



Editorial

Navigating sexuality in the 21st century: Embracing diversity and understanding

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Introduction

Finding a universally accepted definition of sexuality is challenging. While in some contexts, it has meant the act of sexual contact or eroticism, in others, it has been used to describe sexual orientation, identity or preference. With time, we have evolved our understanding of sexuality from a hetero-normative genital focussed concept towards a much broader and more complex experience encompassing physiological, behavioral, psychological and social elements.^[1] Being an abstract and socially influenced concept, sexuality shares a complex association with culture- its norms, taboos, social scripts, political beliefs and agenda and, of course, stigma. In the book 'History of Sexuality', Michel Foucault examines how sexuality converted from being a socially accepted normal pleasurable discourse in Ancient Greece and Rome to a morally unacceptable, socially repressed entity in 17th century Europe and other Western countries.^[2] Even in India, the social expression and acceptance of sexuality have seen major changes over the centuries.^[3] While the concept of sexuality has gone through multiple analyses, dissection and association with the

greater psycho-socio-politico-economic schema, it takes little effort to accept that in the last 40 to 50 years, it has gone through an accelerated phase of debate and re-discovery. Thus, the topic of 21st-century sexuality rather examines the multifaceted and ever-evolving aspect of human identity.

As societal norms shift and individuals gain more autonomy over their lives, the discussion surrounding sexuality has become increasingly nuanced and complex. From the recognition of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities to the ongoing debate over sexual expression and rights, the landscape of sexuality today demands thoughtful consideration and understanding. Thus, in this issue, we take a look at the various relevant and upcoming research in this context.

Sexual fluidity: The diversity and continuum of sexuality

One of the most significant advancements in recent years has been the growing acceptance and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals. This has led to an increase in the identification of individuals with gender dysphoria, made transitioning to the coveted gender somewhat easier and safer, same-sex couples normalized, and same-sex marriages possible. The acknowledgement of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities has challenged traditional notions of sexuality, paving the way for greater inclusivity and representation. In India, section 377 of IPC which held homosexuality or any other form of 'unnatural' sexual contact punishable with imprisonment was abolished. Though this was a victory on the one hand for greater acceptance of sexuality, it also left a caveat in addressing scenarios of bestiality and non-consensual acts of homosexuality.

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Similarly, with legal frameworks changing, same-sex marriages are becoming common in multiple countries. In India, a major debate happened in 2023 regarding the inclusion of same-sex marriages under the Special Marriage Act. Despite an overall positive social acceptance, the act continued to remain unchanged. Much distinction remains between the rights of same-sex partners in realms of healthcare and financial benefits, their overall integration in the social milieu and the stigma associated with their sexuality. Continuing advocacy for equal rights and protections for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, still has a long way to go.

At the same time, when homosexuality and same-sex marriages were getting more visibility and acceptance, gender dysphoria has also come to the forefront of discussion regarding sexuality. The Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act of 2019 is a positive step towards their normalised acceptance in Indian society.^[4] The prevalence of transitioning has increased all over the world.^[5] However, it has also come as a double-edged sword as younger, pre-pubertal or early pubertal children and adolescents are being identified to be having gender dysphoria, initiating transitioning, and then, after years of irreversible change, choosing to de-transition.^[6] As professionals working in the realm of sexuality, we need to develop more clarity regarding when is an appropriate time to identify gender dysphoria and what should be the correct age-appropriate step-wise approach to it.

Sexual health, sexual behavior and expression of sexuality: The changing trends in a digital era

The 21st century has witnessed a significant shift in attitudes towards sexual expression and freedom. In navigating sexuality in the 21st century, it is essential to recognize and respect the diverse experiences and identities that exist within our communities. From rigid norms and expectations, society is gradually embracing the complexity of human sexuality and celebrating the diversity of desires, expressions, and relationships. With more celebrities and public figures coming out with their expressions of sexuality, a culture of acceptance, understanding, and consent is being fostered, which can create a world where everyone is free to explore and express their sexuality authentically and without fear of judgment or discrimination.

The rise in OTT platforms has allowed larger dissemination of digital content that shows and discusses sexually explicit content. Even on various social media platforms, the prevalence of self-posting of sexual content, which can be classified as pornographic, has become acceptable. Certain social media platforms have also made a viable business for both individuals posting and individuals consuming various pornographic material by introducing pay walls to access certain content. Widespread and easy digital marketing has also allowed the marketing of 'sexual well-being devices', more commonly referred to as sex toys or sexual paraphernalia. Also, the demand and supply for commercial sex are growing, facilitated by economic growth, the internet, globalization and changing sexual attitudes. With an increase in diversity, the variety of negative impacts related to sexuality has also increased. One of them is Chem sex, which describes "intentional sex under the influence of psychoactive drugs", mostly seen in homosexual partners. The most commonly used substances are Mephedrone and crystal meth, which are stimulants that trigger euphoria and sexual arousal.^[7] Also, changing patterns of sexual behavior like swinging, swapping etc., has opened easier avenues for exploring one's sexuality, where married partners are opting to have consensual sexual contact with other couples or partners.^[8,9] While the higher acceptance of open marriages and polyamory might be perceived as increased freedom by some, it can certainly come with its own set of emotional and legal challenges. Situationship has been introduced as a term among the younger generation, where casual, commitment-free relationships are acceptable between partners primarily based on their proximity.^[10]

Social media platforms have started providing spaces for open dialogue, fostering communities that amplify diverse voices and experiences. The internet facilitates access to information, challenging traditional norms and fostering a more informed and tolerant society. With the rise of the internet and social media, discussions about sex have become more open and accessible. While this increased visibility has led to greater acceptance of diverse sexual practices and preferences, it has also given rise to new challenges, such as the proliferation of misinformation and unrealistic standards of beauty and sexuality, cyberbullying,

and media analysis of sexual abuse and violence. The #Me Too movement has brought much-needed attention to issues of consent, harassment, and sexual violence. The movement has sparked important conversations about power dynamics, boundaries, and accountability in sexual encounters.

Future directions

With more sexual openness and increased availability of resources, sexual health seeking has become more common.^[11] Conversations about the sexual symptoms of chronic diseases like hypertension, diabetes, mood disorders, etc., and the need to address them more often have started. Researchers are looking into newer avenues, like using Yoga, Mindfulness, etc., to improve the sexual functioning and satisfaction of couples. Sexuality and the need for intimacy of older adults are being explored instead of being dismissed.^[12]

While society continues to evolve, we also need to upscale our understanding and acceptance of the diverse expressions of human sexuality, so that we can contribute through clinics, research and policy-making in creating a positive difference in this changing society. In this issue, various articles bring out and discuss various important issues regarding this colourful spectrum of sexuality and its associated factors.

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