

CONCEPTUAL TRAILER LITERACY IN DIGITAL INTIMACY – A KEY COMPETENCE FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

DR. LAURA VANDENBOSCH

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6834-8386>

Laura.vandenbosch@kuleuven.be

KU Leuven, Media Psychology Lab, Belgium

Received: March 12, 2025 / Accepted: March 14, 2025
doi: <https://doi.org/10.26439/contratexto2025.n43.7921>

ABSTRACT. This trailer introduces *digital intimacy literacy* as a missing concept in debates on how to empower young people's sexualities in today's digital society. It suggests that while extensive literature exists on different subareas of digital intimacy and the development of users' sexuality, they can be combined to yield a more comprehensive understanding of digital intimacy in youth. Such integration can be further enriched by taking into account insights from communication literature, including the need for age-appropriate media interactions and the hidden costs of technological efficiency. Advancing our knowledge of digital intimacy is key for conceptualizing digital intimacy literacy, which is considered an important tool to empower contemporary young media users' sexuality. Digital intimacy literacy is framed as a unique construct which goes beyond traditional media literacy, encompassing interactive experiences, emotional responses, and sexuality at its core. Further research on digital intimacy literacy is essential to deepen our understanding of digital intimacy among youth—insights that can ultimately support their sexual flourishing.

KEYWORDS: media literacy / sexuality / adolescence / digital intimacy

ALFABETIZACIÓN EN INTIMIDAD DIGITAL: UNA COMPETENCIA CLAVE PARA EL DESARROLLO JUVENIL

RESUMEN. Este tráiler desarrolla la noción de alfabetización en intimidad digital, un concepto ausente en el debate sobre cómo empoderar la sexualidad de los jóvenes en la sociedad digital actual. Se plantea que existe una literatura abundante sobre diversas subáreas relacionadas con la intimidad digital y el desarrollo de la sexualidad en los usuarios, que podrían integrarse para lograr una comprensión más completa del

fenómeno en jóvenes. Esta integración podría enriquecerse, además, con la inclusión de aportes desde la literatura comunicacional, por ejemplo, respecto de la necesidad de interacciones mediáticas adecuadas a la edad o sobre los costos ocultos de la eficiencia tecnológica. El avance en el conocimiento sobre la intimidad digital será clave para conceptualizar la alfabetización en intimidad digital como una herramienta fundamental para empoderar la sexualidad de los jóvenes usuarios de medios. La alfabetización en intimidad digital se conceptualiza como un constructo único que trasciende la alfabetización mediática tradicional al incluir en su núcleo experiencias interactivas, respuestas emocionales y la sexualidad misma. Finalmente, es necesario profundizar la investigación en este campo para construir una comprensión integral de la intimidad digital juvenil que permita a las nuevas generaciones desarrollar plenamente su sexualidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: alfabetización mediática / sexualidad / adolescencia / intimidad digital

ALFABETIZAÇÃO NA INTIMIDADE DIGITAL — UMA COMPETÊNCIA CHAVE PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO DOS JOVENS

RESUMO. Este trailer desenvolve a noção de *letramento em intimidade digital* como um conceito ausente no debate sobre como as sexualidades dos jovens podem ser fortalecidas na sociedade digital atual. O trailer sugere que há uma rica literatura sobre diferentes subáreas da intimidade digital e o desenvolvimento da sexualidade dos usuários, que pode ser combinada para uma compreensão mais completa da intimidade digital entre os jovens. Essa integração pode ser ainda mais enriquecida ao se considerar a literatura da comunicação, por exemplo, sobre a necessidade de interações midiáticas apropriadas para cada faixa etária e os custos ocultos da eficiência tecnológica. O avanço do conhecimento sobre intimidade digital será essencial para conceituar o letramento em intimidade digital, considerado uma ferramenta importante para o fortalecimento da sexualidade de jovens usuários de mídia contemporâneos. O letramento em intimidade digital é conceituado como um constructo único que vai além do letramento midiático tradicional, incluindo experiências interativas, respostas emocionais e sexualidade em seus significados centrais. Juntas, mais pesquisas sobre o letramento em intimidade digital são necessárias para construir uma compreensão mais completa da intimidade digital entre os jovens e permitir que eles floresçam sexualmente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: letramento midiático / sexualidade / adolescência / intimidade digital

INTRODUCTION

The trailer seeks to unpack the concept of *digital intimacy* for youth, providing a solid theoretical framework for understanding *digital intimacy literacy*. Scholars have long examined how today's youth struggle with editing sexy selfies, receiving and sending sexting (both consensual and nonconsensual), soft launching new relationships on social media, dealing with the risks of online grooming, and finding balance in their pornography use (Maes, Van Oosten et al., 2022). At the same time, digital media offer the necessary tools that enable youth to quickly find romantic and sexual partners through dating apps, overcome parental-imposed physical boundaries to connect with new lovers, explore diverse sexual identities in more safe and private online spaces, and access sexual health information like never before (Maes, Van Oosten et al., 2022). Yet, an umbrella perspective linking these seemingly distinct digital media—and sexuality—related interactions is lacking, despite their shared foundation in sexuality.

In this essay, I advocate for a more unified approach to understanding youth's digital intimate experiences, offering a first insight into the competencies and skills young users need to flourish sexually in an online world: digital intimacy literacy.

SEXUALITY DEVELOPMENT

Nowadays, individuals—particularly pre-adolescents, adolescents, and emerging adults—spend a significant amount of time using digital devices, with social media platforms being particularly popular (Smahel et al., 2020). The pervasive presence of digital media in everyday life has resulted in the digitalization of youth development, occurring alongside their traditional offline maturation. More specifically, digital media have become a crucial outlet for exploring and developing sexuality during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

During adolescence, individuals undergo significant physical changes as their bodies mature into adult forms, accompanied by the onset of sexual, hormone-driven needs. As independence from parents grows and the topic of sexuality remains taboo in many contexts, adolescents turn to peers for discussion about their biological changes and newly emerging sexual interests. The development of cognitive skills, such as impulse control and self-reflection, further supports adolescents in forming their own sexual identity (Impett et al., 2013; Maes, Trekels et al., 2022). At the age of 18, the explorative phase of emerging adulthood begins—a period when individuals typically graduate from secondary school and move to more independent living conditions (e.g., because of college studies or pursuing a professional career) (Arnett, 2000). Among the primary goals of emerging adulthood (ages 18–25 years) is the establishment of a committed romantic relationship (Shulman & Connolly, 2013)—a process often characterized by trial and error (Stinson, 2010) and related explorative, casual sex experiences

(Claxton & Dulmen, 2013). During this phase, emerging adults develop their sexual self by exploring and identifying their own and desired sexual preferences and attributes. Ideally, this sexual self will reflect a positive understanding of sexuality (Impett et al., 2013; Maes, Trekels et al., 2022).

Among youth, a positive sexuality goes beyond being merely the opposite of a negative sexuality. It is defined as: acceptance of one's own sexuality, a positive approach to sexual relationships, control over sexual interactions, resilience in the face of challenging sexual experiences, and respectful approach to different sexual expressions (Maes, Trekels et al., 2022). Sexology literature informs how a positive sexuality development is key for individuals' (future) well-being. Hence, scholars and stakeholders have advocated for research that identifies positive sexual socialization processes (Anderson, 2013; Maes, Trekels et al., 2022).

DIGITAL INTIMACY

Such sexual socialization processes unfold today in a digital world, leading us to the concept of digital intimacy. This term has been especially used in humanities literature to describe how adults navigate their sexuality online. Parsakia and Rostami (2023) conducted qualitative research with predominantly young adults to describe the different ways in which technology intersects with individuals' intimacy (i.e., digital intimacy). Their research highlights several aspects of digital intimacy: formation of digital intimacy (e.g., online dating, social media flirting), maintenance of relationships (e.g., texting partners for social support), challenges of digital intimacy (e.g., nonconsensual sexting forwarding), benefits of digital intimacy (e.g., overcoming spatial boundaries in sexual interactions between partners), navigating digital and offline worlds (e.g., managing the etiquette of confirming online a newly developed offline sexual relationship), evolution of digital intimacy (e.g., adopting new partner communication patterns with newly introduced platforms), and characteristics of digital intimacy (e.g., public and private interactions) (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). While this first characterization of digital intimacy provides fundamental and valuable insights into how it can be understood among users, further research is needed to adapt it to the digital experiences of youth and their evolving sexual identity. For instance, the evolution of digital intimacy can be seen through a developmental lens, with implications for both platform governance and user maturation.

From a platform governance perspective, major digital transformations (e.g., developing a new app) are typically driven by the constant pursuit of improving human efficiency (Zuboff, 2023). However, the costs of this efficiency are typically hidden or not fully understood when technology is introduced to society (Vandenbosch et al., 2025). The drive for efficiency typically comes without considering the ages of the users who will be interacting most with these new technological features. Accordingly, the

question of whether a newly developed technology will enable age-(in)appropriate interactions is typically absent (Livingstone & Sylwander, 2025). This results in a technology landscape in which youth predominantly use digital devices and features originally intended for (older and thus more sexually mature) adults. Such access brings along both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, unlimited digital access to sexual resources may empower young users by satisfying their need for autonomy (Rosič et al., 2024) and facilitating, for instance, “freer” explorations of their emerging sexual identity (Maes, Van Oosten et al., 2022). On the other hand, substantial challenges arise. Such challenges are multifold and can include, for instance, interactions with inappropriate sexual content (e.g., incidental exposure to sexually explicit and violent content among 12-year-olds [Vandenbosch & Peter, 2016]), as well as an unregulated pace of sexual exploration that may not be developmentally appropriate for users who are still developing self-control and an understanding of “sexuality” (Arnett, 2000; Maes, Trekels et al., 2022; Rosič et al., 2024). At the most basic level of sexual interactions, technology has enabled (young) users to access “sex” anywhere, anytime. Concepts, such as the socialization of a script of instant sexual gratification (Vandenbosch, 2013) and the fluidity of online sexual interactions (Bauman, 2013) illustrate the undermining impact this technological access can have on intimacy.

From a user development perspective, digital intimacy can also be clustered within the maturing youth user (Vandenbosch et al., 2025). While 12-year-old adolescents may still experience feelings of disgust toward sexually explicit online content, 16-year-old users may actively search such contents to explore their sexual identities (Vandenbosch & Peter, 2016). In other words, the same digital intimacy interaction may mean something different to a user across their developmental lifespan. Similarly, its impact may differ in valence when considering short- (e.g., instant gratification and pleasure after using pornography in adolescence) versus long-term (e.g., increased sexist attitudes and behaviors in emerging adulthood after using pornography in adolescence) outcomes (Laporte et al., 2024).

Apart from this developmental lens, the digital intimacy framework can be enriched with insights from sexuality literature. For instance, within sexuality literature, relationship literature highlights how intimacy is experienced differently during the courtship versus the commitment stage (Vranken et al., 2024). The framework proposed by Parsakia and Rostami (2023) now includes the maintenance of a relationship but not its initiation or ending. Yet, such relationship phases are typical of adolescents and emerging adults (Arnett, 2000; Maes, Trekels et al., 2022). A digital media interaction within the context of the initiation of a relationship involves different needs than those typically present when the interaction occurs between committed partners. Similarly, the ending of a relationship can be done in many forms, some of which have been further shaped through the digitalization of intimacy—for instance, through practices such as ghosting (Konings et al., 2023).

The digital intimacy framework proposed by Parsakia and Rostami (2023) was developed without integrating the extensive existing literature on various digital intimacy behaviors. These include research on online dating, online sexual diversity, sexting (including forwarding), online sexual activism, online interactions with romantic partners, ghosting, grooming, online sexism, online infidelity, and pornography (Maes, Van Oosten et al., 2022). Although a wide variety of digital intimacy behaviors have been studied, these studies are often isolated from one another, clustered into distinct subareas, and rarely connected. A unified perspective on digital intimacy could help to structure the common characteristics shared by intimacy interactions in the online world. Such an umbrella approach fits with today's media ecosystem, where sexual interactions often span multiple platforms—rather than being confined to a single medium—and are even interrelated. For example, in the past, activities like watching television, listening to the radio, or making phone calls were distinct; today, all these activities can be performed on a smartphone. Current research on topics like sexting (e.g., via smartphones), pornography (e.g., via computers, smartphones, tablets), and other forms of digital sexual content (e.g., dating apps) typically overlooks the cross-platform and cross-activity nature of these behaviors. For example, dating apps can be used to interact with new partners but can also be used to send sexts. Acknowledging the interrelatedness of these different digital intimacy behaviors would enhance our understanding of digital intimacy from a communication-centered approach. Unlike a channel-centered approach (e.g., using a dating app versus using Snapchat for sexting), a communication-centered approach would provide a better understanding of what drives a user and how these interactions are dynamically interrelated with the user's (emerging) sexual identity (Meier & Reinecke, 2021).

DIGITAL INTIMACY LITERACY

A framework for understanding digital intimacy in adolescence would help to identify those who especially benefit from it and those who face challenges. Such knowledge seems vital for empowering future generations and, more precisely, for understanding what makes some users flourish and others flounder. This is where the concept of digital intimacy literacy comes into play.

Digital intimacy literacy should be distinguished from traditional media literacy as its inherent starting point is to empower media users' online sexuality. It should go beyond digital intimacy-specific subarea literacy levels such as porn literacy, defined as "a framework from which young people can critically examine and make sense of the sexual images they see" (Hutchings, 2017, p. 292). While useful, this type of literacy is too narrow, as it does not account for interactive experiences. This includes aspects like producing one's own sexual images or commenting on others' sexual content, which

are inherent aspects of digital intimacy. Following recent conceptualizations of digital literacy (Martinez et al., 2023; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020), future frameworks of digital intimacy literacy could be defined as a three-dimensional concept. This would encompass three components: (a) Technical competence: The ability to manage online privacy-related risks and opportunities, while engaging in intimate interactions optimally aligned with one's sought sexual gratification and overall positive sexuality (e.g., knowing how to search for sexually explicit content in a secure environment or finding content that matches one's sexual preferences, such as female-friendly pornography). (b) Knowledge structures: The ability to critically process and produce digital intimacy content and its related interactions in an empowered way (e.g., understanding the intentions behind pornography versus sexting messages and identifying which sexual interactions are positive, negative, or neutral). (c) Affective structures: The ability to monitor and control emotional responses (e.g., sexual gratification as well as eudaimonic responses) in relation to engagement with different digital intimacy experiences (e.g., managing emotional reactions after being ghosted on dating apps or when a partner does not reply to a text). These components of digital intimacy literature are not independent; rather, they are highly interconnected.

A novel digital intimacy framework would provide not only scholars but also practitioners with new ways to understand the knowledge and technical/affective skills young media users need to thrive sexually online. This shift in understanding is urgently required, as the current landscape of digital intimacy remains largely unaddressed by key stakeholders. Educators, parents, and policymakers typically ignore the prevalence of digital intimacy experiences among adolescents and emerging adults, due to legal barriers (e.g., pornography viewing restrictions for minors) and social stigma (Konings et al., 2023). Additionally, policy and health organizations have taken limited or no action in guiding youth's digital intimacy experiences (Widman et al., 2021), often relying on a "no consumption" approach. This is questionable given the high rates of pornography consumption and sexting among youth (e.g., Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022). By ignoring or shying away from these issues, current approaches fail to address the reality of how youth interact with digital intimacy. This gap in understanding and education partly explains why digital intimacy remains largely absent from school curricula and why parents often avoid discussing it with their children (Widman et al., 2021). Without a framework to guide these conversations and decisions, both young people and the adults responsible to support them are left without the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of digital intimacy in a safe and healthy manner. Developing a deeper understanding of digital intimacy and the concept of digital intimacy literacy can provide the scientific basis needed to reassess and reshape how we approach youths' experiences in this area. A better understanding of digital intimacy literacy may prompt a fundamental shift toward a more proactive approach—one that equips young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in these

experiences in a safe, informed, and positive way. Such an approach could lead to the creation of tailored educational programs, policies, and support systems designed to empower youth to navigate their digital worlds with confidence and responsibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Chelly Maes, Lara Schreurs, Gaëlle Vanhoffelen, and Femke Konings for their valuable insights in prior discussions on this subject.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. M. (2013). Positive sexuality and its impact on overall well-being. *Bundesgesundheitsblatt – Gesundheitsforschung – Gesundheitsschutz*, 56, 208-214. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00103-012-1607-z>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Bauman, Z. (2013). *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Claxton, S. E., & Dulmen, M. H. M. van. (2013). Casual sexual relationships and experiences in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(2), 138-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813487181>
- Hutchings, N. (2017). Porn literacy: Raising sexually intelligent young people. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 14(4b), e292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.04.405>
- Impett, E. A., Muise, A., & Breines, J. G. (2013). From risk to pleasure: Toward a positive psychology of sexuality. In M. Hojjat, & D. Camer (Eds.), *Positive psychology of love* (pp. 57-75). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199791064.003.0005>
- Konings, F., Sumter, S., & Vandenbosch, L. (2023). It's not you, it's me: Experiences with ghosting on mobile dating applications and Belgian emerging adults' self-esteem. *Sexuality & Culture*, 27, 1328-1351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10065-3>
- Laporte, H., Vangeel, L., Wang, K., Eggermont, S., & Vandenbosch, L. (2024). Exposure to sexually explicit internet material in adolescence and unwanted sexual behavior in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000449>

- Livingstone, S., & Sylwander, K. R. (2025). There is no right age! The search for age-appropriate ways to support children's digital lives and rights. *Journal of Children and Media*, 19(1), 6-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2435015>
- Maes, C., & Vandenbosch, L. (2022). Adolescents' use of sexually explicit internet material over the course of 2019–2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: A three-wave panel study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51, 105-121. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02122-5>
- Maes, C., Trekels, J., Impett, E., & Vandenbosch, L. (2022). The development of the Positive Sexuality in Adolescence Scale (PSAS). *The Journal of Sex Research*, 60(1), 45-61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2021.2011826>
- Maes, C., Van Oosten, J. M. F., & Vandenbosch, L. (2022). Adolescents' digital media interactions within the context of sexuality development. In J. Nesi, E. H. Telzer, & M. J. Prinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent digital media use and mental health* (pp. 135-161). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108976237>
- Martinez, D., Helsper, E., Casado, M. A., Martinez, G., Larrañaga, N., Garmendia, M., Oliveira, R., Salmela-Aro, K., Spurava, G., Hietajärvi, L., Maksniemi, E., Sormanen, N., Tiihonen, S., Wilska, T.-A., Vissenberg, J., Puusepp, M., Edisherashvili, N., Tomczyk, L., Opozda-Suder, S., Sepielak, D., Pedaste, M., & d'Haenens, L. (2023). *Co-developing media literacy and digital skills interventions: Report on preliminary results*. REMEDIS. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/122324/1/Martinez_et_al_Co_developing_media_literacy_and_digital_skills_interventions_report.pdf
- Meier, A., & Reinecke, L. (2021). Computer-mediated communication, social media, and mental health: A conceptual and empirical meta-review. *Communication Research*, 48(8), 1182-1209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220958224>
- Parsakia, K., & Rostami, M. (2023). Digital intimacy: How technology shapes friendships and romantic relationships. *AI and Tech in Behavioral and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 27-34. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.aitech.1.1.5>
- Rosič, J., Schreurs, L., Janicke-Bowles, S. H., & Vandenbosch, L. (2024). Trajectories of digital flourishing in adolescence: The predictive roles of developmental changes and digital divide factors. *Child Development*, 95(5), 1586-1602. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.14101>
- Schreurs, L., & Vandenbosch, L. (2020). Introducing the social media literacy (SMILE) model with the case of the positivity bias on social media. *Journal of Children and Media*, 15(3), 320-337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2020.1809481>

- Shulman, S., & Connolly, J. (2013). The challenge of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood: Reconceptualization of the field. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(1), 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696812467330>
- Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., & Hasebrink, U. (2020). *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries*. EU Kids Online. <https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.47fdeqj01ofo>
- Stinson, R. D. (2010). Hooking up in young adulthood: A review of factors influencing the sexual behavior of college students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 24(2), 98-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568220903558596>
- Vandenbosch, L. (2013). *Self-objectification and sexual effects of the media: An exploratory study in adolescence* [Doctoral dissertation, KU Leuven]. Lirias. <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/414622/1/Phd.%20LVandenbosch.pdf>
- Vandenbosch, L., & Peter, J. (2016). Antecedents of the initiation of watching sexually explicit internet material: A longitudinal study among adolescents. *Mass Communication & Society*, 19(4), 499-521. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1148171>
- Vandenbosch, L., Beullens, K., Vanherle, R., & Schreurs, L. (2025). Digital media uses and effects: The contributing roles of time. *Journal of Children and Media*, 19(1), 71-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2438690>
- Vranken, I., Sumter, S., & Vandenbosch, L. (2024). A multi-method study examining the role of swiping on dating apps: Mate value preferences, sexual satisfaction, and need satisfaction with matches in emerging adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 53, 2547-2582. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-024-02891-9>
- Widman, L., Javidi, H., Maheux, A. J., Evans, R., Nesi, J., & Choukas-Bradley, S. (2021). Sexual communication in the digital age: Adolescent sexual communication with parents and friends about sexting, pornography, and starting relationships online. *Sexuality & Culture*, 25(6), 2092-2109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09866-1>
- Zuboff, S. (2023). The age of surveillance capitalism. In W. Longhofer, & D. Winchester (Eds.). (2023). *Social Theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (pp. 203-213). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003320609>