

Visibility, Mediation, and Intimacy: An Ethnography of Adolescents in School

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Abstract:

The article examines how adolescents aged 14 to 18 appear to negotiate intimacy under conditions of heightened visibility, constant digital mediation, and institutional proximity. Moving beyond a simplified opposition between online and offline worlds, the study adopts a relational perspective that conceptualizes digital media as embedded within embodied and school-based practices. The main focus will be on images, visibility, and algorithmic feedback in shaping affective subjectivities, as well as practices such as sexting, non-consensual image circulation, and emerging forms of mediated intimacy, including relationships with non-human agents. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes, the article illustrates divergent strategies adolescents develop to manage risk, agency, and vulnerability, highlighting how intimacy becomes a site of negotiation between control and exposure. The findings suggest that contemporary adolescent shame is increasingly aesthetic rather than moral, and that non-consensual image circulation constitutes a form of ontological violence that fractures identity and relational presence. The article ultimately argues that educational responses to digital intimacy must move beyond surveillance and prohibition, advocating instead for a relational and ethical pedagogy capable of addressing the lived realities of adolescents in digitally saturated school environments.

Keywords: Adolescent intimacy; Digital mediation; Ethnography of education; Visibility and self-representation; Non-consensual image circulation.



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1. Introduction

This research emerges from a long-term, structural intersection between academic inquiry in cultural anthropology and professional practice in secondary education. Situated at the crossroads of these two domains, the study draws on a fifteen-year dual trajectory that combines sustained ethnographic sensibility with everyday pedagogical engagement. This specific epistemological positioning allows for a productive tension between analytical distance and relational proximity, transforming the secondary school from a mere institutional setting into a privileged, high-intensity ethnographic field.

Over the past two decades, adolescent affectivity and sexuality have become central objects of inquiry within sociology, media studies, and youth studies. Scholars have examined the impact of digital technologies on intimacy and the role of social media in shaping self-representation. We have seen a proliferation of studies regarding “networked publics” and the “quantified self.” However, much of this literature relies on surveys, experimental designs, or short-term qualitative studies conducted outside adolescents’ everyday institutional environments. As a result, the school — despite being one of the most significant spaces of socialization during adolescence — has often remained analytically marginal, treated merely as a container for students rather than an active agent in their affective lives.

This study addresses that gap by situating ethnographic research directly within the daily life of the school. It posits that the school is not just a place where students learn curriculum, but a “hot” cognitive and emotional environment where the private and public spheres collide. Corridors, classrooms, bathrooms, informal gathering spaces, and the digital communication channels inextricably linked to school life form a dense relational ecology. Within this ecology, norms, desires, fears, and conflicts surrounding intimacy are continuously negotiated.

Rather than treating adolescence as a homogeneous category, the research foregrounds the multiplicity of lived experiences through which young people engage with intimacy under conditions of heightened visibility. The contemporary school is a hybrid space: physically enclosed by walls and gates, yet digitally porous. A glance across a classroom is now often accompanied by a notification on a screen; a whispered rumor in the hallway is amplified instantly via screenshot.

The data presented here derive from a three-year ethnographic study focused on adolescents aged 14 to 18. The research investigates how affective and sexual subjectivities are formed, negotiated, and destabilized within a socio-technical environment characterized by constant mediation. Moving beyond a simplistic dichotomy between “online” and “offline” worlds — a distinction that the participants themselves no longer recognize — the study adopts a relational approach. The screen is not a barrier to reality; it is the texture of their reality.

2. Methodological Framework: Ethnography from Within

The research employs participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviewing as its primary methodological tools, but these standard definitions fail to capture the nuance of the “insider” position. Ethnographic data were collected through prolonged engagement in everyday school life, covering a spectrum of interactions ranging from formal classroom debates to the chaotic liminality of the schoolyard.

Occupying the role of teacher enabled access to relational spaces typically hermetically sealed to external researchers. Adolescents often articulate experiences, anxieties, and conflicts in moments of unstructured interaction—at vending machines, during transitions between classes, in the minutes before the bell rings, or in spontaneous digital exchanges regarding homework that bleed into personal confessions. These moments, often dismissed in educational theory as “dead time”, proved particularly valuable for understanding how intimacy is negotiated in practice rather than merely narrated retrospectively.

While a traditional anthropologist might require months to build rapport, the teacher-student relationship already contains a framework of familiarity and (ideally) trust. This allowed for an immediacy of data collection. When a crisis of intimacy occurred — a leaked photo, a breakup played out publicly, a panic attack in the restroom — I was often present not as an observer, but as a stakeholder in the community.

3. Reflexivity and Power. Ethical Considerations

At the same time, this insider position requires rigorous methodological reflexivity. The dual role of educator and researcher entails asymmetries of power that cannot be fully neutralized. There is an inherent tension between the pedagogical mandate to correct, guide, or protect, and the ethnographic mandate to observe, listen, and understand. Rather than denying this condition, the research adopts a reflexive stance that treats positionality as an analytical variable.

I had to constantly navigate the boundary between “surveillance” and “observation.” When does a teacher’s gaze become an intrusion? Attention was paid to moments of silence, resistance, and emotional withdrawal, recognizing them as meaningful data rather than obstacles to research. The silence of a student when asked about their digital habits is often louder than their speech, indicating a protective circling of the wagons around their private “backstage” areas.

From an ethical standpoint, this positionality demands a double responsibility: maintaining anthropological rigor while fulfilling pedagogical obligations. The “do no harm” principle of anthropology here aligns with the duty of care inherent in teaching. All participants’ names — Arianna, Veronica, Liliana, Thea, Anthony — are pseudonyms. Data collection occurred between 2020 and 2023, involving students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Informed consent procedures were adapted to the institutional context, ensuring students understood that their disclosures would be treated with scientific anonymity, distinct from school disciplinary records.

4. Mediation, Visibility, and the Image Economy of Adolescence

With regard to affective and sexual matters, these young people have received confused and often contradictory “instructions for use.” No one has truly educated them, and yet everyone — and everything — has done so. They are exposed to a multiplicity of sources: parents, school, peers, pornography, the internet, social media, popular music, and television series. They are bombarded with heterogeneous inputs, which they organize as best they can.

A liquefied — indeed, more than merely liquid — society offers them a non-hierarchical array of stimuli, to be personalized at will. In order not to surrender, they have been compelled to transform themselves into identity bricoleurs, into active customizers of the self.

Thus, young people assemble fragments — bodies, filters, messages, poses, screenshots — producing provisional versions of themselves. These are not “false selves,” but rather situated, exploratory, and temporary selves.

To understand contemporary adolescent intimacy, we must analyze the structural environment they inhabit. The contemporary adolescent does not merely “use” digital

media; they inhabit an environment in which mediation is structurally embedded in the ontology of everyday life. This is the condition of the “Onlife”— where the biological and the digital are continuous.

5. The Imperative of Visibility

Digital platforms shape not only communication practices but also expectations regarding recognition, desirability, and social legitimacy. Within this environment, visibility functions as a central axis around which adolescent subjectivity is organized. In previous generations, intimacy was often defined by privacy and exclusivity. For the subjects of this study, intimacy is frequently validated through visibility. A relationship that is not “Instagram official” suffers from an ontological deficit; it does not fully exist in the eyes of the peer group.

Images play a particularly crucial role in this process. Visual self-representation has become one of the primary means through which adolescents test their social value and negotiate belonging. The selfie is not merely an act of vanity; it is a probe sent out into the social ether to test the atmosphere. Likes, views, and comments operate as micro-forms of judgment — a quantitative economy of affect — that contribute to the construction of self-worth.

Crucially, the absence of feedback is as potent as its presence. To post an image and receive no engagement is a form of social death, generating acute anxiety and intense self-surveillance. This leads to a rigorous logic of “curation.” Students described deleting posts that did not reach a threshold of likes within the first hour, treating their identity as a portfolio manager treats underperforming assets.

Rather than interpreting these dynamics through a technological determinist lens (i.e., “phones are ruining intimacy”), this study approaches them as relational phenomena. Images acquire meaning through shared interpretive frameworks that circulate among peers. A specific filter, a specific angle, or a specific caption carries dense sociological weight understood only by the in-group. The pressure to curate the self visually reflects broader cultural logics of optimization and performance, which increasingly govern affective life. Theory functions here as a support for ethnographic interpretation, helping to decode the complex semiotics of the digital school corridor.

6. Ethnographic Vignettes: Divergent Strategies of Intimacy

The core of this research lies in the lived experiences of the students. The following ethnographic vignettes illustrate the wide range of strategies through which adolescents navigate this high-stakes environment. These strategies are not mutually exclusive but reflect ongoing negotiations between desire, fear, agency, and vulnerability.

Arianna (16): Embodied Resistance and the “Analog” Self

Arianna represents a distinct, conscious form of counter-conduct. In a classroom where the glow of screens under desks is ubiquitous, Arianna is conspicuously “unplugged.” She does not own a smartphone by choice, using an old-generation Nokia for emergencies only.

Her resistance is not Luddite ignorance; it is a sophisticated critique of the digital economy of attention. Arianna articulates a philosophy of intimacy that requires

temporal continuity and corporeal exposure. “If you can't smell them, you don't know them,” she remarked during a discussion on relationships. For Arianna, the digital medium dilutes the “truth” of the encounter. She forces her peers to interact with her on her terms: face-to-face, voice-to-voice.

This strategy, however, comes at a cost. Arianna is frequently excluded from the “always-on” stream of class gossip, memes, and logistical coordination that happens on WhatsApp groups. She accepts this social friction as the price for what she deems “authentic” connection. Her stance highlights the persistence of relational imaginaries grounded in proximity and shared risk, challenging the assumption that all youth are seamlessly integrated into digital life.

Veronica (17): The Managerial Approach to Intimacy

By contrast, Veronica embraces mediated intimacy as a strategic field to be mastered. She is hyper-aware of the risks associated with digital sexuality, yet she engages in sexting regularly. For Veronica, this is not an impulsive act but a managed operation.

Her engagement with sexting is governed by explicit, almost contractual rules. She never includes her face in intimate photos (“The headless body is safer,” she explains). She uses disappearing message features exclusively and thoroughly selected recipients through a rigorous “trust test” involving lower-stakes secrets before escalating to images.

Veronica negotiates agency through control. She views her digital body as a currency she can distribute to gain intimacy or attention, but only under strict regulatory frameworks. Her case complicates moralizing narratives that frame adolescent sexting solely in terms of victimhood or ignorance. Veronica is not a victim; she is a risk manager operating in a volatile market. However, the emotional labor required to maintain this control is exhausting, leading to periods of “digital burnout” where she disappears from social media entirely to recharge.

Liliana (15): Dissociation and the Split Self

Liliana's experience offers a darker view of the digital/biological divide. Following an incident where a semi-nude photo she shared privately was circulated in a boys' group chat, Liliana developed a strategy of radical dissociation.

When confronted with the digital evidence of her body circulating without her consent, her response was not to claim the image but to reject it ontologically: “That isn't me. That's just a picture.” Liliana experiences a schism between her biological body (which she inhabits) and her digital representation (which she views as a rogue object).

This dissociation allows her to preserve a sense of self-continuity in the face of public exposure. If the digital body is “not her,” then the violation “didn't happen” to her essential self. However, this survival strategy results in a fragmentation of identity. She speaks of her online profile in the third person, observing her digital life as one would watch a character in a movie. This case illustrates how the trauma of non-consensual visibility can fracture the coherent adolescent subject.

Thea (15): The Safety of the Non-Human

Thea presents a novel emergent phenomenon: intimacy with non-human agents. Shy, socially anxious, and intimidated by the complex power dynamics of teenage dating, Thea turns to a romantic AI chatbot (specifically, a “Replika” companion).

For Thea, the chatbot offers a controlled emotional environment. Unlike human peers, the AI never judges, never ghosts, never screenshots, and is eternally available.

“He listens to me,” she says, referring to the algorithm. “Real boys just want to show off.”

Thea uses the bot to rehearse intimacy without the unpredictability of embodied interaction. It is a sandbox for affection. While easy to dismiss as pathological, this behavior reveals a profound fatigue with the “risk society” of modern dating. The mediated form of affection functions here as a protective space — a digital womb — rather than a mere simulation. However, it also raises questions about the atrophy of conflict-resolution skills. Thea is learning an intimacy that is frictionless, whereas human relationships are inherently abrasive.

Anthony (17): Algorithmic Masculinities and the Game of Conquest

Anthony embodies the internalization of masculinities shaped by online sub-cultures (the “Manosphere,”). His understanding of intimacy is heavily informed by instrumental logics that frame relationships as games of conquest, governed by algorithms of input and output.

In interviews, Anthony uses terminology borrowed from economics and gaming to describe dating (“value,” “status,” “leveling up”). He views intimacy not as a space of mutual vulnerability but as a zero-sum game. His case illustrates how algorithmic environments can normalize misogynistic scripts. The echo chambers he inhabits reinforce a view of women as “non-player characters” (NPCs) to be manipulated.

Anthony's digital life is a performative space of bravado, yet in face-to-face interactions, he often displays awkwardness and insecurity. The dissonance between his aggressive online persona and his embodied vulnerability highlights the role of the internet in offering compensatory masculinities to insecure young men.

7. Sexting as a Contemporary Rite of Passage

Within this relational ecology, sexting emerges as a central, albeit controversial, practice. Rather than viewing it exclusively through the lens of deviance, risk, or pathology, this study interprets sexting as a contemporary rite of passage in a context where traditional transitions to adulthood have become fragmented or no longer exist.

Drawing on Mauss's theory of the gift, the exchange of intimate images can be understood as a system of total social performance. Sending an intimate image constitutes both an offering and a test. It involves trust, vulnerability, and the expectation of reciprocity (either in the form of a counter-image or social validation).

“It's like a trust fall,” one student explained, “but with your reputation.” The act of hitting “send” is a threshold moment — a crossing from the safety of privacy into the risky terrain of shared intimacy. In a society that offers few formal rituals of maturation, the management of one's own sexual image becomes a do-it-yourself initiation rite.

However, unlike traditional rites of passage which are guided by elders and community structures, this digital rite is conducted horizontally, among peers, without a safety net. It exposes adolescents to the risk of betrayal (the screenshot) and reputational damage. Sexting thus operates within a fragile economy of reciprocity, where intimacy is inseparable from danger. The thrill lies precisely in the risk; without the possibility of the image being leaked, the act would lose its potency as a demonstration of trust.

8. The Transformation of Shame: From Moral to Aesthetic

A critical finding of this ethnography is the shifting nature of shame. Traditional forms of shame, historically associated with sexuality, were grounded in moral transgression (violating religious or community commandments). In contrast, contemporary adolescent shame is largely performative and aesthetic.

The anxiety expressed by participants centers not on the *immorality* of sexual expression, but on *inadequate self-presentation*. The ultimate social sanction is not being called a “sinner,” but being perceived as unattractive and inadequate.

The fear of appearing “wrong,” “unoptimized,” or “badly lit” reflects an aesthetic regime governing bodies and desires. Adolescents internalize the gaze of the camera even when no camera is present. This transformation has profound consequences for how they experience intimacy. Vulnerability, once the bedrock of connection, becomes a liability to be managed. Emotional distancing and self-monitoring become default settings.

When a student expresses regret over a shared image, it is rarely framed as “I shouldn't have done that because it's wrong,” but rather “I shouldn't have done that because I looked bad,” or “I chose the wrong person.” The ethical question is replaced by a tactical critique of one's own performance.

9. Corporeality, Risk, and Digital Dissonance

Adolescence has always involved bodily uncertainty — the sudden growth spurts, the hormonal shifts, the acne. But contemporary adolescents experience a specific, intensified form of corporeal dissonance.

They inhabit two bodies simultaneously: the biological body, which is unstable, leaky, flawed, and publicly evaluated in the physical space of the school; and the digital body, which is editable, filterable, and controllable. This tension creates (not always but often) a preference for the digital. Many participants expressed that they feel “more themselves” online than offline, precisely because the online self is subject to their editorial control.

This shapes attitudes toward physical intimacy. For some, like Thea, physical intimacy is perceived as “messy” and riskier than mediated interaction. The biological body cannot be deleted or cropped. This leads to a paradox where students may be hyper-sexualized in their digital presentations but deeply conservative or hesitant in their physical encounters. The screen acts as a prophylactic against the raw vulnerability of the flesh.

10. Non-Consensual Image Circulation as Ontological Violence

The darker side of this ecology is the phenomenon of non-consensual image circulation (NCII). This study argues that NCII should not be trivialized as “cyber-bullying” but recognized as a form of ontological violence.

It undermines the individual's capacity to control their own narrative and relational presence. Because digital memory is persistent and algorithmic, the violation is experienced as enduring rather than episodic. A physical rumor fades; a digital image can be resurrected by a single click years later.

Victims describe a sensation of “being haunted” by their own data. They report not only shame but a loss of authorship over their identity. The digital body becomes detached from the subject, circulating independently within peer networks, accruing comments and contexts over which the original subject has no say. This lack of sovereignty over one's own image is a defining trauma of the digital age. For the school, this presents a massive challenge: how to mediate a conflict where the “weapon” (the image) is everywhere and nowhere?

Conclusions. Educational Implications and Future Directions

This study argues that the contemporary challenges surrounding adolescent intimacy are fundamentally relational rather than purely technological. Digital media shape the environment in which intimacy unfolds — providing the architecture of the “hallway” — but they do not strictly determine its meanings. The students are not passive victims of screens; they are active agents trying to solve universal human problems (how to be loved, how to belong, how to be safe) with new, volatile tools.

Consequently, educational institutions must move beyond the current paradigms of surveillance (“ban the phones”) and prohibition (“don’t sext”). These approaches are destined to fail because they ignore the embeddedness of the digital in the social. Banning the phone does not ban the desire for visibility, nor does it dissolve the peer networks that demand it.

Instead, schools must move toward practices of dialogue and presence. We need a “pedagogy of the digital” that is not technical (how to use settings) but ethical and emotional. By creating spaces for reflection — where Arianna’s resistance, Veronica’s contracts, and Thea’s fears can be discussed openly — schools can support adolescents in navigating visibility without erasure.

The task is not to eliminate mediation, which is impossible, but to cultivate relational literacy within it. This means teaching students to recognize the “image economy” for what it is, to understand the permanence of the digital footprint, and, crucially, to recover the value of the un-mediated, un-optimized, and un-recorded encounter. The school should become a place where it is safe to be “glitchy” — to be imperfect, physical, and profoundly human in a digitally perfected world.

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