

## **Swipe, Scroll, Connect: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Sexual Health and Behaviour**

**Running Title:** Social Media and Risky Sexual Behaviour

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### **Abstract**

Adolescents' social and emotional lives have been completely transformed by the rapid growth of social media, which has opened new avenues for relationship-building, communication, and identity development. At the same time, adolescent sexual views and behaviours have been increasingly influenced by digital platforms, which has led to serious concerns about sexual health and wellbeing. With a focus on risky sexual behaviours, sexting, exposure to sexually explicit information, cyber exploitation, and the normalizing of harmful online interactions, this viewpoint piece examines the complex relationship between social media use and teenage sexual health. As a result, the article promotes a comprehensive and well-rounded approach to public health that incorporates psychosocial support, parental involvement, digital literacy, and culturally sensitive comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). To address the increasing digital determinants of adolescent sexual behaviour, schools, families, healthcare providers, and legislators must work together. It is imperative to strengthen offline protective contexts and provide adolescents with key digital decision-making skills to promote safer online involvement.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Risky Sexual Behaviour, Sexual health, Social media.

## Introduction

The shift from childhood to early adolescence is characterised by considerable biological, emotional, and social transformations. During this sensitive period, young people begin to form identity-defining behavioural patterns, but it can also be a window of vulnerability where risky behaviours arise [1]. These days, this shift occurs in a digital environment where social networking sites (SNS) and information and communications technology (ICT) are pervasive in daily life [2].

Adolescents who are frequently referred to as "digital natives" use social media platforms for peer connection, identity exploration, and self-expression [3]. Although these platforms aid in the maintenance of friendships and the development of technical abilities, they also pose serious threats to the emotional and sexual health of young people [4]. Research demonstrates a clear connection between risky sexual behaviour, poor social media use, and online abuse [5]. This viewpoint examines how social media impacts adolescent sexual health and discusses protective strategies.

## How Social Media Accelerates Risky Sexual Behaviours

Adolescents' attitudes about intimacy and dating have changed as a result of smartphones and mobile internet. Fast, straightforward online messaging has essentially supplanted slower, more traditional wooing techniques. The immediate response and continuous connectivity of contemporary social media platforms are driving this change [6]. Behaviour change theories state that media exposure has a significant impact on behaviour by influencing young people's perceptions of what constitutes appropriate and normal behaviour [3]. Social media frequently becomes the primary source of sexual information for adolescents in places where official sex education is either non-existent or severely stigmatized [3,6].

However, a large portion of this internet information is unauthenticated. Adolescents are frequently exposed to peer networks that publicly discuss their sexual lives and sexually explicit media (SEM) [3,7]. Persistent exposure to hypersexualized information gives the impression that risky sexual behaviours such as multiple partners, unprotected

intercourse are normal, glamorous, and devoid of negative consequences[7]. Research indicates that teens who use social media frequently and are exposed to internet pornography are more likely to engage in sexual activity in real life [3]. This digital pleasure often leads adolescents to begin a sexual relationship, casual sexual interactions, and multiple-sexual partners.[3,4].

Different adolescent groups are impacted by this digital sensitivity in different manners:

- **In-School Adolescents:** Higher sexual risk scores and an increased chance of unprotected sexual encounter are associated with frequent texting or instant messaging [3,4]. Additionally, utilising four or more social media apps at the same time considerably raises the probability of participating in harmful behaviours like self-harm or exchanging explicit messages [8].
- **Out-of-School Adolescents:** Public health challenges especially impact this population. Because they're engaged or spend time in informal environments, they often lack access to school-based health education. As a result, they get

most of their information from older peers and social media. Regular social media users in this category are twice as likely to participate in risky sexual behaviours like transactional sex or having several partners as non-users [9].

### Social Media Use and Online Intimacy

Sending and receiving sexually explicit texts, images, or videos, known as "sexting", has grown to be a significant aspect of contemporary adolescent relationships [2]. Adolescents frequently utilize it as a virtual instrument to develop intimacy [5,6,11]. According to studies, up to half of adolescents in relationships have used sexting [5,11].

Sexting has significant risks, even though it might be a choice way of expression. It is frequently a clear indicator that a teenager is prepared to move into offline, physical sexual engagement [11]. Young individuals who post explicit images are far more likely to have risky sexual encounters, frequently to live up to the expectations set during their online conversations [5,11].

Sexting behaviours vary according to gender, format, and degree of explicitness. Since sharing nudity necessitates a great degree of confidence, teenagers are far

more likely to send suggestive texts or pictures of themselves in seductive poses than explicit nudity. But these decisions are heavily influenced by gender norms [11]. Adolescent girls are frequently more inclined to share such pictures of themselves on social media [5,11]. This is motivated by a desire for peer approval and popularity as determined by virtual "likes" and comments [2,6].

### **Problematic Social Media Use and Online Victimization**

When regular usage of social media transforms into internet addiction or problematic behaviour, the risks become even greater. Low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction often coexist with internet addiction, which is typified by an obsessive drive to stay online. Teenagers who use social media excessively are far more likely to become victims of online sexual assault. This can include cyber-grooming (adults posing as peers to take advantage of minors) and sextortion (using graphic content to blackmail a victim) [2].

The types of risks adolescents face online depend heavily on their relationship with the other user [13]. (Table 1)

Adolescents who experience body dissatisfaction or low self-esteem are particularly susceptible to these dynamics [2]. They frequently seek external

validation of their appearance through the anonymity of chat rooms and social media [2,10]. Talking to strangers, joining unmonitored chat "clans," and agreeing with requests for explicit images are examples of risky behaviours that might result from this need for affirmation [2,6,11].

On the other hand, adolescents who think they are physically appealing or who have a lot of body confidence face an unsettling dilemma [2]. They are much more likely to submit intriguing photographs that display their faces or distinct surroundings since they are self-assured about their appearance [2,11,14]. This makes them easily identifiable and makes them perfect targets for sexual harassers and cyber-groomers, who can use this content as a weapon on public platforms to harm the victim's well-being [2].

### **Barriers to Sexual Health Promotion Online**

Public health groups have attempted to use social media to disseminate trustworthy sexual health information because they are aware of the significant influence social media has on adolescent behaviour [4,10,14]. Youth who require information on safe sex, STI prevention, and birth control can receive it through digital public campaigns and mobile health (m-Health) projects [3,4,6]. Research demonstrates

that young people's deliberate online searches for health-related content serve as a protective factor, resulting in a notable decline in unprotected sex and drug usage during sexual activity [4].

However, in adolescent social networks, conventional health efforts encounter significant opposition. The tailored, identity-driven settings that teens occupy are significantly at odds with the serious aims of public health organisations [14]. Social media platforms are spaces for self-presentation, popularity, and fitting in [2,14]. Adolescents are extremely cautious about their digital footprints due to the strong social stigma associated with sexual health disorders, particularly STIs [14].

Formal sexual health initiatives are typically avoided by adolescents. For fear of social "drama," gossip, or peer criticism, they decide not to "like," comment on, or share a message about sexual health [14]. Many young people are forced to rely on secondary sidebar ads that provide "plausible deniability" since they are unable to directly seek information about sexually transmitted diseases due to concerns about privacy and parental surveillance [15].

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Social media is a two-edged sword that determines adolescent sexual health risk

and resistance [4,10]. The unchecked growth of internet addiction, the normalization of sexting, and ongoing exposure to explicit information significantly incline adolescents to early sexual debut, physical risk-taking, and online victimization, even when online networks provide venues for interaction [2,3,6].

In order to address this digital problem, holistic, socio-educational preventive initiatives must replace isolated medical interventions [1]. All school systems must implement comprehensive sex education (CSE), with versions developed especially for non-school environments [5,6,9]. CSE programs should cover digital literacy, the risks of sexting, and clear guidelines for online consent and boundaries in addition to essential biology [5,6,11].

Protective factors need to be developed offline at the same time. Regardless of their exposure to social media, research demonstrates that active parental supervision, honest family discussions about sex, and stable households serve as essential protective factors against sexual risk for young people [3,9,10]. Regulators, public health experts, academic institutions, civil society organizations, and parents must work together going ahead to develop nonjudgmental digital health services and reasonable screen time

limits [1,3,14,17]. The only way society can effectively give adolescents the tools they need to securely and healthily explore their relationships in the digital age is by viewing social media as a particular setting for identity performance [6,11].

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**Table 1: Contextual Matrix of Online Sexual Risks and Responses [13]**

| <b>Relationship Type</b> | <b>Prominent Sexual Risk Type</b>                     | <b>Common Media Format</b>                          | <b>Participant Role &amp; Response Strategy</b>                                                                     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Strangers</b>         | Sexual Solicitation, Harassment, & Suspicious Spam    | High mix of Text, Images, Videos, & Link-based Spam | Direct Recipients (Victims), predominantly manage risk by <b>ignoring</b> or blocking the user                      |
| <b>Acquaintances</b>     | Moderated Harassment & Target-Driven Sexting Requests | Heavily Text-Based Mediums                          | Mixed Roles (Victims or Mutual Parties), Actively manage risk by <b>saying no</b> or setting firm boundaries.       |
| <b>Friends</b>           | Consensual Sexting & Playful Sexual Spamming          | Exclusively Text-Based Mediums                      | <b>Mutual Participants</b> , Highly engaged and completely <b>fail to set boundaries</b> or reject sexual requests. |

Source: Authors' own Formulation