

“This is not Something that I Share with Everyone”: Digital Media Use and One Night Stand in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an understanding of digital media, intimate relationships, urban lifestyles, and moral norms for contextualizing the study of the construction of contemporary urban identity. It provides an overview of key issues in the mediated interactions of urban youth and online interactions, especially the tensions around choice and social stigma, which can limit the social values in the urban community. It also offers a reflection of the tension between individual pleasure and moral standards in the region. These data are based on a study from the cities in Indonesia, comprehensively interviewing how 20 youths in the region experience ONS to some extent. The findings are guided by the thematic analysis of the data and provide insights into categories of significance of mediated connections, intimate practices, and areas of social values, including youth, urban, ethics, culture, and modesty.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, a growing number of urban populations have emerged in modern-driven energy transitions, becoming metropolitan people who deepen the modernization and Westernization spirit. (Antweiler, 2019; Bunnell et al., 2013; Roitman & Rukmana, 2022; Shirleyana et al., 2018). Initially championed by the local wisdom and religious spirit, peer pressure for a lifestyle transition that is both modern and sociologically sustainable and free has since been integrated into the urban inhabitants' maturation, such as the urban nightlife. Urban life is now widely recognized for its role in mitigating the negative impacts of modernization and involving marginalized groups in participatory processes. This social relational shift reflects individuals' growing awareness that the value transition creates integration and belonging in more than just the vicinities of communities, and that high-interaction, low-equity social structures impact the peer acceptability of new members compared to the close social interaction in Urban kampungs (Roitman & Rukmana, 2022). Examples of sexual misconduct among urban young men in Bandung (Johnston et al., 2021), Low Sexually Transmitted Infections knowledge found in Urban Jakarta (Winarto et al., 2023), and the high-risk sexual behavior and pregnancy as an urban problem that needs to be solved (Rakhmawati et al., 2021). So, while modernization was proposed through mass media, infrastructure, and pop culture, this study explores the intersection between urban lifestyle, eastern values

associated with social interaction, and digital media, and how modern community energy nevertheless provides a discursive opening to risky lifestyle.

There is a rising academic and practitioner interest in the perception of urban lifestyle in third-world countries, such as the politics of urban density, human movement and daily visitation, digital media role in urban spaces, urban narratives, and urban climate actions (Kjærås, 2024; Ma et al., 2024; Machimura, 2021; Yazar, 2024; Zou, 2025). The base of the academic conversation on urban vs rural lifestyles is one of the pioneering research streams in the field of social sciences and has long explored the potential contributions of the understanding of the urban perspective in social sciences (Gutierrez-Velez et al., 2022). Urban lifestyles aspire to create unique social values by engendering positive social and cultural outcomes despite the negative sides they entail.

Indonesia has many cities with changes in forms of settlement, which follow the needs and lifestyles of the millennial generation who moved from rural to urban areas (Sihombing et al., 2020). The rapid growth of digital technologies has profoundly altered the rhythms of urban life, influencing not only patterns of work and leisure but also the ways young adults approach intimacy and sexuality. In Indonesia's metropolitan centers, mobile dating applications and social networking platforms have become everyday tools for initiating contact, negotiating relationships, and exploring sexual encounters. These technologies create new opportunities for connection, but they also intersect with ongoing transformations in urban culture, globalization, and shifting normative frameworks. One of the clearest examples of this intersection is the increasing visibility of one-night stands (ONS), which highlight the negotiation between individual desires, cultural expectations, and digitally mediated forms of social interaction.

Indonesia presents a particularly interesting case for explaining this phenomenon. Prevailing cultural and religious traditions emphasize restraint, modesty, and family-centered notions of morality (Fatmawati, 2021; Fuadi et al., 2024). Within this setting, casual sexual practices such as ONS often carry stigma, even as digital platforms make them more accessible and discreet. These encounters are not simply private choices; they are shaped by the affordances of technology—such as anonymity, speed, and the ability to curate self-presentation—that encourage experimentation while complicating issues of trust, safety, and reputation (Cerwenka et al., 2022; Kennair et al., 2021). Urban environments amplify these dynamics, concentrating populations and offering spaces—from nightlife districts to shared online communities—where such practices become more feasible.

From a communication and media studies perspective, ONS should be seen as a socially mediated practice rather than a purely individual act. Digital applications like Tinder, Bumble, TikTok or even Instagram function as more than communication channels; they serve as cultural intermediaries that influence how intimacy is initiated, how risk is managed, and how personal narratives are constructed (Cruz et al., 2023). Popular media representations of casual sex further complicate this picture by alternately normalizing and problematizing the practice, providing young adults with reference points for making sense of their own experiences.

While research on hookups and digital intimacy has expanded in Western contexts (Jiao et al., 2025; McKinnon et al., 2025; Reling et al., 2021a), relatively little is known about how these practices unfold in Southeast Asia. Indonesian scholarship has largely concentrated on youth sexuality within the domains of religion, morality, and reproductive health (Kågesten et al., 2020; Lubis et al., 2022), leaving unexplored the specific role of digital mediation in shaping ONS practices among young urban adults. This study seeks to address this gap by situating ONS within the intersection of communication, media, and youth culture, focusing on how digital platforms enable, frame, and give meaning to these encounters.

This research is guided by a central question: In what ways do young adults in Indonesian cities use digital media to facilitate one-night stands, and how are these practices interpreted within broader cultural discourses of morality, intimacy, and modernity? Using a qualitative methodology, the study examines both the lived experiences of young people in Indonesia and the symbolic meanings they attach to ONS in digitally mediated environments.

The contribution of this work lies in three main areas. First, it expands our understanding of how digital technologies shape intimate practices in non-Western contexts, offering a counterpoint to the dominance of Western-based scholarship. Second, it illustrates how globalized sexual practices intersect with, and sometimes contest, local cultural frameworks. Finally, it refrains from ONS as a communicative and mediated phenomenon rather than merely a behavioral choice, thus broadening the analytical scope of media and communication research on sexuality in Southeast Asia.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how digital media shape one-night stand (ONS) practices within contemporary urban lifestyles. A qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing participants' lived experiences, subjective interpretations, and communicative strategies surrounding intimacy that are difficult to access through quantitative measurement (Flick, 2022). Rather than focusing on the frequency of ONS, the study seeks to understand how digitally mediated interactions are embedded in everyday urban life and how they underline the meaning of intimacy, agency, and morality among young adults.

The research was conducted in Bandung, an urban environment marked by intensive digital media use, a dense youth population, and the normalization of app-based social interaction. Twenty young adults aged 20–30 participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling (Bailey, 2014), to reach individuals who had direct and indirect experience with ONS practices or were closely familiar with them through peer networks. This sampling strategy started with personal contacts from the researcher's students and allowed access to a socially sensitive phenomenon that is often hidden due to stigma and moral regulation.

Table 1. Participants in this study.

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Primary Digital Platform Used	Experience with ONS
P1	27	Male	Event Organizer Employee	Dating App	Know someone who practiced it
P2	26	Male	Event Organizer Employee	Instagram	Know someone who practiced it
P3	25	Female	Online Employee	Dating App	Yes
P4	24	Female	Photographer	Instagram	Familiar
P5	21	Male	College Student	Bumble	Familiar
P6	21	Male	College Student	Tinder	Familiar
P7	23	Male	College Student	Bumble	Familiar
P8	23	Male	Employee	Tinder	Familiar
P9	24	Male	Student	Instagram	Familiar
P10	22	Male	College Student	TikTok	Familiar
P11	23	Male	Employee	TikTok	Familiar

P12	23	Male	Employee	Instagram	Know someone who practiced it
P13	22	Male	Employee	TikTok	Yes
P14			College Student	TikTok	Yes
P15	22	Male	Employee	Instagram	Yes
P16	23	Male	Employee	TikTok	Familiar
P17	24	Male	Employee	TikTok	Familiar
P18	24	Male	Employee	TikTok	Familiar
P19	28	Male	Employee	TikTok	Familiar
P20	28	Male	Employee	Instagram	Familiar

Data was collected through in-depth (Seidman, 2019), semi-structured interviews (Galletta & Cross, 2013) conducted on-site in locations chosen by participants, including cafés, co-working spaces, and other private yet familiar urban settings. Conducting interviews in these environments helped reduce social distance and encouraged open reflection on intimate experiences. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis was employed using an inductive and iterative coding process (Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2022). Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent; anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms; and no identifying personal data was recorded. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular care was taken to create a non-judgmental interview environment.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Collectively, this study, drawing on qualitative data, found themes illustrating that one-night stand practices among urban youth are deeply embedded within platform-mediated social structures.

Digital media shape not only access to intimacy but also its meaning, boundaries, and moral negotiation (Lambert, 2019). By foregrounding the role of platforms as infrastructures of intimacy, this study contributes to academic scholarship on how digital systems reorganize social life, particularly in the domain of intimacy and sexuality.

3.1. Digital Platforms as Infrastructures of Intimacy

The findings demonstrate that digital platforms function as infrastructural systems that reorganize how intimacy is accessed and enacted in urban contexts. Dating applications and social media platforms are not merely channels for communication but structured environments that shape users' possibilities for interaction. Participants described platforms as spaces that reduce uncertainty and social risk by providing clear signals of availability, interest, and proximity. Through these infrastructures, intimacy becomes more accessible, predictable, and routinized within everyday digital practices.

Platform affordances such as anonymity, profile curation, algorithmic matching, and location-based filtering actively mediate how individuals encounter one another. These features allow users to bypass traditional social gatekeeping mechanisms—such as shared social circles or prolonged acquaintance—that typically regulate intimate encounters. Participants emphasized that the ability to “filter” potential partners based on preferences and proximity made casual encounters feel efficient and intentional rather than accidental. In this sense, platforms do not simply facilitate intimacy but actively configure its conditions of possibility.

This social interaction aligns with an urban lifestyle that conceptualizes platforms as socio-technical systems shaping social relations. Intimacy emerges here as an outcome of platform design rather than solely personal desire. ONS practices thus become embedded within the logics of platforms, where speed, choice, and optimization shape how relationships are initiated and understood.

3.2. Communicative Pre-Negotiation and the Structuring of Casual Sexual Encounters

A central theme emerging from the data is the role of digital communication in pre-negotiating intimacy before face-to-face encounters occur. Participants consistently reported that expectations regarding emotional involvement, duration, and boundaries were clarified through text-based interactions. This process reflects a mediated form of sexual scripting, where meanings and intentions are articulated and aligned through digital communication.

Through chat functions, individuals negotiate what the encounter will involve and, importantly, what it will exclude. Participants described this pre-negotiation as a strategy to minimize emotional ambiguity and avoid misunderstandings. Digital communication allows intimacy to be framed as temporary and bounded, reducing the risk of misaligned expectations. As a result, ONS encounters are rarely spontaneous; instead, they are communicatively organized events shaped by explicit negotiation.

This finding illustrates how digital media restructure intimacy into a communicative project rather than a gradual relational process. The ability to script intimacy in advance reflects broader shifts toward rationalized and managed social interactions in platform-mediated environments. Intimacy becomes something to be coordinated efficiently rather than discovered organically.

3.3. Sexual Autonomy and Reflexive Identity in Platform-Mediated Urban Life

Participants frequently framed their engagement in ONS practices as an expression of personal choice and autonomy, closely tied to the construction of reflexive self-identity. Drawing on Giddens' concept of reflexive modernity, the findings suggest that sexual practices are increasingly understood as part of individual self-projects rather than adherence to fixed moral scripts. Digital platforms provide the tools that make such reflexive choices possible.

ONS practices were described as conscious decisions rather than impulsive acts. Participants emphasized their ability to set limits, decide when and with whom to engage, and disengage when desired. This framing positions sexual autonomy as a form of self-governance, where individuals actively manage their intimate lives in alignment with personal values and goals.

However, this autonomy operates within platform environments that subtly guide behavior through algorithms, interface design, and normative cues. While participants experience a sense of freedom, their choices are shaped by the architectures of platforms themselves. This highlights the tension between agency and structure in platform-mediated intimacy, where autonomy is both enabled and constrained by digital systems.

3.4. Managing Intimacy Through Platform-Enabled Control and Detachment

Another prominent theme concerns how digital platforms enable control and emotional detachment in intimate encounters. Participants emphasized the importance of being able to disengage easily through features such as blocking, unmatching, or ceasing communication. These mechanisms allow individuals to manage intimacy without the social obligations typically associated with ending offline relationships.

This capacity for disconnection supports what Rosewarne describes as "Intimacy on the Internet," (Rosewarne, 2018) characterized by economy of love, online intimacy, and reduced online deception. Participants framed emotional distance as a protective strategy, allowing them to engage in intimacy without vulnerability. Digital platforms facilitate this detachment by minimizing accountability and social consequence.

While such control offers emotional security, it also reflects broader cultural shifts in how relationships are valued. Intimacy becomes temporary and instrumental, shaped by efficiency rather than endurance. The findings suggest that platform-enabled detachment is not merely a personal preference but a structural feature of digital intimacy that reshapes relational norms.

3.5. Platform-Mediated Intimacy and the Ongoing Negotiation of Moral Boundaries

Despite the normalization of ONS practices within digital spaces, participants remained acutely aware of moral stigma associated with casual sex. This stigma did not disappear in platform-mediated environments but was instead managed through strategies of discretion and compartmentalization. Participants distinguished between the perceived normality of ONS within apps and the judgment they anticipated in offline social contexts.

Despite the normalization of ONS within digital spaces, participants remained conscious of social judgment, particularly outside online environments.

“Di dunia digital itu kelihatannya biasa saja, tapi di dunia nyata tetap ada kosakata tersendiri yang kami pahami” (P1, male, 31).

Participants actively managed visibility by separating their digital sexual practices from family, workplace, or community identities. This compartmentalization reflects how digital media simultaneously enable discretion and reinforce moral boundaries.

“Ini bukan sesuatu yang bisa saya ceritakan ke semua orang” (P19, female, 27).

Thus, digital platforms do not erase stigma but reshape how it is navigated. ONS practices become socially possible not because morality disappears, but because digital environments allow intimacy to exist within controlled, semi-private spheres. This highlights the complex role of digital media as spaces where autonomy, pleasure, and moral discipline intersect.

Digital platforms provide partial insulation from moral scrutiny by enabling anonymity and selective visibility. Participants actively managed their online identities to ensure that intimate practices remained separate from family, workplace, or community identities. This highlights how digital media allow intimacy to exist within semi-private spheres rather than fully public ones.

These findings demonstrate that platforms do not dissolve moral boundaries but reconfigure how they are navigated. ONS practices become socially possible not because moral norms disappear, but because digital infrastructures enable individuals to manage visibility and stigma. Platform-mediated intimacy thus emerges as a site where pleasure, autonomy, and moral regulation intersect in complex ways.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how digital media shape one-night stand (ONS) practices within contemporary urban youth culture, focusing on the role of platforms as socio-technical systems rather than neutral communication tools. Drawing on qualitative interviews with young adults in an urban Indonesian context, the findings demonstrate that ONS practices are deeply embedded in platform-mediated infrastructures that organize access to intimacy, structure interaction, and reconfigure moral boundaries. Digital platforms actively shape how intimacy is initiated, negotiated, managed, and terminated, positioning ONS as a communicative and infrastructural outcome rather than merely an individual sexual choice.

The study contributes to media and communication scholarship by foregrounding intimacy as a mediated social practice structured by platform affordances. Features such as algorithmic matching, anonymity, and disconnection tools enable users to rationalize intimacy, pre-negotiate boundaries, and manage emotional risk. These affordances foster a form of reflexive sexual autonomy that aligns with broader dynamics of platform-mediated urban life, where flexibility, efficiency, and self-regulation are

prioritized. At the same time, this autonomy remains situated within systems that subtly guide behavior, highlighting the tension between individual agency and platform governance.

Importantly, the findings reveal that digital media do not eliminate moral regulation but transform how it is navigated. While ONS practices are normalized within digital spaces, participants continue to manage stigma through strategies of discretion, selective visibility, and compartmentalization. This underscores the paradoxical role of platforms as both enablers of sexual freedom and sites of ongoing moral negotiation. Rather than dissolving cultural norms, digital infrastructures reorganize the conditions under which intimacy becomes socially acceptable.

By situating ONS practices within a Global South urban context, this study also extends New Media & Society discussions that have been largely centered on Western settings. The findings demonstrate that platform-mediated intimacy operates within locally specific moral, cultural, and gendered frameworks, even as it draws on globally circulating digital practices. This highlights the importance of contextualizing digital intimacy within diverse socio-cultural environments.

Future research may build on these findings by examining comparative urban contexts, platform-specific dynamics, or longitudinal shifts in mediated intimacy. As digital platforms continue to permeate everyday life, understanding their role in shaping intimate practices remains crucial for broader discussions on media, culture, and social change.

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