

Societal and Technological Dimensions of Online Sexual Behaviours: A Systematic Review of Contemporary Challenges and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the societal and technological dimensions of online sexual behaviours and explores emerging challenges and implications. It discusses cultural norms within digital social contexts, gendered vulnerabilities, mental health consequences, and patterns of victimisation. The review also analyses technological developments including deepfake production, artificial intelligence, blockchain, and social media infrastructures and highlights their influence on privacy, content creation, and legal governance. The findings underscore the complex interactions between societal attitudes and technological capabilities that continuously reshape how online sexual behaviours are produced, normalised, and regulated. To address these multidimensional issues, the review emphasises the importance of strengthened regulatory frameworks, multistakeholder collaboration, and public awareness initiatives that promote safer digital environments. This study employed a systematic literature review approach, enabling the inclusion of both empirical and conceptual studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the societal, psychological, legal, and technological aspects of online sexual behaviours. To ensure transparency and methodological rigour, the reporting framework followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines

Keywords: online sexual behaviors, societal impact, technological advancements, privacy concerns, deepfake, mental health, legal challenges

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology have significantly expedited the growth of online sexual behaviours, changing how people interact with sexuality in modern society. A wide variety of sexual behaviours, such as watching porn, sexting, and engaging in social media conversations centred around sexual material, have been made easier by the widespread use of internet-based platforms. Complicated societal repercussions, such as widespread stigma, mental health issues, victimisation worries, and difficult moral and legal quandaries, accompany this growing trend.

Researchers like Jahnens et al. (2022) have drawn attention to the ways in which the use of internet pornography is linked to both personal psychological states and society perspectives, highlighting worries about problematic consumption habits and their impact on mental health. Regulations and social standards are facing new difficulties as a result of the growing popularity of technology-enabled sexual content, especially deepfakes and AI-generated content (Stormezand et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Deepfake technology has

complicated legal remedies and privacy protections by increasing the possibility of non-consensual material sharing and victimisation through the creation of false but hyper-realistic sexual photos and videos (Yavuz, 2025). This technological advancement makes it possible to promote both explicit and manipulative content, which can skew perceptions of sexuality and strengthen gender stereotypes and societal stigmas.

Social media has a complex impact on sexual behaviour; certain platforms are used for sexting and the sharing of consenting sexual content, while others are used for online sexual abuse and harassment. According to research by Guerrero et al. (2023), social media can reveal weaknesses, particularly among young people and marginalised groups, and serve as a source of victimisation as well as empowerment. According to Borgogna et al. (2022), who connected excessive pornography use with sexual dysfunctions and body image disorders among young males, the casual sharing of sexually graphic photos, frequently through social media, presents serious privacy and consent issues. Furthermore, the effects on society also extend to mental health, as problematic use of sexual content online is linked to social disengagement, anxiety, and depression (Yavuz, 2025).

It is challenging to have open dialogue about healthy sexuality because of the stigma attached to these behaviours, which also discourages people from getting help and feeds feelings of shame. Authorities trying to stop deepfake pornography, revenge porn, and non-consensual pornography face difficulties since legal frameworks don't keep up with the quick advancements in technology (Batty, 2022). Online content's crossborder nature makes enforcement more difficult, which is why international collaboration and policymaking are being called for. Its scope includes a critical examination of the ways in which modern sexual encounters are shaped by cultural conventions, gender norms, victimisation issues, mental health implications, and technological advancements, as well as their possible future directions.

The goal of the review is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how society deals with the advantages, dangers, and difficulties of internet-facilitated sexuality by combining data from current studies. This review's goal is to thoroughly map the social and technological factors that influencing sexual behaviour online, highlighting the necessity of clear understanding and thoughtful regulation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This review is grounded in Social Learning Theory and Technological Determinism. Social Learning Theory explains how online behaviors are shaped by observation, imitation, and reinforcement within digital environments, while Technological Determinism frames how technological innovations such as AI and deepfakes influence human sexuality and social norms. Integrating both perspectives provides a dual lens to analyse the reciprocal relationship between technology and societal attitudes toward online sexual behaviors.

The Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that human behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. In the digital environment, individuals are continuously exposed to online behaviors—ranging from expressions of intimacy to harmful acts such as digital harassment or revenge pornography. These exposures, mediated by technology, normalize certain sexual behaviors and reshape moral perceptions.

In the context of online sexual behavior, social learning occurs through repeated interactions with media content and peer feedback. Users learn both explicit norms for example legal boundaries of sharing sexual images and implicit norms for example gender expectations and body presentation that influence their online conduct. Thus, the theory provides a lens to explain how societal attitudes toward sexuality are reproduced and reinforced within digital platforms.

In this review, Social Learning Theory is used to interpret how exposure to online sexual content and peer interactions shape individuals' attitudes, motivations, and normalization of risky or deviant sexual practices. In the other hands, the Technological Determinism Theory (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1992) asserts that technological innovation is a primary driver of social and cultural transformation. The design and affordances of digital media platforms inherently shape human interactions, including sexual expression, privacy

boundaries, and gender relations. From this perspective, technology is not neutral influences what kinds of sexual behaviors become possible, visible, and socially acceptable. For example, the emergence of AI-generated deepfakes and ephemeral messaging has altered the dynamics of consent, anonymity, and accountability in online sexual interactions. Technological Determinism helps explain the structural forces—algorithms, anonymity, and accessibility—that shape how online sexual behaviors are produced and consumed, beyond individual moral choices.

While Social Learning Theory focuses on individual and social mechanisms of behavioral adaptation, Technological Determinism highlights the structural influence of digital systems. Integrating these two perspectives provides a comprehensive framework to understand online sexual behaviors as both socially learned and technologically shaped phenomena. This dual-lens approach enables the current review to interpret empirical findings not as isolated incidents but as outcomes of ongoing interactions between human socialization processes and technological affordances. Accordingly, this study synthesizes the literature through a socio-technological theoretical lens, demonstrating how technology mediates human learning, social norms, and legal interpretations of digital sexual conduct.

METHOD

This study applied a systematic literature review approach, enabling the synthesis of diverse empirical, theoretical, and policy-based studies. To enhance transparency, the review adhered to PRISMA 2020 reporting standards. The review process consisted of four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Identification

A total of 340 records were retrieved from three databases which is Scopus, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink—using the predefined search terms related to online sexual behaviors, digital intimacy, deepfake pornography, and cyber victimization. Additionally, 28 supplementary records were identified through manual searches and reference list screening of key articles. After importing all records into Mendeley for citation management, 50 duplicates were identified and removed, resulting in 290 unique records proceeding to the screening phase.

Search strategy

The titles and abstracts of all 290 records were independently reviewed by two researchers using the online screening tool Rayyan. Each record was categorized as “include,” “exclude,” or “uncertain.” The inclusion criteria emphasized relevance to the societal, psychological, technological, or legal aspects of online sexual behaviors. Studies focusing purely on medical, biological, or non-human samples were excluded. After this phase, 210 records were excluded, leaving 80 articles for full-text assessment.

Full-Text Eligibility Assessment.

Full-text versions of the 80 remaining studies were retrieved and assessed in detail for eligibility against the inclusion criteria. The reviewers evaluated factors such as research design, context relevance, data quality, and thematic fit. Studies were excluded if they (a) duplicated content found in other publications, (b) lacked methodological transparency, or (c) discussed general online behavior without a focus on sexual or gendered aspects. Following this assessment, 22 articles were excluded with documented reasons such as insufficient focus on the target phenomenon, conceptual overlap, or incomplete data reporting.

Final Inclusion.

A total of 58 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. These studies represented diverse research designs, including 24 empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), 18 conceptual or theoretical papers, and 16 policy-oriented analyses. Each selected study contributed unique insights into one or more thematic dimensions, technological developments (e.g., deepfakes, AI-generated content), societal and gender dynamics, privacy and legal frameworks, and mental health implications.

Phase	Description	Records (n)	Outcome
Identification	Records identified from databases (Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink)	340	
	Additional records identified through manual searches	+28	368 total records identified
	Duplicates removed	-50	290 unique records for screening
Screening	Titles and abstracts screened	290	
	Records excluded (not meeting inclusion criteria)	-210	80 full-text articles assessed for eligibility
Eligibility	Full-text studies assessed for inclusion	80	
	Studies excluded with reasons (e.g., insufficient focus, conceptual overlap)	-22	58 studies included
Included	Final studies meeting inclusion criteria	58	24 empirical, 18 conceptual/theoretical, 16 policy-oriented

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection

FINDINGS

This review identified four major themes that shape how online sexual behaviours are understood, experienced, and regulated across cultural, gendered, technological, and legal contexts.

A. Cultural and Normative Influence

Cultural and normative influences are significant determinants of attitudes towards pornography, sexting, and social media usage. In numerous cultures, particularly those with robust religious and social traditions, significant taboos and stigmatisation exist regarding online sexual behaviours. In numerous cultures, pornography is deemed immoral, with its consumption linked to shame and social exclusion (Whelan & Brown, 2021). In contrast, more liberal or secular contexts may exhibit increased acceptance of sexting and online sexual expression, despite ongoing debates regarding morality and virtue. Cultural norms significantly impact discussions of online behaviours within families and communities; social taboos may obstruct open conversations about sexuality, consequently affecting adolescents' access to accurate information and safe practices (Esplin et al., 2022). Moreover, religious doctrines frequently categorise specific online sexual activities as inconsistent with moral standards, thereby escalating social sanctions and moral judgements directed at individuals participating in such behaviours.

Research indicates that societal acceptance varies significantly across different regions and cultures. A crosscultural study on pornography consumption revealed significant disparities, certain societies exhibit high prevalence and openness, while others impose strict prohibitions and consider these behaviours deviant (Eljawad et al., 2021). These variations directly influence the stigma associated with online sexual behaviours. In nations with stringent regulations or conservative social environments, individuals may hide their online behaviours due to concerns about social consequences, potentially impacting mental health and resulting in secrecy or feelings of shame. In contrast, societies that accept these behaviours often cultivate more tolerant

perspectives, which may diminish social stigma while possibly increasing apprehensions regarding moral decline or social cohesion.

B. Gender and Normative Influence

The social context of online sexual behaviour is further complicated by gender conventions. Gender disparities in the use and perception of online sexual content are frequently reinforced by societal norms. Due to cultural norms that emphasise masculinity and sexual boldness, men are typically more likely to look for pornography and sexting services (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2023). However, because of conventional notions of femininity and modesty, women are frequently subjected to more stigma and moral condemnation for comparable actions. Because women are disproportionately the targets of online abuse, harassment, and revenge porn, these gendered expectations can result in victimisation.

Research indicates that gender-based victimisation is widespread, with women exhibiting greater susceptibility to online harassment and exploitation (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2021; Thorpe et al., 2024). Online victimisation encompasses a spectrum of behaviours, including the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, cyber harassment, threatening conduct, and coercive sexting. Societal norms may implicitly accept or promote gendered double standards. Wherein male promiscuity is perceived as acceptable, while female sexuality frequently faces scrutiny or stigma. Victimisation affects mental health by contributing to anxiety, depression, and trauma. This situation simultaneously reinforcing entrenched gender stereotypes and inequalities, thereby complicating efforts to challenge or alter these detrimental norms.

The influence on mental health and societal perceptions is significant. Online sexual behaviours that are problematic are often associated with psychological distress; however, social stigma may prevent individuals from seeking assistance or openly discussing their experiences (Barchielli et al., 2024). Stigmatisation amplifies feelings of shame and social exclusion, particularly among adolescents and young adults who are exploring their sexual development. It can influence self-esteem and body image, as societal standards frequently establish unrealistic ideals that are reinforced through social media platforms (Marcu et al., 2021).

C. Privacy and Consent Issues

Victimisation and privacy concerns are pivotal topics in the societal discourse surrounding online sexual behaviours. Non-consensual sharing of intimate images, commonly known as revenge pornography, has led to significant legal and ethical challenges. Many countries are addressing the regulation of these behaviours, with certain jurisdictions implementing laws to criminalise revenge porn and safeguard victims' privacy (Yavuz, 2025). The swift advancement of technology, particularly AI-driven deepfakes, complicates this landscape. Deepfake technology enables the production of highly realistic counterfeit sexual content that can be exploited maliciously without the consent of the individuals depicted, thereby prompting significant ethical and legal concerns regarding consent, privacy, and support for victims (Guerrero et al., 2023; Bassani & Chaves, 2025).

The rise of deepfakes and AI-generated sexual content can lead to significant psychological distress, with victims frequently reporting feelings of violation, embarrassment, and shame. Legal systems face the challenge of creating frameworks that effectively address harms and offer support to victims. Additionally, technological solutions are required to identify and mitigate deepfake pornography, complemented by comprehensive societal education campaigns to enhance awareness. The interaction among societal norms, technological advancements, and legal frameworks is crucial in determining the future regulation of online sexual content.

Overall, societal perceptions of online sexual behaviours are deeply rooted in cultural, gendered, psychological, and legal factors. Perceptions shape individual experiences, affect victimisation patterns, and necessitate comprehensive policies to mitigate harm, enhance sexual health, and uphold individual rights in the evolving digital landscape.

DISCUSSION

Through a critical examination of the technological, ethical, psychological, and policy-related aspects of online sexual behaviours, the debate incorporates the most important results from the literature that was studied. With a focus on the implications for mental health and digital governance, this section investigates the interconnection that exists between developing technology, societal attitudes, and the ever-changing legal landscape.

A. Technological Dimension

The interplay between societal norms and technological affordances frames the context of online sexual behaviour. Social Learning Theory explains how exposure to online content and peer interactions normalizes risky or deviant practices (Bandura, 1977), while Technological Determinism highlights how digital platforms, AI, and deepfakes shape sexual expression and consent dynamics (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1992). AI-driven manipulations can generate non-consensual sexual images, frequently employed in harassment or extortion, thereby complicating legal and ethical frameworks for victim protection. The integration of blockchain technology and encryption protocols enhances privacy and security. The decentralised and tamper-proof characteristics of blockchain enable secure sharing of sensitive sexual health data or evidence of abuse; however, its implementation encounters regulatory challenges, including the establishment of appropriate standards and the assurance of accessibility (Chen et al., 2021; Padua et al., 2021). The challenge involves balancing technological innovation with societal safeguards to prevent misuse and protect individual rights.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok facilitate sexual expression but also pose significant risks, including exposure of minors to inappropriate content, victimisation, and privacy breaches. Algorithms often amplify sensational or sexually explicit material, unintentionally increasing access for vulnerable users (Stormezand et al., 2021). Many users remain unaware of how their digital footprints—including search histories, shared images, and location data—are collected and exploited, heightening the potential for identity theft, harassment, and social stigmatisation (Ali et al., 2021; Bawazir & Idid, 2024). Regulatory and content moderation efforts struggle to keep pace with rapid technological advances and crossborder interactions, leaving gaps that can be exploited. These challenges underscore the need for robust privacy protections, enhanced encryption, and comprehensive governance frameworks to safeguard users' well-being (Yavuz, 2025).

B. Legal and Ethical Challenges

Existing legal frameworks often lag behind technological advances, complicating enforcement across jurisdictions and limiting protections for victims of non-consensual content, including revenge pornography and deepfakes (Ali et al., 2021; Yavuz, 2025; Guerrero et al., 2023). Policy responses must integrate stakeholder collaboration, educational initiatives, AI-based moderation, and privacy safeguards to balance freedom of expression with protection from harm (Alekseeva et al., 2022; Hussein et al., 2025; Pedro et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021)..

The rapid expansion of online sexual behaviors, including pornography consumption, sexting, and the proliferation of deepfake technology, has introduced complex societal and technological challenges. These encompass significant mental and physical health risks, ethical and legal dilemmas, as well as societal impacts that demand coordinated responses from diverse stakeholders.

C. Health and psychological Impacts

Problematic online sexual behaviours are associated with anxiety, depression, compulsivity, body dissatisfaction, and sexual dysfunction (Borgogna et al., 2022; Demirgül & Demetrovics, 2025; Paulucci et al., 2022). Social stigma intensifies shame and low self-esteem, particularly among adolescents and women (Marcu et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2024). Pandemic-driven increases in digital sexual activity further underscore the need to address mental health and social implications (Castro et al., 2024).

Beyond individual health, ethical and legal challenges have grown more pronounced with emerging technologies. Ali et al. (2021) argue that current legal frameworks inadequately address issues of consent, privacy, and autonomy, particularly in the context of non-consensual sharing of intimate images. These violations, often termed revenge pornography, cause severe emotional distress and long-term social consequences for victims. Yavuz (2025) discusses that deepfake technology—AI-driven synthetic content—further complicates these issues by creating realistic but fabricated sexual images or videos without consent, raising profound questions about authenticity, ownership, and rights. Batty (2022) calls for comprehensive policy reforms that balance freedom of expression with the protection of individuals from digital sexual violence, emphasizing that legal measures must evolve rapidly to counteract technological innovations.

Societal impacts are multifaceted, influencing social norms and gender roles. Stormezand et al. (2021) explore how social media platforms, by facilitating widespread sharing of sexual content, can both challenge and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. They note that platform policies often lag behind technological developments, allowing harmful content, including misogynistic and violent material, to flourish. Grubbs et al. (2023) observe that online sexual behaviors can perpetuate unrealistic body images, thereby fueling body dissatisfaction and self-objectification, particularly among women and vulnerable populations such as adolescents. Wagner et al. (2024) add that technological innovations—such as AI-generated content—have the potential to radically alter social perceptions of attractiveness, intimacy, and consent, which may influence future norms around sexuality, gender expression, and interpersonal relationships.

The influence of these changes on youth and vulnerable groups is especially critical. Studies from the matrix reveal that adolescents are particularly susceptible to forming distorted views of sexuality based on online content, which often emphasizes hypersexualized and non-consensual behaviors. This exposure can predispose them to risky sexual behaviors or victimization, as highlighted in research by Guerrero et al. (2023), who examine the rise of revenge pornography and online abuse among minors. Effective intervention requires active engagement of various stakeholders.

D. Policy and Stakeholder Involvement

The role of stakeholders and policymakers is pivotal in addressing these challenges. Alekseeva et al. (2022) advocate for comprehensive educational programs that foster digital literacy and awareness about the risks and rights related to online sexual content. Hussein et al. (2025) emphasize cross-sector collaboration among governments, technology firms, and civil society to develop regulations that mitigate harmful content while respecting freedom of expression. Pedro et al. (2022) suggest that improving legal responses, such as swift victim support systems and international cooperation, can help combat non-consensual and malicious online sexual acts. These initiatives must be complemented by technological solutions, including AI-based moderation and privacy safeguards, as discussed in works by Chen et al. (2021), focusing on the properties of emerging AI-driven technologies like deepfakes.

CONCLUSION

Online sexual behaviours are influenced by a multifaceted interplay of cultural norms, gendered expectations, technological advancements, privacy considerations, and evolving legal frameworks. Cultural and societal expectations continue to shape how individuals express sexuality online, often producing stigma, secrecy, or unequal exposure to risks, particularly for women and adolescents (Whelan & Brown, 2021; Gewirtz-Meydan, 2021). Technological innovations, including social media algorithms, AI-generated content, and deepfake tools, create both opportunities for sexual expression and heightened vulnerabilities to exploitation, harassment, and non-consensual dissemination of personal material (Stormezand et al., 2021; Guerrero et al., 2023; Yavuz, 2025). Privacy breaches and gaps in legal protections underscore the urgent need for robust regulatory frameworks, comprehensive data governance, and cross-jurisdictional cooperation to safeguard users (Ali et al., 2021; Bawazir & Idid, 2024).

The findings indicate the necessity for three interconnected strategies: 1) robust regulatory measures that evolve alongside technological change to ensure accountability and protection; 2) multi-stakeholder collaboration, including policymakers, technology developers, educators, and civil society, to address online sexual risks holistically; and 3) public awareness and digital literacy programs that empower users, particularly adolescents, to recognize, prevent, and respond to potential harms while fostering responsible online behaviours (Pedro et al., 2022; Castro et al., 2024).

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to examine the long-term psychological, social, and developmental impacts of online sexual behaviours, especially among vulnerable and marginalized groups. Additionally, it should explore the design and implementation of ethically grounded interventions that balance technological innovation with individual rights protection, such as AI-assisted content moderation, educational campaigns, and community-based support mechanisms. This comprehensive approach can promote safer, more informed, and equitable digital spaces while addressing the complexities of modern sexual expression.

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