


# Youth, sexuality, and health: theoretical and methodological reflections based on multisituated research on youth affective-sexual trajectories

Juventudes, sexualidade e saúde: reflexões teóricas e metodológicas a partir de uma pesquisa multissituada sobre trajetórias afetivo-sexuais juvenis

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## Abstract

This study describes the theoretical perspectives and methodological assumptions that underpin the research “Jovens da era digital” [Youth in the digital age], a socio-anthropological study regarding youth sexuality carried out with young people aged 16 to 24 years between 2021 and 2022 in six Brazilian cities. This study examines the concepts of sexuality and gender socialization in conjunction with notions of youth and adulthood transitions, which comprise fundamental aspects of the research. The methodological features of the research seek to reflect on the barriers faced in carrying out such a study, the fieldwork strategies adopted, and the current conditions for scientific research with young people hailing from an array of social contexts. The study conclusion expounds upon recent moral disputes surrounding youth sexuality, which greatly impact public policies concerning adolescents and young people.

**Keywords:** Youth; Gender; Sexuality; Public Policy; Methodology.

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## Resumo

O artigo apresenta perspectivas teóricas e pressupostos metodológicos que subsidiaram a pesquisa “*Jovens da era digital*”, um estudo socioantropológico realizado entre 2021 e 2022 com jovens de 16 a 24 anos sobre sexualidade juvenil, em seis diferentes cidades do país. Às noções de juventude e transição para a vida adulta é acrescida a concepção de aprendizado da sexualidade e do gênero, aspectos basilares para a investigação desenvolvida. O detalhamento metodológico da investigação é acompanhado de uma reflexão acerca das barreiras enfrentadas na realização do estudo, das estratégias que foram sendo adotadas ao longo do trabalho de campo e das atuais condições de realizar investigação científica com jovens de distintos contextos sociais. O artigo finaliza com uma digressão a respeito das recentes disputas morais em torno da sexualidade juvenil, que reverberam sobremaneira nas políticas públicas elaboradas para adolescentes e jovens.

**Palavras-chave:** Juventude; Gênero; Sexualidade; Política Pública; Metodologia.

This study aims to describe the theoretical premises and methodological assumptions that underly the research “*Jovens na era digital*” [Youth in the digital age], a study of youth sexuality, whose initial results comprise this dossier.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this study reflects on the barriers faced while conducting research, the strategies adopted throughout the fieldwork, and the concerns/reflections raised about the current conditions of carrying out scientific research with young people from diverse social contexts (in the broadest sense of the term). These barriers include the challenges related to the current ethic-political-normative context that affects the (im)possibility of carrying out research on juvenile sexuality. It is important to reflect on the specificities of doing research with/on young people during a health emergency – the COVID-19 pandemic – and in period characterized by political setbacks in sexual and reproductive rights, the rights of youth, and the massive presence of social media and the Internet in socializing the current generation.<sup>2</sup>

This study aims to present readers with a set of ethical, theoretical, and methodological elements to stimulate insights, debates, and reflections on research carried out with/on young people, as well as on studies that address themes considered “private,” but which are regulated by the state or various instances of socialization. By sharing dilemmas, difficulties, adaptations, and improvisations, this study explains the paths derived from the research and transforms such observations into material that exceeds methodological notes. Furthermore, it is essential to stress the commitment to producing objective scientific knowledge and the reflexivity and understanding of the partiality, contingencies, and situationality inherent to scientific research.

1 The research “*Jovens da era digital: sexualidade, reprodução, redes sociais e prevenção às IST/HIV/AIDS*” [Youth in the digital age: sexuality, reproduction, social media, and STI/HIV/AIDS prevention] was coordinated by Cristiane da Silva Cabral (general coordinator and coordinator of São Paulo/USP), Ana Paula dos Reis (Salvador/UFBA), Daniela Riva Knauth (Porto Alegre/UFRGS), Elaine Reis Brandão (Rio de Janeiro/UFRJ), Flávia Bulegon Pilecco (Conceição do Mato Dentro/UFMG), and José Miguel Nieto Olivares (São Gabriel da Cachoeira/USP). The study received financial support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) (grant number: 442878/2019-2; grant number: 431393/2018-4). We would like to give special thanks to the coordinators and fieldwork teams at each location, as well as to the young people who shared some of their life experiences with us.

2 Language possesses a significant political dimension. Thus, in the Portuguese text, we opted to use the spelling “os.as” in words that require gender inflection in order to break with (at least at the textual level) the universalization of subjects in the masculine form.

## Youth and transition: revisiting concepts employed by the research

The famous phrase, “Youth is just a word” (Bourdieu, 1983) brilliantly summarizes several discussions around this life course period. At its core is the complexity that arises by analyzing subjects through the social differentiations produced according to the time and spaces they occupy (economic, political, social, cultural, generational, and territorial, etc.). This classic debate in youth studies stresses the heterogeneity of this “population group” and the (de)synchronization of its constituting processes (Galland, 1991; Kohli, 1989; 2007; Saraceno, 1989). This theoretical-political stance complexifies the understanding of adolescents and young people as a generational group delimited by chronological age boundaries. It recognizes the biopsychosocial-pedagogical dimension of this life course period and, above all, its cultural and symbolic construction, characterized by a set of social events and conforming to variable periods - sometimes longer, sometimes shorter - between childhood and adulthood that are experienced across extremely heterogeneous social realities (Bordieuc, 2018; Camarano, 2006; Pais, 1993).

Despite its strong representation as something natural or universal, chronological age constitutes one of many social forms of organizing existence. The division of time into categories such as childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age are also important social organizers, showing that “only via ideological effects do we conceive [the stable institutions of society] as natural forms of organization of collective life rather than as variable products of social activity” (Durham, 1983, p. 18; free translation). On the one hand, asserting that the 19th century invented childhood (Ariès, 1981) and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adolescence and old age, offers nothing new (Debert, 1997; Lenoir, 1996). However, it is worth mentioning that the demarcations surrounding such categories are mobile and equally arbitrary, and that the meanings attributed to them and the expectations placed on them culturally vary (Dupont, 2014).

The constitution of the modern nuclear family, the delimitation of boundaries between public

and private, and the invention of childhood - just to mention a few historical-conceptual elements (Ariès, 1981) - are crucial to build a life stage that should receive intensive investments in terms of care, as a time dedicated to developing social skills and the formation of future adults. Thus, the notion of youth is inseparable from the concept and representations of childhood. Its constitution includes the need to give intelligibility to and identify the characteristics of an intermediate period between childhood and adult life.

Almost a century of discussions concerning “youth” have produced several adjustments, scientific-political clashes, and intricacies. Amid this polysemic conception, it is pertinent to recall the classic definition of generation provided by Karl Mannheim, in *The Problem of Generations* (1982): “A generation consists of a group of people with a similar chronological age (the idea of age group) that enables them to live experiences of a certain historical time. Likewise, sharing a certain historical time also makes up a generation, regardless of individuals’ chronological age. Thus, the members of a generation share certain experiences, whether from the point of view of historical events or social representations.” Mannheim has drawn attention to the fact that a generation is composed of a heterogeneous social bloc, conceptualized as several “generational units” that are differentiated by their political or ideological orientations.

This concept is particularly relevant, especially for youth studies, since it enables researchers to highlight the socializing experiences that cut across youth trajectories and endow them with unique characteristics (Weller, 2010). Arguing about youths (plural) means analytically articulating the socializing instances, contexts, and specific structural processes that forge youths’ life paths. It is possible to admit the existence of a generation of young people who, despite sharing the same historical time, undergo different and unequal life trajectories. This understanding offers the possibility of considering specific processes across diverse social spaces, despite the apparent unity perceived due to their shared historical time. These reflections lead us to question to what extent

we can understand cotemporary youth through the lenses of a “COVID-19 generation” or a generation of “digital natives.”

The premise that youth consists of a form of socially organizing age, despite important historical-contextual variations, is in line with an interest in understanding age transition processes, in addition to the behaviors considered pertinent to and the social expectations for each life stage (Mauger, 2013). Employing terms related to youth to adulthood transition processes (which also possess innumerable nuances, attributes, and transitions) implies aiming to understand the ways in which young people deal with important instances of socialization (such as family, school, peer groups, religious spaces, digital media, and affective-sexual partnerships) and build identities and paths to independence and autonomy. In this regard, it is also essential to consider questions concerning how the current sociopolitical context and forms of societal organization imply a temporal acceleration to adult life (“a condensed transition,” Heilborn; Cabral [2006]) or, on the contrary, an almost endless prolongation of youth (Galland, 1991).

The research “*Jovens da era digital*” possesses a close theoretical affiliation with such perspectives and seeks to research youth socialization processes, especially regarding socializing experiences linked to gender and sexuality and their interface with dimensions related to sexual and reproductive health. In this regard, the preeminence of socialization proves fundamental, encompassing learning rules, norms, and scripts (sexual and gender *scripts*), as well as values and cultural scenarios for the exercise of sexual experiences and gender.

Numerous social events typically occur during youth, such as one’s first romantic relationship, an increase in curiosity, knowledge, and questioning about one’s own body and those of one’s partners, and the intensified learning of norms, representations, attitudes, beliefs, and values throughout a comprehensive process of identity construction (Bozon, 2004; Sawyer et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2012). These “firsts” can be understood as expressions of behaviors that are being learned and consolidated during the transition to adulthood (Igras et al., 2014).

Experiences of sexuality, reproduction, and youth itself constitute inherently different phenomena depending on gender, generation, socioeconomic class, or skin color/ethnicity/race. In addition, these experiences can also be shaped by other social markers among adolescents and young people that are used to understand the sinuosity of these phenomena and their correlates, such as learning about preventive behaviors to protect oneself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), in addition to understanding contraceptive practices (contraceptive socialization). Comprehending the heterogeneity of these situations and conditions of youth socialization is essential, especially in recent societal contexts characterized by fierce political disputes over issues related to sexuality and gender morality (Cabral; Brandão, 2020; P; Silva, 2015).

## The methodological aspects of data production of the research “*Jovens da era digital*”

To better understand what being young in contemporary times means, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality socialization processes, the occurrence of certain sexual and reproductive events (such as sexual initiation, pregnancy, STI infections, etc.), and perceptions surrounding sexuality and related health prevention strategies or behaviors, a group of dedicated researchers decided to carry out a socio-anthropological study with young people from a variety of social backgrounds. The studies “*Juventude, sexualidade e reprodução: um estudo sobre mudanças e permanências nas trajetórias sexuais e reprodutivas de jovens brasileiros no cenário de relações sociais mediadas pelas redes sociais*” [Youth, sexuality, and reproduction: a study on change and permanence in the sexual and reproductive trajectories of young Brazilians in the context of social relations mediated by social networks] and “*Sociabilidade juvenil, práticas sexuais e proteção à saúde: desafios para a prevenção do HIV/AIDS em jovens da era digital*” [Youth sociability, sexual practices, and health

protection: challenges to HIV/AIDS prevention among young people in the digital age] received financial support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). We adopted the abbreviated name “*Jovens na era digital*” to identify both studies in light of their complementary nature. Both studies are deeply immersed in issues related to sexuality, reproductive rights, and youth sociability, in addition to focusing on producing extensive empirical material based on in-depth individual interviews with young people aged 16 to 24 years old.

We seek to stress that youth, regardless of its duration or position as a transitional or preparatory stage for adult life, also constitutes a period of strong increase in the learning processes of norms and gender and sexuality behaviors and values, which are shaped by specific social, historical, cultural, and structural contexts. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the processes and characteristics inherent to youth experiences, which are closely anchored in issues related to learning about gender and sexuality and characterized by conditions of class, religion, race, ethnicity, place of residence, specific social time, etc.

Our research employed the biographical approach as its underlying theoretical methodological perspective, as this approach enables researchers to better analyze the contexts, elements, and repercussions of certain events derived from study participants’ biographies. The adoption of a certain temporal distance from the analyzed events enables us to reflect on the resulting developments and experiences. The *timing*, *duration*, and *order* dimensions of events are fundamental to construct research instruments according to the biographical perspective. This implies the need to situate certain events of interest in people’s biographies based on these three elements without losing sight of the fact that social contexts define the field of possibilities and the universe of different meanings of given events or trajectories. Thus, this perspective makes it possible to contrast diverse demographic and social events, a strategy that, if applied to different generations, can show the permanence or change in values or customs from one generation to another, a classic theme in the social sciences.

One goal of this study seeks to understand the generational specificities of youth sociabilities and socialization processes according to distinct geographical/regional contexts (large cities versus small cities), sex and gender identities, socioeconomic class (middle versus lower class), and reproductive experiences. The research assigned quotas to each dimension to ensure a study sample comprised of a diverse universe of young people. Although the research did not utilize a specific quota for skin color/race, the researcher sought to recruit a sample comprised of at least one third of young people who self-identified as Black. Similarly, the research did not adopt a quota regarding sexual identity and gender diversity, but the search for young people willing to talk about their affective-sexual trajectories would undoubtedly obtain a diverse contingent of participants in terms of these social markers.

The research delved into the universe of issues related to sexuality and gender socialization, dimensions of vulnerability concerning HIV/AIDS and STIs, and the use and management of contraceptive methods. In order to achieve the research goals, the study examined the trajectories of young people living in the state capitals of Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), São Paulo (SP), and Salvador (BA), as well as the small cities of Conceição do Mato Dentro, Minas Gerais (approximate population of 23,000 inhabitants) and São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas (approximate population of 51,000 inhabitants). The inclusion of youth from two small cities offers an important counterpoint to the youth experiences obtained from the four larger cities in the study.

Producing empirical data using convenience sampling serves several purposes. In the context of this study, convenience sampling allowed for the inclusion of a diverse set of biographies to permit an in-depth understanding of the current generation of young people’s trajectories and their ways of coping with the “dangers arising” from sex (risk perceptions regarding the possibility of HIV infection, STIs, and unplanned pregnancy). By including two small cities in this study, the researcher sought to fill a gap in the literature regarding the dimensions of sociability,

values, and sexual experiences of young people living outside large urban areas in Brazil. The study hypothesizes that small towns impose greater social control over young people due to fewer possibilities for amorous encounters and spaces for sociability, which certainly impact their sexual experiences. The inclusion of a city in the North Region of Brazil seeks to provide visibility to contexts and conditions that are often absent in studies on young people and sexuality. As a result, this study aimed to recruit a socially and culturally diverse sample in terms of ethnicity and race, gender, socioeconomic class, and diverse sexual practices, residing across diverse regions of Brazil, and characterized by divergent access to digital technologies, health services, and education.

Multicentric research entails several challenges, such as ensuring similar underlying elements when producing empirical data. Achieving this goal proves even more challenging in qualitative research based on in-depth individual interviews. An interview inherently constitutes a social relationship established in a singular encounter between two intersubjectivities (Bourdieu, 2008). Certain fundamental elements must be ensured to provide satisfactory interactions and security, empathy, privacy, while reducing the asymmetries between researchers and participants. Thus, interviewees' attributes play a preponderant role in each encounter.

Young graduate student researchers who were adequately trained in procedures related to the theoretical-methodological principles of qualitative research carried out the study fieldwork. It is important to highlight that the research team was comprised of interviewers similar in age to the study participants, in addition to hailing from diverse sexual and gender identity and skin color/racial backgrounds.

The research team utilized a semi-structured script to conduct the interviews, a methodological strategy that aided in the search for common thematic nuclei, regardless of the specific interviewee or in what region the interview was conducted. We constructed the script based on the premise of the biographical approach, with its main

thread following the unfolding of participants' affective-sexual trajectories, in addition to examining their principal sexual and reproductive events (such as pregnancy and abortion), as well as young people's educational, professional, and residential backgrounds. Moreover, the research focused on sexual initiation contexts, the complex interactions and negotiations surrounding reproductive episodes (including abortion), issues related to sexuality norms, values, and representations, STI prevention, relationship contexts or specific sexual relationships, and the characterization and use of digital media for social interactions.

Research dissemination and participant recruitment strategies included utilizing the researchers' personal and professional networks, in addition to sending informative texts via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram groups. Furthermore, the study used an electronic form to identify young people interested in granting interviews. These strategies made it possible to access young people who were no longer in school. The research team recorded and transcribed the interviews, created biographical summaries, and utilized NVivo 13 software (2020, R1) to organize and manage the large volume of empirical material obtained.

## **Between the ideal and the possible: flexibility in research with/on young people**

Certain contingencies always affect any scientific endeavor. In the case of this study, unplanned events drastically impacted its social, political, cultural, and health dimensions. It is impossible to omit the omnipresence of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the research period. Study fieldwork took place from October 2021 to July 2022, a period characterized by decreasing Sars-Cov-2-related deaths and increasing vaccination rates among adolescents and young people in Brazil, facilitating the return to in-person activities at the universities involved in this study. In order to protect themselves, researchers and interviewees utilized N95 masks during the interviews, representing another barrier

to the tenuous and important interactions to be constructed during the interview. We deemed the possibility of ethnographic observations in contexts of youth sociability as unfeasible, leading us to restrict the methodological research strategy to individual interviews out of contexts of greater bonding between researchers and interviewees.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were also reflected in young people's (un)availability to participate in interviews, especially in-person meetings. Separation and periods of greater or lesser physical and social distancing characterized the most intense (almost) two years of this health emergency. The intensification of contacts through social media and the increase in communication using smartphone devices seem to have produced or greatly intensified a new form of youth sociability that contrasted sharply with the idea of meeting in-person.

In this regard, the study's in-person invitation produced a sense of estrangement in some young people, who asked about the possibility of conducting the interview via WhatsApp or remotely. These types of requests were frequent, especially among participants aged 16 to 18 years old and among middle-class interviewees. This "preference for the online" can be interpreted as a symbol of the importance of the Internet as a mediator in the daily lives of young people, as well as the intensification of this importance resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Internet represents a new form of communication that has become fundamental during the current historical moment. As a result, researchers, especially those who prefer traditional forms of social interaction in research contexts, must embrace and reflect on the implications this "novelty" brings to the canons of socio-anthropological research.

In addition to this context, young people consistently reported "not having enough time" for interviews. In fact, this was the main argument they used to decline to participate in the study or to reschedule meetings with researchers numerous times. In most cases, the time interval between the initial contact with participants and the interview

was considerable. Several in-person interviews were only able to be carried out at the insistence of our interviewers and after rounds of negotiation.

The search to find young people willing to talk about their affective-sexual trajectories was intensive and difficult in all cities, especially among men. The quotas of women interviewees were the first to be met, especially for lower-class women. Conversely, middle-class young men with some reproductive experience proved the most difficult to recruit.

The widespread use of emergency contraception among participants may be a contributing factor to declines in adolescent pregnancy, implying the need to rethink objectives and methodological strategies in future studies concerning the phenomenon of juvenile reproduction.<sup>3</sup> However, the difficulty faced by the researchers in recruiting men participants was not entirely unexpected, given men's greater reluctance to partake in studies on issues related to affectivity and sexuality (Heilborn et al., 2012).

Another common feature across the six cities included in the study concerns the use of snowball sampling, which demonstrated low effectiveness throughout the research. Although the young study participants always ended interviews positively, noting the importance of that moment and how comfortable they felt talking about intimate aspects of their lives with the interviewers, we rarely managed to obtain additional contacts through their personal networks. They always said they needed to ask their friends before sharing their contact information and would either fail to follow up with the research team or claimed their friends had declined to or could not participate in the study.

This behavioral trend among young interviewees raises certain hypotheses. First, perhaps it is impossible to control the type of intermediation young made with their own contact networks via snowball sampling, which is commonly used in this type of research. Second, there exists a degree of presumed lack of interest in spending more time on a study with which they have little involvement

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<sup>3</sup> Study participants with children were the hardest to find in all six cities. This difficulty undoubtedly reflects declining fertility among young women aged 15 to 19 years over the previous decade (Coutinho, 2023). Furthermore, it is remarkable that this trend manifested itself much more forcefully among young men than among young women in the context of this study.

or responsibility. Finally, the lack of success of snowball sampling in this study could be due to a possible mixture of disinterest and forgetfulness, in addition to an inability of participants to convince their peers to also partake in the study. These difficulties forced field teams to constantly search for potential interviewees, surpassing the duration initially planned for carrying out the study.

In each of the four larger cities, the research team contacted more than a hundred young people to meet the initial quotas established for the study. Conducting fieldwork in the two smaller cities demanded distinct logistics to carry out the research. In São Gabriel da Cachoeira (AM), the study coordinator immersed himself in the city for a month along with a field researcher/interviewer who had moved to the city in 2022. Although the interviewees benefited from possessing ample available time, innumerable other difficulties permeated their fieldwork. For example, many young people were timid or reluctant to participate in study interviews. Although they were born and lived in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, all study participants from this city belonged to some Indigenous ethnicity, as does most of the city's population. Another difficulty that arose was related to certain questions in the interview script. Several young people refused invitations to participate in the research, while others interrupted ongoing interviews. In particular, some men manifested discomfort or more blatant refusal to discuss certain subjects.

Such difficulties cannot be fully or exclusively avoided in the context of an interview. Talking about sex and sexuality, especially with strangers, is not part of the local culture. The intersection of these issues is present in this type of relationship in which two strangers, foreigners in this location, request an interview asking extremely personal questions that address themes of sexuality and sexual practices that are usually not discussed in any sphere of these young people's social lives. Ethnographic observations suggest that conversations about sexual desires and practices are possible only among peers in intimate, protected, and everyday contexts, particularly among young women (Morais, 2021).

Fieldwork in Conceição do Mato Dentro (MG) presented other difficulties. During the planning

phase of this research project, the city fell under the collective health jurisdiction of the School of Medicine of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Conceição do Mato Dentro was removed from the group of cities pertaining to UFMG's jurisdiction, causing the loss of entire contact and travel logistics (accommodation, overnight stays, etc.) networks. Consequently, the team had to reorganize itself to get to know Conceição do Mato Dentro in greater detail, establish new contact networks, and plan recurring trips to the city, located almost 170 km away from the state capital of Belo Horizonte. Study logistics were further complicated by Conceição do Mato Dentro's expansive size and the large distances between its city center and rural hinterlands, which required the development of specific time, access, and travel plans when coordinating study interviews.

From a certain perspective, cancellations and "absences" of scheduled interviews resulted in some frustrating and "unproductive" trips. It is also worth mentioning the challenge posed by regional weather conditions, especially rain, due to the absence of an enclosed or covered space to carry out the interviews, which primarily took place in public squares. Public squares were the preferred interview setting, as young people's homes were not a feasible option. Their small and crowded nature rendered it practically impossible to establish a private environment where participants would feel comfortable talking about their experiences. Thus, public places became the most private environment in this context.

Attempts to manage asymmetries in the field interviews conducted by young researchers produced a beneficial secondary effect via investments in specialized human resources training related to academia, higher education, and the service and public sectors. The fieldwork teams in each Brazilian state underwent training conducted by interviewers and field coordinators and were mostly comprised of undergraduate public health, social sciences, psychology, or social work students, or public health master's or PhD students. The research fieldwork presented an opportunity to introduce them to the universe of socio-anthropological health research,



data production techniques, conducting in-depth interviews, fieldwork challenges and contingencies, and, above all, the socialization of these young people in the context of the theme of youth sexuality and reproduction.

Finally, it is worth including key observations concerning the possibility of carrying out studies with young people under 18 years of age without explicit parental consent. This is an ethical-scientific-political debate that has been waged among researchers hailing from various academic disciplines. As 16- and 17-year-olds are still under parental guardianship, it was necessary to appeal to the National Research Ethics Commission (CONEP) to allow them to participate after signing free and informed assent forms without the explicit approval of their legal guardians. Age is conceived based on a chronological dimension and serves as a form of social organization, although it can conflict with other organizing and classificatory logics. This study addresses intimate and private issues that concern young peoples' perceptions and

experiences regarding sexuality, STIs, pregnancy, abortion, access to prevention methods, and use of health services. Prior requests for authorization from guardians could have jeopardized the ability and privacy of interviewees to freely report their experiences during the interviews or introduce an undesirable bias, as only youth capable of dialoguing with their parents or guardians regarding issues of sexuality would have participated in this study.

The sum of these efforts resulted in 194 in-depth interviews, encompassing a socially and culturally diverse set of young people in terms of sexual and gender identity, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and age, among other characteristics. The vast and rich empirical material obtained during the research allows for the analysis of a wide array of related topics. Chart 1 and Tables 1 and 2 display a sociodemographic profile of the study participants. Specific articles, both in this dossier and in future publications, will provide further detail regarding study participants' biographies.

**Chart 1 – Interviewees by place of residence and sex/gender identity (“Jovens da era digital,” 2022)**

City	Number of interviewees	Sex/gender identity		
		Women	Men	Non-binary or gender-fluid
São Paulo	43	21 cis	19 cis, 1 trans	1 non-binary, 1 gender-fluid
Rio de Janeiro	40	20 cis, 1 trans	19 cis	-
Porto Alegre	37	20 cis, 1 trans	15 cis	1 non-binary
Salvador	41	20 cis, 1 trans	20 cis	-
Conceição do Mato Dentro	17	9 cis	8 cis	-
São Gabriel da Cachoeira	16	10 cis	6 cis	-
Total	194	100 cis, 3 trans	87 cis, 1 trans	2 non-binary, 1 gender-fluid

**Table 1 – Age, socioeconomic class, race / skin color, educational attainment, current employment status, and religious affiliation of study participants (“Jovens da era digital,” 2022)**

Sociodemographic data	n
Age group	
16 to 17	42
18 to 19	51
20 to 21	45
22 to 24	56
Socioeconomic class (self-reported)	
Lower class	125
Lower-middle class	10
Middle class	54
Upper-middle class	5
Race / skin color	
Black and mixed-race	120
White	55
Asian	1
Indigenous	18
Educational attainment (years)	
Incomplete primary education	2
Complete primary education	3
Incomplete secondary education	77
Complete secondary education	49
Incomplete Higher Education	53
Complete Higher Education	10
Currently employed	
Yes	123
No	71
Religious Affiliation	
Nonreligious / Agnostic / Atheist	96
Catholic	23
Evangelical	30
Umbanda / Candomblé	22
Christian	6
Spiritist	8
Jewish	1

**Table 2 – Sexual orientation, marital status, and reproductive experiences of participants (“Jovens da era digital,” 2022)**

Sociodemographic data	n
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	136
LGBTQIA+	58
Marital status	
Single	142
Partnered	28
Married	23
Separated	1
Pregnancy experiences	
Pregnancies	98
Induced abortions	5
Miscarriages	6
Number of children	
None	116
One	69
Two	8
Three	1

## Final considerations

This study sought to situate the theoretical methodological concepts and strategies utilized by the research concerning youth sexuality conducted by the project “*Jovens da era digital*,” between 2021 and 2022 (a period when the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing) among young people between the ages of 16 and 24. This research faced a set of methodological concerns that should be considered when designing future studies regarding young people. These issues encompassed ethical barriers, study dissemination, costly and difficult access to possible participants, tenuous responses to the use of traditional snowball sampling, temporalities modified by both the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread social media usage, and challenges in

managing the distance and asymmetries between the researchers and interviewees.

However, this study would be incomplete without reflecting upon one final element, specifically the recent intensification of political (and moral) disputes surrounding youth sexuality. As Foucault (1977) and other quintessential authors in this field of study have taught us (Gagnon, 2006; Rubin, 1984; Vance, 1995), disputes surrounding sexuality and sexual meanings are ways of exercising and distributing power in society. Sexuality is an important classificatory and organizational system of social contexts in which institutions, such as organized religion, the state, various academic fields (law, biomedicine, etc.), educational establishments, and the family, among others, dispute sexual meaning and create and implement the norms and rules that compose the social fabric.

Seen as a kind of barometer of social change, public intervention targets adolescents and young people precisely because they lie at the heart of social and political disputes regarding the possibility of transmitting rules and values from one generation to the next. As adolescence and youth comprise important life stages for acquiring social skills, attributions, duties, and responsibilities, as well as for affirmation, they represent unique periods of profound learning and the internalization of norms related to gender and sexuality. However, the previous decade has witnessed a strong turn toward a resurgence of conservative morals in the Brazilian and international socio-political contexts (Paternotte; Kuhar, 2018), greatly affecting health and educational policies targeting young people.

It is important to recognize the establishment of the first *Programa Nacional de Atenção Integral ao Adolescente* (PROSAD - The National Program for Comprehensive Adolescent Care) and the Department of Adolescent and Youth Health within the Ministry of Health in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brasil, 1989). This period was characterized by a conjuncture that legitimized the rights enshrined in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution and a broader context of a large youth population, increasing adolescent fertility rates, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. PROSAD employs content that features sexuality as a legitimate dimension of

young people's experiences and seeks to ensure safe conditions for its exercise (Brasil, 1989). The specific objectives of the program contain proposals for measures promoting reproductive health, including conception, contraception, STI and HIV/AIDS prevention, and guaranteeing conditions to ensure low-risk pregnancies for adolescents. From a certain perspective, the document does not adopt a conservative tone regarding youth sexuality, as it fails to mention topics, such as sexual abstinence, to be addressed or promoted via public policies.

However, the continuous suppression of once-existent initiatives concerning the field of sexuality in Brazil has greatly affected STI/HIV/AIDS prevention programs and sexuality education in schools (Abia, 2019; Cabral; Heilborn, 2010; Carrara, 2015; Paiva; Silva, 2015). In 2019, then President Jair Bolsonaro created the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, further intensifying the moral crusade against sexual and reproductive rights (Brandão; Cabral, 2019; David; Cabral, 2022).

This attack obviously included the sphere of juvenile sexuality (Cabral; Brandão, 2020). One of the first administrative acts of the then president was to create National Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Week (Law number 13,798, January 3, 2019), which established its annual *celebration* in the first week of February (Brasil, 2019). In 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights announced the creation of a National Policy for the Prevention of the Risks of Early Sexual Activity, which proposed abstinence or postponing sexual involvement as core public policy measures to reduce teenage pregnancy. The ministerial publicity campaign adopted the slogan, "Adolescence first, pregnancy later - everything has its time," leaving no doubt about the campaign's political stance and implying a close relationship between sexuality and pregnancy, as well as an alarmist tone regarding the exercise of juvenile sexuality (Cabral; Brandão, 2020). The campaign's initiatives clearly highlight the importance of promoting sexual abstinence among adolescents, while ignoring the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, the gender-as-relational approach, sexual health prevention methods (contraception, STI prevention, etc.), sexual or gender-based violence, unequal access to health

services, and so many other fundamental issues concerning youth sexuality or, rather, the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents and young people.

What is at stake in public policies aimed at adolescents and young people? What is intended to be fostered through public policy? In order to illustrate the questions at hand, I cite current debates concerning the Secondary Education Reform in Brazil, which significantly altered the mandatory curriculum content, incorporated “training opportunities” chosen by students, and proposed an educational system that would focus more on young people’s labor market insertion, rather than preparing them for higher education.

The creation of a transversal component, called a “life project,” which aimed to help young people understand their own life aspirations draws significant attention. This proposal began during Michel Temer’s government (2016-2018) before being emphatically embraced during the Bolsonaro administration (2019-2022). Following, Lula’s return to the presidency and the corresponding change in the federal administration on January 1, 2023, there has been an ongoing campaign to repeal the *Novo Ensino Médio* [New High School] policies, as was the case with an array of other policies and regulations implemented from 2016 to 2022 that were repealed in early 2023. The debate surrounding the *Novo Ensino Médio* policies was still ongoing at the time this article was written, despite calls for its repeal by several societal sectors, including many young people.

Moreover, Law number 13,798, which modified the Statute of the Child and Adolescent and created National Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Week, remains in force.

Finally, disputes surrounding young people still occur in various spheres of the social imaginary and policy proposals. In this regard, we sincerely hope that the National Policy for the Integral Health of the Youth Population that is currently being developed will reflect on past achievements, restore previously successful initiatives that have been dismantled, and meet the current calls for action that youth voices and the researchers from this field of study are calling for, as prominently demonstrated by the results of this study and its contemporaries.

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### Author contributions

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