands of sexual modesty.

## Thematic Findings

The analysis revealed three related themes that describe the process of negotiating sexuality on social media in restricted but digitally expansive realms of Punjab adults.

### Theme 1: Solving Sexual Desire between Culture and Morality

According to the participants, social media was a place where sexual desire is met, fantasized, and bargained, but seldom stated publicly because of the strong cultural and religious beliefs that prohibit sexual indulgences

and focus on modesty, honor, and restraint. The issue of desire was more commonly presented as a matter that is to be handled privately and not publicly expressed.

“You see pretty people on Instagram, of course emotions arise, but you cannot express them directly. In this case, it is even dangerous to like some posts.” (P2, Male, 21)

“The desire is there yet our culture is to conceal it. Social media provides enticement, yet the fear of being judged.” (P6, Female, 25)

“I think social media amplifies the relationship and attraction thoughts, but you never forget your family values.” (P8, Male, 27)

“In Punjab, particularly, persons converse. Even lust over the Internet may be turned into a problem when one screenshots.” (P10, Female, 29)

These stories show the way in which digital scripts of sexuality are producing intersections with more localized moral codes, which give rise to a kind of contained desire of surveillance and reputational risk.

## **Theme 2: Sexual Identity, Respectability and Strategic Self-presentation**

Respondents always insisted on the need to be respectable online. Sexual identity was not an outcry but a latent act conducted through directed images, headings and communications. This was especially more intense among the female respondents, who reported a higher level of scrutiny and repercussions.

“I am quite cautious about what I write. A single misplaced image and the society begins to form assumptions on the character.” (P3, Female, 22)

“You cannot be entirely yourself online. You make an acceptable version of the filtered version that is acceptable to society.” (P5, Male, 24)

“Men get more freedom. Even normal photos can be interpreted as sexual to girls.” (P6, Female, 25)

“My sexual thoughts do not belong to my personal image. Social media is not secure thereof.” (P9, Male, 28)

In this regard, sexuality identity became a strategically quieted affair, which was formed by gender expectations, familial reputation, and perceived audiences.

## **Theme 3: Digital Intimacy, Privacy and Hidden Sexual Agency**

The subjects found social media to facilitate personal intimacy via direct messages and a list of close friends as well as encrypted communication despite their social responsibility to limit personal information. These areas provided some sexual agency with exterior conformity.

“On the one hand, we are nice to others, and on the other, DMs are a different place.” (P1, Male, 19)

“Private chats feel safer. You know, you can speak about feelings without all the people paying attention.” (P4, Male, 23)

“I am only able to speak to the person I trust. Never openly.” (P10, Female, 29)

“Social media provides choice of privacy and that is where true intimacy occurs.” (P7, Male, 26)

These narratives demonstrate the manner of exercising sexual agency in a discrete manner that is negotiated within technological possibilities that enable intimacy and cultural constriction to co-exist.

## **Discussion**

Sexual scripts theory is a conceptualization of desire as socially structured as opposed to an instinctual desire or conception, structured by culturally accessible discourses that establish what is possible to think and say and perform (Brown et al., 2001). The stories by the participants show that social media presents them with visual and relational sexual scripts bodies of attractiveness, romantic intimacy, flirtation, which heighten sexual imagination and sexual awareness. These scripts are however not enacted freely. Rather, they are screened through the culturally dominant moral scripts that focus on modesty, self-restraint and family honor especially in the Punjab socio-cultural set-up.

This contradiction is consistent with the argument of Adams-Santos (2020), who states that digital sexual cultures promote desire and takes moral control to a new level. The fact that participants describe fear in terms of likes, screenshots, and gossip are some of the examples of how platform affordances affect a greater level of surveillance and turn desire into something that should be controlled privately instead of expressed publicly. Digital platforms widen intrapsychic scripts (fantasy, attraction) by limiting interpersonal scripts (expression, interaction), which may be interpreted as what may be called contained desire, a kind of sexual awareness under the influence of continuous expectations of being judged.

The results regarding sexual identity and self-presentation also indicate the functionality of sexual scripts at the point of gender, visibility, and respectability. The researchers did find that participants continuously talked about constructing a socially acceptable sexual self which is what the sexual scripts theory refers to as culturally dominant scripts, which determine legitimate sexual identities (Brown et al., 2001). These scripts are enforced on the social media by likes, comments, and imagined audience, which act as the regulatory mechanisms to promote conformity and discourage deviation (Burgess et al., 2016; Marwick, 2013).

The gendering differences were especially high. Women reported tighter restrictions on what should be considered acceptable to self-present, which is consistent with the current studies where digital sexual scripts disproportionately police the sexuality of women (Ringrose, 2011; Bhana et al., 2025). These results expand the previous study by showing that such dynamics continue to exist even in adulthood and refute the idea that sexual surveillance is a youth-driven phenomenon. The sexual identities of adults were not perceived as hard and publicly expressible but strategically down-low performances due to the necessity to remain morally legitimate in family, professional, and community situations.

In a performativity standpoint, sexual identity in this case is an activity practiced meticulously by adults and not a claim (van Doorn, 2011; Hilton-Morrow and Battles, 2015). This points to the organization of adult digital sexuality through risk management, respectability politics and anticipatory self-censorship besides lust. Aligned with the neutrality of unmarked categories, it is the sexual agency concealed, called hidden sexual agency, which is reconfigured into interpersonal scripts.

Although the narratives of participants are constrained by the masses, it is clear that sexual agency still exists but redefined in the privacy of technologically mediated spaces. The ability of direct messages, limited visibility features, and encrypted communication creates what sexual scripts theory would term as alternative interpersonal scripts in that intimacy and desire are practiced without being subject to external scrutiny.

The results are consistent with the findings of Cooper et al. (2021) who reported that social media can limit and empower sexual agency at the same time. Nevertheless, this paper builds on that observation by demonstrating how adults in conservative cultural backgrounds actively take advantage of platform features in order to bargain sexual expression without necessarily defying the prevailing moral scripts. Sexual agency is therefore contingent and disjointed and is applied selectively as opposed to universally.

Notably, this questions dualistic conceptualizations of agency versus oppression in cybersex. Instead of simply opposing the hegemony of scripts, the participants practiced what can be interpreted as script adaptation, i.e. keeping open conformity, but at the same time foster intimate relationships. This shows the argument given by Adams-Santos (2020) that digital sexual practices are experienced in the form of contradiction, ambiguity, and emotional labor.

The results can be placed in sexual scripts theory since they demonstrate the stratification of scripts and their presence in digital space, which is activated. Cultural scripts are not set and fixed in religion, family, and gender norms, yet they are still dominant; it is negotiated with new digital scripts of privilege of visibility, desirability, and interaction. In adults, the negotiations are informed by life-course anticipations concerning maturity, respectability, and social accountability and builds on scholarship that has had minimal attention to the adolescents and emerging adults (Eleuteri et al., 2017; Maes et al., 2022).

Focusing on adult experiences placed within the context of Global South, this study is a challenge to the Western and age-based presumptions in digital sexuality studies. It shows that adulthood does not solve sexual expression tensions but brings about new forms of restrictions and negotiation especially where sexuality is still morally controlled. Social media, in that matter, does not make sexuality free but transforms sexual scripts to be controlled, hidden and selectively played.

## Conclusion

The paper has explored the process of interpreting and negotiating sexuality on social media within the context of sexual scripts theory and anticipated the real experiences of adults in Punjab, Pakistan. The research approach of focusing on adult narratives criticizes age-centric and Western-centric conceptions under which digital sexuality is often discussed as a characteristic of the adolescent stage or the period of emerging adulthood. Rather, the results show that sexuality is a continuous, negotiated and socially controlled part of adult life, which is heavily influenced by digital media spaces.

It is identified that the social media does not merely cause new sexual freedoms but it restructures the old sexual scripts through amplification of visibility, surveillance and moral responsibility. The experiences of the participants exemplify the ways the globalized digital sexual scripts, which circulate in images, interactions and platform affordances, collide with the localized cultural scripts based on religion, family honor, and gendered respectability. The result of this encounter is the creation of ambivalent sexual subjectivities in the form of increased desire and restraint, strategic self-presentation, and selective intimacy.

Notably, the results can be used to expand sexual scripts theory because they show the dynamism of scripts in both the public and private online space. Although the prevailing cultural scripts restrict the expression of sexuality by ordinary people, the adult population engages in the customization of interpersonal scripts by using private messaging and hiding visibility settings, which allow them to practice forms of sexual agency in coexistence with outward conformity. Sexual agency, therefore, is not a form of open opposition but a negotiated practice, which is determined by technological affordances and socio-cultural constraint.

Placing the concept of digital sexuality into the socio-cultural environment of Punjab, the study will help the Sexualities field understand that the adult digital sexual life is framed in the moral economies of respectability and surveillance. The results highlight the fact that sexuality studies must pay attention to adulthood as a specific location of sexual negotiation and must take into account how digital technologies mediate sexuality in different cultural settings.

## Recommendations

According to the discoveries of this research paper, some research, practice, and digital policy recommendations can be proposed regarding sexuality and social media usage in the context of adults, living in a culturally conservative setting.

To begin with, future studies in the field of sexuality ought to cease to focus on the digital sexual experiences of youths and increasingly carry out studies on the digital sexual lives of adults in different cultural contexts. It is suggested that the sexual scripts theory can be put into practice and improved in non-Western countries, where scholars ought to be sensitive to the global digital sexual scripts being localized, negotiated and reworked, taking into consideration the cultural norms, religion, and gendered expectations. A longitudinal and comparison qualitative analysis would be especially helpful to grasp the way the digital sexual scripts change with time and life stage.

Second, sexuality education and sexual health programs must take into account that adults still have to negotiate digitally mediated sexual desire, identity, and intimacy. Through educational interventions, either formal, community-based or online, there should be cultural sensitivity and non-judgmental in the way sexual agency is deemed discrete and private, without presuming a lack of sexual agency or overt expression. These strategies can assist in building critical sensitivity of adult digital sexual scripts, consent, privacy and emotional wellbeing without perpetuating stigma and surveillance.

Lastly, practitioners in mental health, counseling, and relationship support must incorporate the conversations on social media in the topics of adult sexuality. The awareness of the conflicts between desiring, respectability, and the inability to remain undetected online can also help professionals see more clearly the experiences of clients and assist them in negotiating intimacy and self-expression in online and offline life in a healthier manner.

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