



Expressing Sexuality: Case Studies of Female Students in Yogyakarta

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Adolescent girls, Sexuality, Sexual Behaviour, social media, Desacralization, and Female Students

How to cite:

Efendi, Z., & Abdullah, I. 2024. Expressing Sexuality: Case Studies of Female Students in Yogyakarta. *ETNOSIA: Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia*, 9(2): 154-166.

DOI:

10.31947/etnosia.v9i2.36561

Article history:

Received: August 9, 2024
Revised: December 4, 2024
Approved: December 5, 2024

ABSTRACT

This article explores the shifting meaning of sexuality among urban adolescents, particularly females, highlighting a trend towards the desacralization of intimate relationships. This issue is critical as it reflects the broader transformation of social values and cultural norms influenced by globalization, social media, and gender awareness. In addition, this study also responds to the lack of studies that address lifestyle and prostitution in a more reflective and anthropological manner. Using a qualitative approach, this research was conducted in Yogyakarta involving five female university students and who are also prostitutes. Data was collected by conducting observations and conducting in-depth interviews. The main findings show that social media and pop culture play an important role in accelerating the desacralization of sexuality, while traumatic experiences contribute to risky sexual behaviour. This study concludes that the desacralization of sexuality among adolescents is influenced by bad sexual experiences, and that social media and pop culture encourage more permissive sexual expressions, shifting meanings of sexuality among adolescents have shaped more flexible perceptions of sexuality. The study recommends developing sexual education policies that are inclusive and responsive to changing social norms, as well as raising awareness of the long-term impact of sexual trauma on adolescents.

1. Introduction

Sexuality among young people has undergone significant shifts in response to modern social and cultural developments. Historically, sexuality was framed within a normative and sacred context, closely linked to religious values and social morality (Caltabiano et al., 2020). However, the increasing influence of globalization and media has led to more open and individualistic perceptions of sexuality. Practices once considered taboo, such as casual sex, have become

normalized within certain urban adolescents communities as part of their lifestyle, especially among university students who are distanced from parental supervision (Gamson & Hertz, 2023). This phenomenon warrants investigation as it reflects the transformation of social values that may affect the younger generation on a broader scale. This shift not only impacts how young people view sexual relationships but also how social norms in urban societies evolve (Abdullah, 2001).

Changes in the meaning of sexuality influenced by social media and online dating apps are creating new spaces for sexual identity exploration. These platforms allow individuals, especially the younger generation, to express themselves in a more authentic, flexible and diverse way (Buggs, 2022). Cultural change, influenced by modernization, globalization and migration, is complex and involves both a shift towards modern values and the persistence of traditional values, especially in non-Western contexts. As societies face the pressures of modernization, they often experience tension between adopting more individualistic and liberal values and maintaining traditional practices rooted in religion and collectivism (Yeganeh, 2024). Although existing research has explored various factors that influence sexual behaviour among social media-influenced adolescents and there is still a lack of research examining how societal norms reshape the meaning of sexuality in urban settings. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the changing perceptions of sexuality among university students in Yogyakarta.

This research focuses on three key factors that contribute the shifting meaning of sexuality among young women: the impact of traumatic sexual experiences, the role of social media, and the changing of socio-gender norms. Traumatic experiences stemming from sexual violence can significantly influence young women view sexuality, potentially pushing them toward deviant sexual behaviours. Additionally, social media and pop culture serve as catalysts in accelerating this change, allowing individuals to express their sexual identities more openly and without strong social attachment. In this context, prostitution is perceived as an alternative means to sexual freedom without social commitment.

The primary goal of this study is to understand how the meaning of sexuality among university students has shifted from being sacred to a form of social expression. This research seeks to answer three key questions: first, how do personal experiences and trauma influence young women's perceptions of sexuality; second, how do social media and pop culture shape these perceptions; and third, how do evolving social and gender norms affect the meaning of sexuality among students involved in prostitution. The study is expected to make a significant contribution to understanding the social dynamics related to sexuality among urban adolescents.

Although prostitution by female college students is often associated with economic factors, social problems, and regulations, the shifting meaning of sexuality in this context has not received adequate attention in research. The phenomenon of female student prostitution is generally seen as a result of economic pressure or social instability, but very few studies have highlighted

how sexuality is understood and interpreted by these prostitutes. In a modern society that is increasingly open to sexual exploration, female students who engage in prostitution may see this activity not just as a means to fulfil financial needs, but also as a form of sexual freedom or a way to negotiate their identity in a complex social environment. The dearth of research in this area highlights the importance of a deeper understanding of how sexuality is affected by the phenomenon of prostitution among female college students, which often goes beyond traditional economic and social aspects.

2. Method

This research is descriptive qualitative using ethnographic methods and was conducted from June 2023 to May 2024. This research began by conducting online observations using three matchmaking applications, namely: Omi, Tinder, and Tantan to find informants who are female student prostitutes in Yogyakarta. Then after obtaining five informants, in-person observations were conducted at flexible times and in informal places to conduct in-depth interviews gradually. The interview topics included personal experiences related to their perceptions of sexuality, who they have sex with, their sexual experiences, how and why they are involved in prostitution.

Informants were selected by purposive sampling, and there are five female university students being participated in this study whose age ranging from 20 and 23 years old (see Table 1 below). All involves in prostitution.

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Name	Age	Status/job
1.	Aurora	23 years	Student
2.	Melati	20 years	Student
3.	Mawar	21 years	Student
4.	Dahlia	23 years	Student
5.	Anggrek	20 years	Student

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a thematic approach, in which the data collected through interviews and observations were organized into themes found. This technique enables us to identify common patterns and differences among the informants' experiences, as well as to understand the relationships between the factors influencing changes in sexual perceptions. The stages of data analysis comprised data reduction, categorization, and interpretation (Rubini et al., 2023). First, the data obtained from interviews and observations were reduced by selecting information relevant to the research questions. Second, the data were categorized into main themes, such as traumatic sexual experiences, the influence of social media, changes in gender norms, sexuality expression. Finally, the data were analysed interpretatively to uncover the meaning behind the observed phenomena and the shared experience in order to draw conclusions based on these findings.

This study applies ethical principles which include consent to participate and to be interviewed, consent to be recorded during interview, and to protect their

identity we use pseudonyms instead of real names. In addition, all information is kept confidential, so who say what cannot be identified.

3. Result and Discussion

- **Female Sexual Behaviour**

Adolescent free sexual behaviour is frequently shaped by romantic relationships that involve emotional and social expectations (Shulman et al., 2017). Many adolescents feel compelled to meet their partner's demands, even if such pressures lead to unwanted sexual activity. This experience often occurs in situations where one party feels coerced, whether through direct pressure from their partner or social encouragement from peers (Thepthien & Celyn, 2022). Such situations can adversely affect adolescents' emotional well-being in the short term, although some report potential benefits, such as heightened self-confidence or increase self-awareness. However, relationships characterized by coercion may result in long-term trauma that affects the psychological development of young people, as Melati (20 years) said that: She has had five ex-boyfriends so far, and when she was dating, sex was always part of her love language. The first time she lost her virginity when she was forced to have sex with a friend of her who is also her neighbour. Up to now, no one knows about this incident.

Young people's excessive courtship models often backfire on them in the future, and the most harmed women may harbour these bad experiences as their excuse for deviant sexual behaviour. This is in accordance with what Dahlia and Aurora stated below:

I had a long relationship with someone, from the third grade of junior high school until we broke up in the middle of 2023, even though he was the one who cheated on me. I always complied with all his requests, including having sex. The first time I had sex I was very scared, but I couldn't avoid it because I was often forced. During our relationship, having sex had become a habit, if I didn't want to comply, I was often threatened with termination, both when I was still in the village and when I was in Jogja because we were both studying in Jogja (Dahlia, 23 years).

The first time I had sex was with my boyfriend when I was in high school, and I was sixteen years old. The reason I wanted to do it was because we liked each other at first and he could always convince me to be faithful and wouldn't leave me. But it turned out that his words couldn't be trusted, it turned out that he used to cheat on my friend (Aurora, 23 years).

These quotes indicates both sexual experience with their boyfriend. But, according to Kaufman-Parks et al. (2023), pressure from partners to engage in sexual activity often accompanied by the threat of a breakup which can result in profound emotional trauma. In accordance with this, Mawar (21 years) stated that:

The first time I had sex was with my boyfriend while I was still in boarding school (*pondok*). I used to have a boyfriend in the same *pondok*, and whenever there was time, we would make an appointment to meet outside

and play. At first I was afraid to do this [to have sex], but because he always insisted and threatened to break up with me, I finally obeyed his desire.

Such psychological pressure shapes their interpretation of intimacy in adulthood, frequently resulting in unhealthy relationships (Navaneetham & Kanth, 2022). Coercion to engage in sexual intercourse by a partner often places adolescent girls in a pressured position. On one hand, feelings of love, without rational thinking, may drive the adolescent to comply with their partner's request to avoid the fear of losing or being abandoned. On the other hand, feelings of betrayal for having given in to their partner's demands can lead to deep emotional trauma.

The impact of these traumatic experiences is profound, affecting adolescent's psychosocial development and contributing to deviant behaviour. Several adolescents who experienced traumatic sexual encounters in their first relationship reported engaging in risky behaviours, including prostitution. This finding aligns with studies that link post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from sexual abuse to involvement in risky sexual behaviour (Steil et al., 2022). Unresolved emotional trauma often leads to emotional instability, which adversely affects interpersonal relationships and sexual behaviour in later life (Dugal et al., 2016). In line with this context, Dahlia (23 years) said that the experience of being cheated on by her boyfriend had caused trauma that was difficult to forget, this was what encouraged her to be more open in expressing her sexual desires without the intention of building a commitment with a sexual partner.

The interpretation of this finding suggests that traumatic experiences in sexual relationships, both within the context of social commitment and coercion, have led adolescent girls to avoid relationships based on commitment and attachment to others, in order to prevent potential negative experiences, they have previously encountered. Negative sexual experiences are often linked with imbalanced power dynamics. When adolescents feel coerced into sexual activity, they may develop recurring behavioural patterns that hinder their ability to establish boundaries in future relationships. This trauma can adversely affect their self-esteem, social anxiety, and capacity to manage interpersonal conflict in healthy manner (Chen & Qin, 2020). Such bad experiences were also experienced by Anggrek (20 years) who said that: "I was once forced to have sex with a friend. I used to hang out with male friends, often going out drinking, and sometimes I would stay at their houses. When I was drunk, I was often touched in sensitive areas and then encouraged to have sex".

Research by Colizzi (2020) demonstrates that adolescents who experience sexual violence are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression, which can evolve into compulsive behaviours such as substance abuse or involvement in prostitution. Although they are involved in prostitution, the five female students claimed that they had never used any type of drugs. Some of them were only willing to drink alcohol and smoke. Engaging in prostitution was seen merely as an alternative to seek sexual satisfaction without commitment, and as a way for them to express their sexual identity and desires more freely and independently.

- **Social Media and Sexuality**

Adolescents increasingly rely on social media as a platform for self-expression and validation, significantly shaping their identity, including their perspectives on sexuality (Reyero et al., 2022). Popular culture, which often glorifies sexual freedom and individuality, creates an environment where adolescents may adopt more permissive lifestyle, even when these choices conflict with social and religious norms (Khumalo et al., 2020). This phenomenon is particularly evident in urban environments, where peer group pressure to conform to global trends is prevalent. Social media, influenced by popular culture, acts as a primary medium in shifting the traditional norms that have historically shaped adolescent identity (Wilska et al., 2023). Consequently, adolescents often find themselves in situations where social expectations conflict with the traditional values they have been taught. In line with this, Aurora (23, years) stated that while living in Jogja, they felt more confident in expressing their lifestyle freely. Unlike their hometown, where the community is more protective and one must be more cautious in expressing themselves, the people of Jogja, with their more polite social life and strong cultural traditions, provide more freedom for newcomers to live their daily lives. This made them feel safer in expressing their lifestyle. Mawar (23 years) also stated that:

I come from a very religious family, at home my clothing is very modest, I'm not allowed to get too close to male friends, I'm not allowed to date, and I was often taught to maintain my honour. But while in Jogja, I feel freer, maybe because I'm influenced by the surrounding social environment, and I hope my parents never find out about what I'm doing here."

Koenig et al. (2022) also said that social media and digital platforms have become key tools for sex workers to connect with potential clients, facilitating safer and more private interactions. These platforms help mitigate the risks of violence and stigma, as workers can screen clients, set boundaries, and communicate anonymously before meeting in person. The ability to operate from behind a screen offers privacy and security, which is crucial in reducing exposure to physical danger and unwanted attention.

Anggrek (20 years) frequently uses social media, including dating apps, for entertainment, broadening her horizons, and seeking sexual partners. She is lonely, so she spent much time on social media through which she meets new people. She feels more confidence to meet people online than in person because she lacks of confidence. On social media, she often meets guys who invite her through friend with benefit (FWB) or open booking out (BO). She expects that one day she will meet someone suitable through social media.

Additionally, popular culture, through mass media, continues to promote narratives of permissive sexuality, which further shaping new norms among adolescents (Kotiuga et al., 2022). Collectively, social media and popular culture have transformed existing value systems, creating spaces for adolescents to explore their sexual identity more freely and with less stringent social control (Döring et al., 2022). This aligns with the lives of five female teenagers involved in prostitution in this study. Negative sexual experiences, the increasing accessibility of social media that normalizes free sexual behaviour, including

prostitution, and urban life that is highly flexible in terms of social development, have shaped free behaviour among adolescents. In line with this context, Melati (20 years) states that free association in urban areas has become a common occurrence, making it an environment that attracts teenage girls to express their interests more freely. This also serves as a related reason for their involvement in prostitution, with social media access as a tool, the freedom of urban life, and the motivation sought through prostitution.

These three cases show that social media provides a platform for them to access a range of information and experiences that often conflict with the social and religious norms they were raised with (West et al., 2024). Mawar (21 years), for example, disregards her life in a very religious family. Living freely away from home makes her more comfortable expressing herself, especially by engaging in prostitution. Furthermore, Melati (20 years) also disregards the messages her father always gave her, particularly the strong prohibition against dating. However, the freedom she experienced living away from home pushed her to become involved in prostitution. Engaging in a free lifestyle, especially in terms of sexuality, since living in Yogyakarta, she ignored social and religious norms that regulate sexual relationships outside of marriage, which are considered forbidden, especially in the context of Indonesian society.

The presence of popular culture, which celebrates sexual freedom, reinforces adolescents' desire to adopt these new, more permissive norms (Bozzola et al., 2022). Pop culture has shaped the phenomenon of sexuality among adolescent as a result of the combination of easier access to information, the influence of social media, and the evolving social norms. Pop culture plays a major role in shaping how adolescent understand and express their sexuality, sometimes by challenging or shifting traditional boundaries, such as the prohibition of sex outside of marriage. While these norms offer adolescents the freedom to express themselves, they also create opportunities for engaging in risky behaviour. This phenomenon illustrates how social media has become a key instrument in dismantling the social boundaries that previously controlled adolescents sexual behaviour (Dhoest & Van Ouytsel, 2023). This is also in accordance with what Dahlia (20 years) said that social media has become part of her everyone's life, so she uses dating apps to keep herself busy, meet different guys and find clients to have sex with. In addition, Anggrek (20 years) also said that social media has become an outlet for her life, including looking for guys to have sex with. She is traumatized by people with emotional closeness who have forced her to engage in sexual relations, and she never wants to have a boyfriend. With dating apps, it's so much easier, you can just scroll and tap from your phone and from anywhere. I also use dating apps to avoid getting attached to anyone, so there's no relationship after playing.

Pan (2023) found that social media creates an anonymous environment where adolescents can experiment with their sexual identity without the concern of adult supervision. Furthermore, a study by Abdullahi and Abdulquadri (2018) emphasized that engagement with popular culture, particularly through social media, has established new norms of permissive sexuality that conflict with traditional values. Overall, this study confirms that social media plays a vital role

in reshaping how adolescents understand and express their sexuality within the broader social context.

- **Changing the Meaning of Sexuality**

Sexuality is increasingly regarded as an individual right that deserves respect, even when it conflicts with established norms. This shift is influenced by growing consciousness of gender equality, encouraging young women to express their sexuality more openly and without social stigma (Ferreira, 2022). While this change promotes individual freedom, it also presents moral and social challenges, particularly for those who adhere to traditional values.

Shifting social norms have significantly influenced how young women perceive and express their sexuality. Interviews revealed that some young women feel freer to engage in sexual relationships without the constraints of traditional norms. For example, Dahlia (23 years) said that when she wants to have sex, she usually looks for someone through apps or asks she has previously met. She is tired of being in an intimate relationship. For her, it's better to open BO than to have an intimate relationship, through which she can take advantage of guys who wants to be with me. This is also the case for Melati (20 years) who expresses her feeling that she has been frustrated since she lost her virginity, and she feels insecure when men approach her. Some of them approached her because they wanted to have sex. Open BO became an alternative to get inner satisfaction. She does not need an intimate relationship as long as she enjoys it. This is in line with what Aurora (23 years) said that open BO is just to fulfil my desires, not just to make money, I don't want to date anymore, I'll probably never get married. I don't need a man in my life. In Jogja I live alone and independent, free to do what I want. Similarly, Anggrek (20 year) feels more comfortable making decisions about her sexuality, including the choice to engage in prostitution as a means of achieving financial independence.

This indicates that their autonomy in determining their sexual behaviour and how they express their sexuality. This shift underscores the importance of understanding sexuality as a dynamic process, deeply influenced by gender dynamics and changing social norms. Women's recognition of their rights to manage their sexuality is increasingly viewed not as taboo, but as an essential aspect of individual freedom that justifies respect. This is in accordance with what Melati (20 years) said that:

Now I feel freer to have relationships with anyone, as long as we maintain privacy and enjoy it together. Rather than letting my body be used for free by men, it's better for me to set a fee for anyone I want to have sexual relations with. I no longer want to have a serious relationship with anyone.

However, this shift also presents challenges, particularly when individual autonomy conflicts with the enduring traditional values present in the society. These tensions often reflect the broader struggle between individual freedom and broader social control, which is central to part of the sexual dynamics among urban adolescents.

Previous studies indicate that the shifting meaning of sexuality and the influence of gender emancipation among adolescents are not phenomena confined to

singular culture or geographic area. Baker et al. (2017) emphasized that changes in gender and sexual norms occur across various countries, particularly in regions exposed to globalization and modernization. Meanwhile, research by Off (2023) reveals that urban adolescent girls are more likely to adopt liberal views on sexuality as awareness of gender rights grows. Overall, this study confirms that the transformation of sexual meanings among female university students is influenced not only by gender emancipation but also by broader global factors such as social media, popular culture, and socio-economic dynamics.

4. Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the shifting meanings of sexuality among five adolescent girls in Yogyakarta, highlighting the influence of traumatic experiences, social media, and changing social and gender norms on this transformation. The main findings show that previously sacred concepts of sexuality are now desacralized, with sexual relationships increasingly seen as part of individual freedom. In this context, prostitution emerged as an alternative chosen to fulfil the sexual needs of five adolescent girls in Yogyakarta. The freedom of living overseas also encourages them to be more confident in expressing their lifestyles freely, adopting flexible sexual identities, and leaving social and religious norms that were previously restrictive.

The research findings show that social media, particularly online dating apps, played a dominant role in encouraging these five female university students to engage in prostitution in Yogyakarta. Social media made it easier for them to seek sexual happiness, despite being affected by previous trauma. These digital platforms allowed the girls to connect with new people anonymously, reducing fear or shame, and giving them space to explore their sexual needs. In addition, changing social norms in urban areas, which are looser and freer, reinforce this trend. The freer urban environment, and the increased emphasis on gender emancipation, has led these five female university students to choose prostitution as an alternative to sexual desire, which is further facilitated by social media.

This study highlights these five female university students as active agents in shaping their sexual behaviour, an aspect that has rarely been explored in previous studies. In contrast to other studies that tend to focus on individual factors, such as peer pressure or lack of sexual education, this study emphasizes the complex interaction between changing social norms and global influences in redefining sexuality in these five female university students in Yogyakarta.

From an anthropological perspective, this research makes a significant contribution to understanding how globalization and modernization have provided knowledge, freedom and courage that influenced their perceptions about sexuality. This research expands the understanding of gender emancipation in local contexts, by showing how previously rigid social norms undergo change through interaction with popular culture and digital technology. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that social change in sexuality is not only influenced by internal factors, such as traumatic experiences, but also by broader external dynamics, including global and technological influences.

This research opens up opportunities for follow-up studies that can deepen the understanding of the relationship between shifting sexual norms and technological development. Future research could further explore the role of social media in shaping adolescents' sexual behaviour, as well as how gender emancipation develops in diverse local contexts. In addition, longitudinal research involving a larger population of adolescents will be crucial to understand the long-term impact of desacralization of sexuality on psychosocial development. This study expands academic horizons, particularly in responding to the changing social dynamics in urban communities

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank all the informants who share their time and experience in this research.

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