



## Becoming a Man in Silence: Peer Learning, Masculinity, and Reproductive Health Knowledge Formation among Punjab's Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

Adolescence represents an important stage when boys learn about their bodies and form masculine identities through culturally definite social settings. This qualitative research paper explores the interaction of masculinity, silence and peer learning with each other to form knowledge among Pakistani adolescents. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data; participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted with 7 male adolescents of Sargodha and Mianwali, Punjab. Thematic analysis determined patterns that were repeated in the experiences of the participants. Results show that learned information is channeled through familial and institutional silence structures to peer networks and digital environments where it is disseminated informally, in a hierarchy, and inaccurately. Peer learning is a major source of instructions but it is influenced by the elements of power, expectations of performances and exposure to content without contextual supports. The paper points out the necessity of sensitive to culture, gender-sensitive interventions that establish safe, guided spaces, enabling more positive healthier knowledge accumulation and a more favorable transition to adulthood.

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**Keywords:** Adolescence, Masculinity, Peer Learning, Reproductive Health Knowledge, Cultural Silence

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## INTRODUCTION:

Adolescence is a developmental stage where the youths are subject to bargaining body changes, societal affiliation, and new sexual self. In the case of boys, this shift is strictly intertwined with acquiring culturally approved masculinity that defines emotions, relations, and sexual behavior (Seidler, V. 2006). Masculinity is never learned only by formal teaching but it is made in the day-to-day interaction, unwritten expectations, and social regulation. In societies where sexuality is ethically controlled and smothered in the public, these processes are critical in determining how adolescent boys get to know, act, and manage sexual knowledge (Moran, J. P. 2002).

There is a common limitation on the discussion of sexuality in Pakistan, because of culture, religion, and morality where sexual issues are considered private and should not be discussed widely across the generations (Nawaz, S., et al. 2021). Sexuality education is still formal and there is little discussion between parents and children regarding puberty, desire, and relationships. Consequently, silence turns out to be a major sexual socialization process. It is not just a sign of information deficit; it is a sign of normative expectations that boys are to learn, be non-inquisitive and act confidently by themselves. These expectations support the mainstream masculine values of emotional regulation and emotional autonomy, and discourage seeking help and showing uncertainty (Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. 2003).

It is within these limitations that peer groups play an important role as sites of sexual knowledge construction. The main source of information is friends and classmates, and these accounts on bodies, sex and relationships are spread by means of humor, exaggeration and digital media (Yeo, T. E. D., & Chu, T. H. 2017). Peer learning provides the adolescents a sense of belonging in the forms where there is no adult direction and it is also organized in terms of age, perceived experience and adherence to hegemonic masculine norms. Boys who demonstrate sexual confidence tend to become status holders whereas boys who exhibit uncertainty are likely to be mocked or alienated. Therefore, sexual information in peer environments is not only shared but acted out, which strengthens the demands of heterosexual ability and emotional impersonality.

Silence and performance are in partnership to define masculine subjectivities. Although boys can be bravado in peer space, they often hide confusion, anxiety, or misinformation. This disconnection restricts the possibility of proper education about permission, sexual health, and emotional health and wellbeing and could lead to the normalized risk choice and the continuation of myths in sexuality. Furthermore, the perceived improperness of talking about sexual issues with parents, teachers or healthcare providers also limits access to credible information and adolescents are left to depend on unofficial and often disjointed sources of information.

Though the issue of adolescent sexual and reproductive health is receiving

growing policy and academic focus in Pakistan, available studies are much more focused on behavioral risks and service use, and provide little understanding of how the social production of sexual knowledge in boyhood is gendered. There is limited knowledge regarding the intersection of masculinity, silence and peer learning in influencing everyday sexual understandings in adolescence. To fill this gap, the current paper concentrates the role of Pakistani teenage male construction of sexual knowledge in peer settings and silence as a gendered form of social control. Through pre-empting the views of young men, this study adds to a sociocultural perception of adolescent sexuality and shows that gender-responsive, culturally based solutions to sexuality education are warranted.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence is a crucial period when boys struggle to cope with the new changes of the body, the social norms, and the new sexual identities based on the culturally defined concept of masculinity. Gender norms in Pakistan focus on restraining emotions, independence, and respectability, which restrict the chances of boys to consult and address the issues related to puberty (Khan & Rashid, 2020). Puberty is then brought through as a biological process and a socially controlled process by silence and uncertainty.

As per the empirical reports conducted in urban Pakistan, boys tend to be facing the changes of puberty without much planning and, therefore, are confused, ashamed, and emotionally alone (Jejeebhoy et al., 2019). Bodily development is not discussed in the family and school because of cultural uneasiness of sexuality and this strengthens the beliefs that boys are expected to cope with the changes alone. The socialization of men turns into a characteristic of silence, which does not support requests to help and shapes the attitude towards emotional vulnerability as a sign of weakness.

Without the guidance of the adults, peer becomes the main source of sexual knowledge. It has been found that the parents tend to discuss the topics of puberty, relationships, and sexual health with their daughters, but with sons, there are almost no dialogs on the topic, which forces adolescents to turn to friends, informal media, and digital technologies (Naeem et al., 2021; Qureshi & Shaikh, 2022). Peer learning is very informational and emotional support that is of the critical type but influenced by powerful masculine stances according to which confidence, sexual experience, and risk-taking are synonymous with manhood. Uncertainty can be mocked by boys, and falsehoods and exaggeration can spread, which strengthen gendered demands and knowledge transfer.

Inequalities in the structure also restrict the access of adolescents to sexual and reproductive health information. Rural Sindh surveys indicate a low level of awareness on contraception, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections, which are associated with poverty, low education levels, and substandard health care (Saeed et al., 2023). These gaps are aggravated by assumptions about boys as innately knowledgeable or less susceptible, and female sexual health needs are marginalized.

The constriction of formal ways of learning through moral regulation, ineffective youth-friendly services, and weak institutional support makes sexual knowledge morally delicate and socially dangerous (Hussain & Mahmood, 2019). In this space, peer learning becomes less voluntary and more obligatory and makes up institutional and family deficits.

South Asian socio-sexual norms influence the experience of sexuality among adolescents by instilling premarital restraint, restricted intergenerational communication, and gender biased, and gendered, norms (Jejeebhoy et al., 2020). Among Pakistani boys, such norms create a paradox, as male sexual confidence is associated with masculinity, and the sexuality topic remains limited (Verma and Mahendra, 2021). Boys overcome this paradox by using sideways, informal process of learning with humor, coded language, peer discourse, and digital space that provide a space to figure out, but also leads to misinformation and further strengthening of gender stereotypes.

The problem of resistance to comprehensive sexuality education is still a key obstacle. The formal programs are often framed as inappropriate by cultural, religious, and political sensitivities, continuing to maintain institutional silence (Ahmed et al., 2022). New findings imply that other and more youth-focused mediums, specifically digital and peer-based projects, can enhance activity and show culturally agreeable standards (Latif et al., 2024). Co-designed and participatory strategies can make adolescents active producers of knowledge, critical in terms of masculinity, silence, or peer norms (Saleem et al., 2023; Zafar & Rehan, 2022). These models suggest that peer learning is more of a resource than a source of risk, which demonstrates that culturally based, gender-sensitive interventions in adolescent sexual and reproductive health are essential.

### **Material and Methods**

The study was a qualitative design that investigated the role of masculinity, silence, and peer learning in the development of sexual knowledge among adolescent and young adult male students in Pakistan. The study was carried out in Sargodha and Mianwali, as the urban and semi-urban areas, and the data obtained in a naturalistic environment, including neighborhoods and informal peer-space, were used to portray the routine interactions, silences, and social norms. This method involved data collection that incorporated both participant observation which recorded verbal and non-verbal peer practices and in-depth interviews that enabled participants to have a confidential space within which they could contemplate their experiences and perceptions and this enabled methodological triangulation. Seven male participants that were recruited using purposive sampling were in late adolescence or early adulthood, and lived in the study sites and were ready to talk about sensitive matters, and the process of recruitment was continued until there was analytical saturation. The University of Sargodha Institutional Review Board provided the ethical approval and informed consent was given in writing and verbally; to protect confidentiality pseudonyms were used and boundaries of the participants were not violated to reduce possible psychological discomfort. The reflexivity of the researcher was ensured by

constant recording of positionality, assumptions, emotional reactions, and analytical judgments to improve transparency and minimize biasness. The analysis of the data was performed in terms of the six-phase thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which follows the inductive approach according to which themes naturally come up as a result of analyzing the data. In this way, the subtle mechanism of the intersection of peer networks, silence, and culturally determined conceptualizations of masculinity to influence sexual knowledge formation among Pakistani adolescent and young adult males was achieved.

**Table 1**  
**Socio-demographic Profile of the Participants**

| Participant No. | Gender Identity | Age Range | Education                 | Employment Status          | City of Residence |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1               | Male            | 24–29     | BS Electrical Engineering | Student                    | Mianwali          |
| 2               | Male            | 18–23     | Intermediate              | Pakistan Army Personnel    | Mianwali          |
| 3               | Male            | 24–29     | Intermediate              | Private-sector employee    | Sargodha          |
| 4               | Male            | 24–29     | BBA                       | Student                    | Sargodha          |
| 5               | Male            | 24–29     | BA                        | Private administrative job | Sargodha          |
| 6               | Male            | 18–23     | Matriculation             | Student                    | Sargodha          |
| 7               | Male            | 24–29     | Matriculation             | Trader                     | Mianwali          |

## RESULTS

### Institutional and Familial Silence

Secrecy of sexuality was a prevailing and common characteristic of family and institutional context of participants. Father was always told as being emotionally detached and not ready to discuss puberty, genitals, and sex development. This silence served as a culturally approved area of isolation instead of caring and this placed sexuality as an inappropriate topic of open discussion.

According to Participant 1, *“I never discussed issues related to my genitals or sexual development with my father,”* emphasizing that such conversations were entirely absent within the household. Similarly, Participant 2 noted, *“My father never discussed sexual development, genitals, or related matters with me,”* which compelled him to rely exclusively on peers for understanding. When guidance was sought, it was often redirected into moral instruction rather than explanation.

Participant 3 recalled, *“My father just said it is natural for boys, just perform ablution and pray,”* then the dialogue ceased, and inquired about nothing. This silence was strengthened in schools. Respondents talked about biology classes as being avoidant and awkward with the reproductive issues being smoothed over. One of them remembered that *“the teacher presented diagrams and then quickly changed*

*the topic,*” while another noted that *“any curiosity was treated as misbehavior,”* coercing sexual education to playground and underground.

### **Peer Networks as First-year learning environments**

Peer networks became the most vital areas of sexual knowledge formation in the absence of adult communication. All of the participants continuously reported learning about changes in the body, masturbation, and sexual activities with friends in a personal or semi-personal setting and outside the adult oversight.

Participant 1 stated that the peer groups were good substitutes to parental guidance by explaining,

*“Despite this absence of parental communication, I believed that I still knew everything,”* as knowledge was obtained through friends. The credibility in these networks was determined by age hierarchies. As Participant 2 observed, *“Sexual knowledge often flowed from older adolescents or young adults to younger boys,”* occasionally with age distinctions of ten or twelve years and putting authority into age and perceived experience instead of accuracy.

Participant 3 had a vivid description of the peer-led sessions and said, *“My friend showed us videos on his phone behind the boundary wall,”* where there were talks of erections, semen and masturbation. These peer spaces served as unofficial classrooms, sewing the informational gaps and strengthening the secrecy, competition and masculine standards.

### **Peer Learning and Power Dynamics/Risk**

Adolescents were also subjected to great dangers when they were placed in peer-based learning settings especially when there were power disparities. The age gaps and the relationship of trust allowed the circumstances when personal and physical boundaries were violated and the harm could be observed quite frequently but could be noticed in the moment.

Participant 1 disclosed that, *“some older individuals engaged in inappropriate physical interactions and foreplay with younger boys,”* mentioning that these actions were frequently condoned by peer culture. Participant 4 recounted that he was introduced to it at an early age by a close cousin, and said, *“He touched my genitals and that is how I learned about masturbation,”* and looking back at it afterwards *“I saw that it had become one of the most disturbing memories of my life.”*

The respondents stressed that such experiences were hardly framed as abuse at that. They were rather understood as learning or curiosity, and how silence and absence of guidance made one more prone to exploitation.

### **Sexual Exposure and Accelerated by the Digital Media**

The digital media took center-stage in fostering sexual exposure. The introduction of smartphones and internet was highly popularly done by peers who were mostly not supervised or put into perspective.

Participant 1 explained that, *“friends would show sexual content as a way of demonstrating knowledge,”* strengthening sexual consciousness as a feminine sign. Participant 2 related to normalization in media by saying that *“memes and celebrity content make sexual topics widely known and casually discussed,”* even in adolescents

who were not mature.

Participant 3 referred to digital exposure as generating. *“a mix of excitement and guilt,”* as one of the respondents observed that online content, *“answered some questions but created many more,”* perplexing more than clarifying. Digital spaces, therefore, were seen as a source of information as well as the sources of psychological tension.

### **Masculinity, Moral Control, and Self-Control**

The idea of masculinity was always presented in the context of restraint and discipline and moral control. The sexual curiosity was in many cases considered to be dangerous or morally loose, and the adolescents started controlling their behavior by means of silence and self-control instead of talking about it.

Participant 5 defined masculinity as suppression since it involves by the fact that, *“any visible curiosity about sexual matters risked social labeling or moral judgment.”* Participant 2 analyzed the behavior under peer influence and subsequent assessment of morality, saying that masturbation was *“a harmful practice originating from uncontrolled peer influence,”* which afterwards was mended by means of marriage.

Participant 6 focused much on internal discipline and explained that there was a *“fear of becoming morally compromised,”* which had benefits of restricted exposure but also communication and confidence. Masculinity, thus, was acquired through austerity and discipline instead of open dialogue.

### **Psychological Effect and Wanting to be Directed**

In spite of the external conformity, respondents reported the inner psychological discomfort associated with silence and unstructured education. Confusion, shame, guilt and anxiety were also common especially in those who were exposed at an early age or because of the violation of boundaries.

Participant 4 reported that the sexual knowledge was cumbersome, as he said that *“knowing too much too early can be harmful,”* without emotional preparation, in particular. Participant 1 observed long-term harm among peers affected by exploitation, noting *“fear, shame, and social stigma,”* and that victims were often blamed rather than supported.

Across accounts, participants expressed a shared desire for guidance. As one participant summarized, *“Silence did not prevent learning; it only pushed learning to the wrong places.”* This reflects a collective recognition that culturally sensitive, age-appropriate communication could reduce confusion and harm.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present research has investigated the interplay of masculinity, silence and peer learning in the formation of sexual knowledge in Pakistani adolescent boys. The results indicate that sexual learning is mostly informal, which is not mediated by adults, and is determined by the interaction of family and institutional silence, peer networks, digital media and moral self-regulation (Nawaz, S., et al. 2021). The silence became a culturally approved production of structuring sexual knowledge of

adolescents, not restricting information. In families, specifically when interacting with fathers, the participants had found no inconsistencies in emotional distance and avoidance of puberty related topics, sexual development or body changes. Since it was observed by some participants, the direction of the guidance was usually switched to moral or religious training as opposed to explanatory talk, and inquisitiveness remained untapped (Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. 2003). This corresponds to previous studies indicating the sex in Pakistani families as a morally sensitive issue, and fathers not being deeply involved in the sexual socialization of adolescents (Jejeebhoy et al., 2020; Hussain & Mahmood, 2019). This silence is a gendered social practice where vulnerability and help-seeking are not only incompatible with masculinity, but they are also in line with the theory of hegemonic masculinity by (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Schools and colleges strengthened these forces: biology classes about reproductive health were reported as evasive, dismissive or moralizing, in essence relocating sexual education to informal and even covert aspects. Silence is not, thus, just a constriction of knowledge but rather a path to peer networks and online resources where sexual knowledge is socially mediated.

Peer networks became the major loci of sexual knowledge production. The participants always talked of learning about the change of the body, masturbation and sexual activities with friends in private or semi-private settings. These were categorized into hierarchical and performative interactions: the older adolescents or the ones considered more experienced had to hold some sort of position of authority and they decided the contents of knowledge as well as its legitimacy. Knowledge about sex used to flow by humor, exaggeration or demonstration, and there was a high value on confidence, heterosexual competency and masculine credibility rather than accuracy. This cannot be assumed without previous studies that have found that peer learning during adolescence is not only a mechanism of knowledge sharing but also a location where the hegemonic masculine norms are performed and strengthened (Tolman et al., 2019; Verma and Mahendra, 2021). In these networks, the less experienced and younger boys were taught both about sex and sexuality and how to negotiate silence, secrecy and masculinity, demonstrating the way peer communications mediate as a pedagogical and disciplinary process.

Nevertheless, peer-based learning did not go without major risks. The premise of age hierarchies and trust relationships sometimes enabled the boundary violations such as improper physical contact, which was first perceived by the participants as curiosity or normative learning. These experiences were hardly acknowledged as abuse then, which underscores the hegemonic masculinity and moralized silence in obscuring vulnerability and normalizing exploitation. Such results are consistent with the literature on the subject of early sexual exposure in South Asian settings and an increased risk of this group, as adolescents are most likely to face when the system of adult guidance and consent is not established (Jejeebhoy et al., 2019). There was also a psychological effect on the participants: it was discovered that they became confused, felt shame, guilt and anxiety thereby proving that, unstructured sexual learning could have long term emotional consequences.

The online media also promoted sexual knowledge hence exposing teenagers to content without the contextual learning. The internet and smart phones which are mediated by their peers provided instant and uncontrolled access to information, including sexual videos, memes, and celebrity-created content (Yeo, T. E. D., & Chu, T. H. 2017). According to the respondents, such exposures had an effect of a mix of curiosity, excitement and guilt. Although digital platforms helped close the informational void caused by families and schools to some extent, they also served as a source of moral tension and psychological stress, which underscores the dual nature of digital media as a resource and risk. These results can be compared to the growing body of research in Pakistan that indicates online content as a promising but wrong avenue of sexual education among adolescents that must be directed to avoid misleading information and ethical issues (Qureshi & Shaikh, 2022; Latif et al., 2024).

Masculinity was always put in perspective of moral discipline, restraint and self-control. Sexual curiosity could be read as dangerous/morally dubious and, therefore, teenagers tended to control themselves instead of discussing the matters with their parents. This self-control was enforced by peer norms and marriage was often placed as the socially acceptable outlet of sexual expression. Such dynamics are indicative of the wider socio-sexual norms in Pakistan, as the premarital sexual inhibition is anticipated and examples of heterosexual competence are shown (Khan & Rashid, 2020). Adolescents also learned to be masculine by being enduring, silent and self-restrained by the internalization of the view that they were weak in openly discussing, seeking help, and being emotional.

These intersecting processes carried a huge psychological consequence. The respondents expressed confusion, shame, and anxiety, especially those that were exposed at an early age to sexual materials or pornography. Although adolescents appeared socially acceptable on the surface, they overwhelmingly wished to be offered lessons and safe places where they could talk about sexual development, because in any case, silence transferred learning to informal, and even dangerous, places. This confirms the idea that misinformation, risk, and emotional wellbeing can be addressed using culturally-appropriate age-specific interventions.

All in all, the research indicates that the processes of sexual knowledge construction in Pakistani male adolescents cannot be reduced to a mere transfer of information but rather is a socially constructed process, involving silence, hierarchies among peers, exposure online and internalized gender ideals of masculinity. Silence does not stop learning, but alters the way, the place and the people, with whom, one learns; it usually increases danger, entrenches forms of gender, and causes psychic stress. The results highlight the relevance of culturally responsive, gender sensitive, and realistically aware of the peer and digital learning contexts and at the same time challenge limiting masculinity norms that discourage dialogue and help-seeking.

## CONCLUSION

Masculinity, silence, and peer learning interact to influence sexual knowledge construction in Pakistani adolescent boys. With no open family or institutional

communication, teenagers turn to their peers and online media, maneuvering misinformation, power asymmetry, and mental pressure. Silence is a gendered practice that violates self-control and discourage help-seeking. The paper focuses on the significance of culturally aware, gender-responsive programs that recognize peer education and develop secure and facilitated environments of discussion, proper information, and support.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The current study has a small sample size (seven participants) in two cities in Punjab, which limits the ability to generalize to other regional, cultural, or socioeconomic settings. To capture more general trends of masculinity and sexual knowledge formation, future studies are to involve larger and more varied samples that would cover country regions and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The use of observation and interviews can provoke the social desirability and recall bias; the participants can falsely understate and/or redefine the experiences because of the concerns related to morality. These biases might be reduced by longitudinal or anonymous data collection, and participatory methodology. The narrow scope of male adolescents only restricts the knowledge about gendered differences in forming sexual knowledge. The perspectives of both girls and parents, teachers and healthcare providers should be included in future research to analyses the process of sexual knowledge negotiation in larger social and institutional contexts. In practice, the results seem to point to culturally aware sexuality education that does not contravene ethical and religious beliefs and includes proper and age-related advice. They should create nonjudgmental and secure areas where the adolescents, especially the boys, can get information in schools and other community institutions. The online resources ought to be used wisely to present authoritative information to curb the dangers of unmonitored online presence. The interventions must also seek to rebrand masculinity in order to make dialogue, help-seeking, and emotional openness a normal aspect of responsible adolescent development.

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