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A critical analysis of the cybersex phenomenon from the perspective of John Paul II's theology of the body

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the ontology of human sexual experience as embodied in the body. The phenomenon of cybersex as a form of digitally mediated sexual activity is commonly adopted by the younger generation under the assumption that the absence of physical contact guarantees the safety of such activities. However, this perception implicitly perpetuates an anthropological reduction that separates the body from the person as a relational subject. This study aims to examine the phenomenon of cybersex through the lens of John Paul II's Theology of the Body by applying a critical-analytical literature review method encompassing descriptive, evaluative, and synthetic stages. The findings indicate that cybersex represents a significant anthropological-theological crisis in the "Onlife" era, where the blurring of boundaries between physical and digital realities distorts the meaning of the body as a medium of "self-gift." Within John Paul II's theological framework, the body is a "personal sacrament" that carries spousal meaning toward authentic relational love. Conversely, cybersex constitutes a distortion that reduces the body to a visual object of consumption, fragmented from genuine personal relationships. This study argues that an adequate pastoral response must go beyond mere normative prohibitions, toward an integrative anthropological approach capable of reclaiming the dignity of the body as the locus of authentic love amidst the complexities of the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has been marked by the development of digital connectivity, which has radically transformed the way people understand the body, intimacy, and sexuality. One significant phenomenon in this context is cybersex, which generally refers to the use of digital media for sexual activities, whether through communication, fantasy, or interaction with real or virtual partners (Bothe et al., 2024; Döring, 2009). This practice encompasses various forms, ranging from solitary consumption of pornography to real-time sexual interactions via live video, sexting, and avatar-based activities in virtual environments (Döring, 2009; Ulvi et al., 2022). Many users view cybersex as a relatively safe activity because it does not involve direct physical contact and offers anonymity (Bothe et al., 2024; Hasibuan, N. S., & Masyhuri, 2024).

However, this perception is based on a problematic anthropological assumption: that the body can essentially be separated from the person, such that digital sexual activity is considered to have no impact on personal identity, relational integrity, or spiritual development. This assumption reflects a crisis of corporeality in late modernity characterized by the progressive disintegration between the real body and the digital body (Baudrillard, 1981; Featherstone, 2010; Shilling, 2012). This logic is rooted in Baudrillard's (1981) theory of the simulacrum, in which visual representations replace authentic physical presence. However, in today's era of hyperconnectivity, this disintegration goes beyond a mere separation of physical and virtual spaces. As articulated in The Onlife Manifesto (Floridi, 2015), information technology is no longer merely a tool but an

environmental force that creates the “Onlife” reality, a condition where the boundary between online and offline has completely dissolved. In the Onlife context, cybersex represents a metaphysical crisis in which digital interactions fundamentally reshape concepts of the self and human agency. The impacts of this shift have been empirically demonstrated, including in changes to sexual cognition, relational behavior, and individual development (Coffey, J, 2024; Wright et al., 2016; Twenge et al., 2017).

In the Catholic tradition, a profound reflection on the meaning of the human body was systematically developed by John Paul II through the Theology of the Body (1979–1984). In this work, the body is understood as a constitutive dimension of human identity, not merely an additional aspect, but a tangible expression of the person in their visible and relational dimensions (John Paul II, 2006). This approach is rooted in Scripture and personalist philosophy, which affirm that human beings are embodied creatures called to relationship and love (Wojtyla, 1981; Schmitz, 1993).

Although this theological framework is rich, studies that specifically and deeply explore the connection between cybersex and the Theology of the Body remain very limited. The existing literature tends to be polarized between normative approaches that lack phenomenological depth (Chiodi, 2010; Grondelski, 2014) and empirically grounded approaches that are methodologically secular (Bothe et al., 2024; Döring, 2009; Ulvi et al., 2022). The intersection between phenomenological theology and digital anthropology thus represents a significant gap in the interdisciplinary literature.

This theoretical gap has become increasingly urgent to address given the massive growth of digital connectivity across various parts of the world, including Indonesia. Currently, the urgency of this research is supported by data showing that internet penetration in Indonesia has reached over 79% of the total population. This digital dynamic brings with it the phenomenon of cybersex, which now spans a broad spectrum in society, ranging from the dissemination of content on social media to online sexual exploitation. Hasibuan (2024) notes that internet addiction and online sexual behavior have significant negative impacts, encompassing

psychological, interpersonal, and financial aspects for users in Indonesia. Therefore, an anthropological-theological framework is needed that can respond to this local context more deeply in order to provide relevant moral guidance amidst the tide of hyperconnectivity.

Given this gap, this study formulates three research questions: (1) How can the phenomenon of cybersex be understood in its deepest anthropological dimensions, beyond behavioral or legal definitions? (2) How can John Paul II’s core theological-anthropological categories, specifically the spousal meaning of the body, the body as a personal sacrament, and the principle of self-giving, serve as an interpretive framework for understanding cybersex as an anthropological-theological issue? (3) What pastoral-theological framework can be constructed to move beyond a purely prohibitive moral discourse toward an integrative response rooted in the restoration of the meaning of the body?

In light of these questions, this study pursues three objectives: first, to describe the phenomenon of cybersex in its anthropological dimensions; second, to apply John Paul II’s core theological-anthropological categories as an interpretive framework; and third, to formulate a constructive pastoral-theological framework that goes beyond a prohibitive moral discourse.

This research also has practical significance. In Indonesia, more than 80% of internet users aged 15–35 are exposed to online sexual content, and cybersex is a common issue encountered in pastoral and educational contexts (Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association [APJII], 2024). Similar trends have been documented globally (Döring, 2009; Price et al., 2016), necessitating an approach that is not merely psychological or sociological, but also theological—to address the fundamental questions about the meaning of humanity, love, and relationships that cybersex, through its distortions, inadvertently raises.

Over the past five years, research on digital sexuality has seen significant development as virtual activities have become increasingly integrated into people’s daily lives. In their conceptual analysis, Döring et al. (2021) assert that practices such as cybersex, sexting, and the consumption of online pornography are no longer marginal phenomena, but rather a common reality

with far-reaching impacts on sexual health and identity formation. These findings indicate that digital spaces are beginning to blur the boundaries between the physical body, personal presence, and the quality of relationships. Nevertheless, the perspective offered by Döring remains limited to the realms of psychology and health, without addressing reflections on faith or the dimensions of human spirituality.

As this phenomenon has grown, research within the context of the Christian faith has begun to emerge to examine the impact of the digital world on the institution of marriage. Ferreira, Yates, and Brunsdon (2021) found that virtual spaces have become a new arena where intimacy and fidelity are put to the test. The digitization of these relationships poses serious moral challenges for Christian married couples. However, their study focuses more on the aspects of identity and the sociology of relationships, and thus has not yet addressed cybersex as an issue deeply related to the sacramental meaning of the body.

From a behavioral perspective, Baroncelli et al. (2023) make an important contribution by linking engagement in cybersex to human emotional needs, such as the longing for closeness and attachment. These findings suggest that cybersex is not merely a mechanical sexual behavior, but rather a manifestation of human vulnerability in building real relationships. Although this analysis helps in understanding the subjects' psychological motivations, the study remains within the realm of behavioral science and has not yet reached the theological depth regarding human dignity.

Efforts to bring this phenomenon into the realm of Christian ethics were first undertaken by Simon et al. (2024), particularly regarding the practice of phone sex among couples in long-distance relationships. This study highlights the tension between fulfilling intimate needs and the demands of religious teachings. Although it has entered the realm of ethics, the scope of the discussion remains casuistic (limited to specific situations) and has not yet provided a comprehensive philosophical framework regarding digital sexuality in light of the nature of the body.

Based on the above discussion, a clear research gap is evident. Although cybersex has been examined through the lenses of health, psychology, and practical ethics, no research has yet been found

that specifically analyzes this phenomenon from the perspective of the Theology of the Body developed by Saint John Paul II. The Theology of the Body offers a paradigm in which the human body is not merely biological matter, but rather a means of expressing incarnate love (the nuptial meaning of the body).

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap. Cybersex needs to be critically understood not merely as deviant behavior, but as a distortion of the "language of love" in interpersonal relationships, which should be all-encompassing, faithful, and life-giving. Through this analysis, the study not only offers theoretical innovation but also formulates a concrete pastoral framework to accompany young people facing moral challenges in the digital age.

This study employs a critical-analytical literature review method adapted from the systematic literature review guidelines by Tranfield et al. (2003). The analysis proceeds through three interrelated stages. In this stage, concepts and empirical findings regarding cybersex and corporeality are identified, synthesized, and subjected to an initial critical assessment. This stage relies primarily on empirical literature in psychology, sociology, and digital media studies, as well as on primary philosophical sources in phenomenology. In this stage, the limitations of existing approaches, both secular and theological, are identified and analyzed through a close reading of primary theological sources, particularly John Paul II's 'Theology of the Body' and Wojtyła's 'Love and Responsibility' (1981), in dialogue with phenomenological literature. In this stage, the findings from the two previous stages are integrated into a coherent theological-anthropological framework, from which pastoral implications are drawn. This deliberately multidisciplinary methodology does not compromise theological integrity but is demanded by the conviction that an adequate pastoral response requires an adequate anthropological understanding.

METHODS

This study employs a critical-analytical literature review method adapted from the systematic literature review framework proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003). This method is integrated through an interdisciplinary dialogue approach to

facilitate a scholarly encounter between primary theological sources and findings from empirical science as well as contemporary media theory. The analysis was conducted systematically through three interrelated stages, beginning with a descriptive-phenomenological stage to identify and synthesize empirical data regarding cybersex and corporeality from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, and digital media studies. This initial stage draws on current empirical literature as well as phenomenological philosophical sources, such as the work of Merleau-Ponty (2005), to map the concrete human reality in cyberspace.

The next step is the evaluative-theological phase, which involves a critical assessment of the limitations of existing approaches through an in-depth reading of primary theological sources, particularly John Paul II's 'Theology of the Body' (2006) and Wojtyła's 'Love and Responsibility' (1981). Finally, the research concludes with a synthetic-constructive phase that integrates all findings into a coherent theological-anthropological framework. The ultimate goal of this phase is to formulate integrative pastoral implications based on the principle that grace presupposes nature (*gratia supponit naturam*). This deliberately interdisciplinary methodology is not a compromise of theological integrity, but is based on the conviction that an adequate pastoral response requires a comprehensive anthropological understanding of humanity's existential challenges in the digital age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in three interrelated main themes: first, an exposition of the core ideas of John Paul II's Theology of the Body as an interpretive framework; second, an analysis of the phenomenon of cybersex from the perspective of that framework; and third, the formulation of a constructive and integrative pastoral-theological framework.

The core ideas of John Paul II's theology of the body

The Theology of the Body developed by John Paul II is one of the most significant contributions to modern Catholic moral theology. Presented through a series of general audiences between 1979 and 1984, and later compiled in 'Man and Woman He Created Them' (John Paul II, 2006), these

reflections offer a phenomenological and personalist approach to human existence as embodied beings. Unlike traditional moral approaches, which tend to be normative and legalistic, Theology of the Body starts from concrete human experience to reveal the deepest meaning of the body as a personal expression.

1. The body as a constitutive dimension of the person

The first fundamental idea in the Theology of the Body is that the human body cannot be separated from the person. The body is not merely a "vessel" for the soul, but a constitutive dimension of human identity: human beings do not merely "possess" a body, but "are" a body in a personal sense. The body is the means by which the person becomes present, visible, and relational in the world. This perspective rejects Cartesian dualism and affirms that every bodily action has personal and moral significance.

To develop this anthropology, John Paul II draws on the narrative of Genesis and identifies three original human experiences: original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness. The experience of solitude reveals that human beings are unique subjects who stand before God as conscious and free persons. The experience of unity is seen in the relationship between men and women who recognize each other as equal and complementary persons. Meanwhile, the experience of nakedness describes a state in which the body becomes transparent to the person without shame, because there is no objectification or exploitation (John Paul II, 2006).

In the digital age, the body as a means of personal expression faces new challenges through what is known as "everyday embodiment." Coffey (2024) explains that young people's bodily experiences are now shaped by practices of digital visual literacy such as the use of filters and image editing, which intensify self-scrutiny. This is highly relevant to John Paul II's Theology of the Body, where the demand to 'perfect' one's digital appearance actually distances people from an appreciation of the authentic and concrete body, creating body dissatisfaction rooted in unrealistic and digitally fragmented beauty standards.

2. The spousal meaning of the body and the body as a personal sacrament

From these three original experiences, John Paul II developed a key concept: the spousal meaning of the body. This concept asserts that the human body possesses an intrinsic capacity to express love as self-giving. The body is not merely a tool of communication, but a medium through which a person gives themselves totally to another. In true love, a person does not use another as an object, but rather gives oneself as a gift. Sexuality, within this framework, is understood as the deepest expression of the human vocation to love totally, faithfully, and open to life (John Paul II, 2006).

This concept is rooted in Wojtyła's (1981) personalist principle in 'Love and Responsibility': that the person must always be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as a means. Furthermore, John Paul II introduced the concept of the body as a personal sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality, namely the person and even the mystery of the Holy Trinity (John Paul II, 2006, pp. 506–509). Thus, actions toward the body have a theological dimension: treating the body instrumentally means reducing the person and obscuring the image of God within humanity.

3. Lust as a distortion of the gaze

However, human reality no longer exists in its original, pure state. John Paul II explains that after original sin, humans experience concupiscence, a tendency to view and treat others as objects. In his reflection on Matthew 5:27–28, he emphasizes that sin occurs not only in actions but also in the way we look at others. Lust is a distortion of the body's meaning, in which others are reduced to objects of gratification; a gaze that should be contemplative is replaced by an objectifying gaze (John Paul II, 2006). Therefore, the restoration of sexuality requires not only behavioral control but also a transformation of perspective, the development of what John Paul II calls a "pure gaze" capable of seeing others as persons worthy of love.

An analysis of cybersex from the perspective of the theology of the body

1. Cybersex as an Anthropological Reduction

In the discourse of digital sociology and contemporary media studies, the human body in virtual environments is increasingly conceptualized through the lens of hyperreality and simulated existence. To establish a solid analytical foundation

for this subsection, it is essential to synthesize several fundamental frameworks: Jean Baudrillard's (1981) theory of the simulacrum, which posits that technologically enhanced visual representations detach from and ultimately replace physical presence; Luciano Floridi's *Onlife Manifesto* (2015), which describes a hyperconnected reality in which the ontological boundaries between online and offline spaces have completely dissolved; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2005), which examines the embodied subject as the anchor of human experience. Empirically, this theoretical convergence aligns with models (accessibility, affordability, and anonymity) as well as contemporary psychological studies on objectifying sexual scripts (Wright et al., 2016; Vieira & Griffiths, 2024). By placing this secular and empirical analysis in direct dialogue with the personalist anthropology of Saint John Paul II, this subsection offers a structural critique of virtual sex as a profound metaphysical and anthropological reduction.

When examined through this integrated framework, the first and most fundamental finding concerns the anthropological logic that shapes the experience of virtual sex. Virtual sex operates as a systematic process of anthropological reduction, in which human beings in their physical and spiritual integrity are gradually reduced to a series of visually consumable representations. Within this digital matrix, pornographic images and virtual interactions function as paradigmatic simulacra; these images are not representations of real sexual relations between embodied human beings, but rather visual products that are carefully designed, technically refined, and commercially optimized to stimulate desire in a frictionless environment.

This phenomenon directly triggers what Merleau-Ponty (2005) identified as the reversal of the intentional arc. The incarnated subject's outward and transcendent orientation toward the world and the authentic "other" collapses into a closed, self-satisfaction-oriented reflexive circuit. Secular psychological literature strongly corroborates this anthropological wound, documenting the formation of objectifying sexual scenarios (Wright et al., 2016), desensitization effects analogous to neurobiological tolerance in substance use disorders (Voon et al., 2014), and profound relational deficits (Perry & Schleifer,

2018). Furthermore, as demonstrated in a systematic review by Vieira & Griffiths (2024), this problematic use is closely linked to underlying psychological distress, such as loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Rather than offering authentic relationships, virtual sex functions as a technological escape mechanism that traps individuals in a cycle of dependence, thereby undermining their relational integrity and severely distorting their self-concept.

This structural fragmentation stands in radical contrast to the theological anthropology of John Paul II (2006), which rejects Cartesian dualism and asserts that the human body is a constitutive dimension of personal identity. Within the personalist paradigm, human beings do not merely “possess” a body as an instrumental vessel; rather, they “are” their bodies in a deeply personal and visible sense. Consequently, every bodily action possesses intrinsic moral and spiritual significance. Contemporary digital visual literacy practices characterized by the widespread use of filters, image editing, and algorithmic optimization reinforce self-reflection and give rise to an artificial “everyday self-representation” (Coffey, 2024). This digital perfectionism fosters widespread body dissatisfaction by distancing young people from their authentic, concrete bodies. By replacing the real body with fragmented digital idols, virtual sex perpetuates a major anthropological crisis of late modernity: it blinds human subjects to the fundamental truth that the physical body is an irreplaceable sacred space, where one becomes present, visible, and capable of loving relationally and authentically.

2. Distortions of the spousal meaning of the body

The conceptual foundation of this analysis rests on Karol Wojtyła’s (1981) principle of personalism, as outlined in *Love and Responsibility*, which states that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, not merely as means to an end. Within the framework of the *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II (2006) extends this philosophical principle into the theological category of “the marital meaning of the body”—the intrinsic capacity God has endowed the human body with to authentically express love through total, faithful, and fruitful self-giving to another person. Previous theological critiques of digital sexuality, as outlined by Grondelski (2014) and Chiodi (2010),

have often approached these categories through a rigid normative or moralistic lens, which at times lacks phenomenological depth. This subsection synthesizes Wojtyła’s principles of personalism and the meaning of physical marriage to offer a rigorous theological critique of how digitally mediated sexual relationships structurally distort the relational ontology of human intimacy.

When examined through this integrated theological framework, virtual sex can be structurally diagnosed as a radical and specific distortion of the meaning of the body within the context of marriage. To authentically live out this meaning of marriage, three essential metaphysical coordinates are required: first, the existence of a real and physically present “other” encountered in a genuine interpersonal relationship; second, an act of self-surrender that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful; and third, a mutual willingness to become vulnerable, to be accepted, and to be transformed by the other’s self-surrender in return. Cybersex systematically sets aside and reverses each of these absolute ontological requirements.

First, within the digital matrix, the “other” is entirely replaced by disembodied visual representations produced primarily for commercial consumption. These digital simulacra are carefully designed to stimulate sexual desire while remaining detached from the existential burdens and moral demands of real-life relationships. As a result, authentic self-sacrifice is entirely supplanted by sophisticated self-gratification. Users do not surrender themselves to another person; rather, they use commodified images of others as unimpeded tools to achieve their own solitary experiences of pleasure. The mutual vulnerability inherent in a genuine encounter, the fundamental readiness to be affected by others and to take responsibility for them, is completely neutralized by the unimpeded and controlled consumption engineered by the digital environment. This is not merely a behavioral failure in love; it is an active ontological reversal of the logic of love, a systematic rejection of the divine call embedded in embodied human existence.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals that cybersex not only exploits the body of “the other” as represented but also the subject’s own physical body. Individuals engaged in cybersex isolate the body’s natural capacity for arousal and pleasure, deliberately separating this somatic experience from

its true teleological purpose, namely, interpersonal communion and self-giving. For this reason, John Paul II's (2006) incisive analysis of masturbation as a form of psychological and spiritual self-enclosure, which stands in direct opposition to the structure of self-giving, applies with unique and devastating force to the reality of cybersex. Cybersex uniquely exacerbates this autoerotic fragmentation by combining the solitary structure of masturbation with the additional algorithmic distortion of using the bodies of others, visually represented and objectified as its subjective catalyst. This reduces the body from a personal sacrament to a biological tool for virtual consumption.

3. Cybersex as a manifestation of the lustful gaze

To establish an analytical framework for this subsection, it is necessary to summarize John Paul II's (2006) in-depth biblical-phenomenological critique of lust, particularly his interpretation of Matthew 5:27–28. In his reflection on Christ's words regarding adultery of the heart, John Paul II asserts that lust is fundamentally a distortion of vision, a subjective mode of perception that reduces human beings from beloved icons of beauty to objects of utilitarian gratification. This theological diagnosis is strongly supported by contemporary empirical research in the fields of social psychology and media effects. Studies by Sun et al. (2016) and Wright et al. (2016) on the internalization of male sexual scenarios demonstrate how exposure to sexually explicit digital media alters cognitive processing, while Galdi et al. (2014) document how objectifying media actively shapes harmful implicit attitudes toward others. This subsection synthesizes these theological and empirical frameworks to demonstrate how virtual sex acts as a powerful mechanism that constructs and normalizes this lustful gaze.

When evaluated from this perspective, cybersex reveals itself, by its very nature, as an intentional act of looking that is structurally organized around the primacy of the gaze. Its entire digital and psychological architecture is designed to isolate the gaze: users gaze at strictly curated digital images of other people's bodies within a virtual environment specifically optimized to maximize sexual arousal. Therefore, the gaze in cybersex is "lustful" in the precise technical sense as defined by John Paul II; it deliberately views the other not to encounter them as a unique and dignified person,

but to consume their visual appearance as somatic stimulation. This subjective distortion of the gaze functions as an internal correlate to the external and objective instrumentalization of the person encountered in the digital realm.

The profound danger of this phenomenon lies in its ability to shape cognitive and spiritual aspects. Because attention capitalism, which has become ingrained, shapes long-term perceptual habits, the regular and repetitive practice of cybersex viewing gradually alters users' cognitive landscape. As confirmed by empirical studies on sexual cognition, individuals who consistently train their gaze in frictionless virtual environments develop the habit of objectifying others in the real world (Sun et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2016). A contemplative and pure gaze, one capable of recognizing the human body as a personal sacrament and welcoming others as a gift—is systematically eroded. As a result, individuals who are deeply accustomed to the cybersex perspective will find it increasingly difficult to navigate the authentic, complex, and vulnerable reality of real-world relationships, which ultimately hinders their ability to respond to others with selfless and sacrificial love as demanded by human dignity.

4. The collaboration between desire and algorithms

To establish a solid framework for this subsection, it is essential to integrate contemporary media theory with theological anthropology. As outlined in *The Onlife Manifesto* (Floridi, 2015), digital information technology is no longer merely a static and passive tool used by human agents; rather, it has evolved into a pervasive environmental force that fundamentally transforms human conceptions of self, agency, and social reality. This structural shift is driven by the economic logic of attention capitalism, or what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) identifies as "surveillance capitalism"—a structural system that systematically commodifies and monetizes human desires manifested through behavioral data. This subsection places these contemporary digital diagnoses in direct dialogue with the theological anthropology of John Paul II (2006) to examine how the subjective "lustful gaze" is no longer merely an individual moral choice, but rather a curated product of a highly sophisticated, data-driven digital ecosystem.

When analyzed through this integrated lens, the crisis of corporeality in the phenomenon of cybersex is shown to be exacerbated by the role of predictive algorithms that systematically filter and exploit users' desires. In the "Onlife" reality, the boundary between reality and virtuality is completely blurred, forcing human subjects to engage in continuous, unimpeded interactions with digital body simulations. In this hyper-connected environment, the gaze of desire loses its purely personal and internal character; it becomes algorithmically mediated and amplified. Artificial intelligence and machine learning protocols process users' deepest vulnerabilities, reducing irreducible human dignity to biometric data points, clicking habits, and consumer preferences.

As a result, the digital ecosystem does not merely provide passive objects for human gaze; it actively trains that gaze to become increasingly objectifying, addictive, and detached from real personal presence. Algorithms create an artificial digital feedback loop designed to trap the subject in a state of permanent psychological arousal, constantly presenting overly optimized visual stimuli without ever demanding the responsibility of genuine interpersonal interaction. By treating human sexual desire as raw material for commercial monetization, this algorithmic curation directly hinders the development of a contemplative "pure gaze" (John Paul II, 2006). This structurally erects a technological barrier that alienates young people from the fundamental truth of their embodied existence, confining them within a closed digital loop that systematically contradicts the human calling toward authentic and self-transcendent love.

5. The crisis of digital embodiment: a structural diagnosis

To establish a comprehensive framework for this concluding subsection, it is necessary to synthesize the sociological and philosophical structures of the late modern era that shape contemporary human experience. This structural analysis draws on Charles Taylor's theory of "expressive individualism" (1989), which argues that authentic selfhood is achieved through the unhindered internal expression of subjective desires, rather than through self-transcendence in relational love, as well as the work of Chris Shilling (2012) and Mike Featherstone's sociology of the body (2010), which examines the progressive

fragmentation and commodification of physical presence in consumer culture. By integrating these secular frameworks with the transcendental anthropology of John Paul II (2006), this subsection offers a final structural synthesis, demonstrating how virtual sex represents the systematic institutionalization of the crisis of self-realization in the era of late modernity.

When evaluated through this holistic lens, the individual findings outlined throughout this study coalesce into a single, comprehensive diagnosis: a crisis of digital embodiment. This profound crisis is not merely a collection of isolated moral failures or behavioral deviations; rather, it reflects a fundamental structural characteristic of the contemporary digital environment as it currently exists. The virtual world operates under an economic and cultural mandate to systematically replace reality with representations, physical presence with hyperreal images, vulnerable human interactions with unhindered digital consumption, and the logic of self-sacrifice with instant self-gratification.

John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (2006) offers a radical and prophetic counter-testimony to these dominant modern logics. Opposing expressive individualism, this theology affirms that human beings are not autonomous subjects isolated and confined within their own desires, but rather relational beings called—in and through the physical reality of the body—to transcend themselves completely in love. Cybersex, by technologically codifying modes of relating that avoid the real presence of "the other," constitutes an active rejection of this anthropological truth. Therefore, this structural diagnosis indicates that a responsible theological response cannot be limited merely to individualistic pastoral counseling or moralistic prohibitions. Since the digital ecosystem itself is designed to monetize and fragment the desires embodied in the body, an effective pastoral-theological framework must incorporate a sharp and prophetic critique of the cultural, technological, and economic structures that actively produce and perpetuate this crisis of digital embodiment.

A pastoral-theological framework in response to cybersex

1. Moving beyond prohibitive discourse toward an integrative approach

To build a solid foundation for a renewed pastoral methodology, it is necessary to integrate the classical Thomistic theological principle stating that grace presupposes nature (*gratia supponit naturam*) (Aquinas, 1984) with contemporary pastoral psychology regarding the formation of behavioral habits. The traditional moral framework in the Catholic context, as criticized by Chiodi (2010), often relies heavily on a discourse of prohibition, one that focuses primarily on normative legalism and external behavioral control. However, contemporary pastoral research shows that a purely negative approach fails to address the underlying psychological and spiritual fragmentation caused by digital dependency. This subsection synthesizes Thomistic axioms with the personalist pedagogy of John Paul II to present an argument for a pastoral transition from reactive prohibition toward proactive and integrative anthropological healing.

When applied to the reality of virtual sex, this integrative approach recognizes that this issue is not merely a series of separate moral transgressions to be avoided, but rather an anthropological crisis that distorts a person's fundamental ability to understand and form relationships. A person accustomed to consuming digital body images does not merely require moral condemnation; rather, they need holistic pastoral care that restores their capacity for authentic human interaction. This healing process demands the systematic reintegration of the user's perspectives, desires, and imagination into the objective order of love. Therefore, pastoral care must extend beyond the confessional or the classroom toward comprehensive affective formation, contemplative practices, and the active cultivation of authentic interpersonal relationships. By addressing the fundamental existential loneliness that drives digital escapism, an integrative pastoral model seeks to heal human nature so that divine grace may fully transform the individual.

2. Guiding young people in the digital environment

Developing an effective educational guidance model for young people requires a comprehensive integration of contemporary digital literacy

frameworks with positive Christian pedagogy. Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024) shows that more than 80% of internet users aged 15–35 are routinely exposed to sexual content online, underscoring that the digital space has become a primary arena for the socialization process. In response to this, contemporary pastoral experts such as Grondelski (2014) emphasize that digital literacy can no longer be treated as a secular and technical competency but must be reinterpreted as a critical spiritual hermeneutic. This subsection synthesizes the structural realities of these media with the pedagogical vision of John Paul II (2006) to formulate a contextual model for guiding young people amid algorithmic hyperconnectivity.

Given the structural characteristics of the digital environment, such as its widespread accessibility, anonymity, affordability, and algorithmic exploitation of addictive behavior, pastoral guidance must be explicitly tailored to the context. Young people must be equipped with a critical hermeneutic that enables them to uncover and reject the logic of objectification and commodification promoted by attention capitalism. Most importantly, this pastoral guidance must reject scare tactics and negative moralism. Instead, this guidance must be rooted in a vision of physically embodied love that is positive, beautiful, and alluring, as articulated by the Theology of the Body. When young people are introduced to the intrinsic dignity and sacramental meaning of their own bodies, they are given a standard of truth that empowers them to explore the digital world not out of fear, but out of a deep respect for their own relational calling.

3. The development of contextual moral theology

To develop a moral theology capable of addressing contemporary digital phenomena, it is essential to employ an interdisciplinary methodology that brings together key theological sources in direct dialogue with the empirical sciences. The Second Vatican Council, in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), explicitly called for moral theology to be continually renewed through a deeper engagement with concrete human realities and the signs of the times. Contemporary moral theologians, including Salzman & Lawler (2008) and Lawler et al. (2003), have noted that traditional frameworks often lack the specific analytical tools

needed to evaluate the complexities of virtual agency, algorithmic mediation, and the globalized commodification of desire. This subsection addresses this methodological challenge by drawing on Theology of the Body as a broad and dynamic framework that evolves through an ongoing dialogue with empirical psychology and sociology.

This interdisciplinary dialogue is an epistemological necessity for contextual moral theology. While John Paul II's theological anthropology provides timeless principles regarding human dignity and the bodily meaning of marriage, empirical disciplines, such as digital media studies and sociology, offer important insights into the specific mechanisms of the digital experience. Understanding the neural correlates of reactivity to digital cues (Voon et al., 2014) or the sociological impact of virtual relationships on marital fidelity (Ferreira et al., 2021) does not undermine the integrity of moral theology. On the contrary, it provides moral theologians with an accurate diagnosis of the condition of modern humanity. This interdisciplinary endeavor fulfills the theological conviction that grace is built upon and perfects human nature—concrete and historical—ensuring that the Church's moral guidance remains highly relevant and rooted in context.

4. Communities of authentic love as a counter-witness

The church's response to virtual fragmentation in intimacy must be grounded in contemporary relational sociology and a robust ecclesiology of communion. Sociological critiques of late modernity, such as Zygmunt Bauman's theory of "Liquid Love" (2003) and Eva Illouz's analysis of "emotional capitalism" (2012), document how consumerist culture systematically weakens human bonds, leading to widespread relational fragility and the isolation of individuals. In response, contemporary pastoral theology argues that individualistic interventions are insufficient unless supported by an alternative social ecology. This final subsection synthesizes these sociological critiques with John Paul II's (2006) vision of communal fellowship (*communio personarum*) to present the church community as an essential and tangible counter-witness to the commodification of love in the digital age.

Ultimately, the Theology of the Body is not merely an abstract intellectual theory, but an

existential call to live out the vocation to love in concrete and historical reality. To effectively counter the imitation of intimacy detached from the body offered by virtual sex, the Church must build local communities that tangibly embody the truth of the body. Authentic communities of friendship, faithful marriages, the sanctity of celibacy, and fraternal service provide credible and tangible alternatives to the frictionless consumption of digital spaces. These spaces allow wounded individuals to experience what Jean-Luc Marion (2002) conceptualizes as the phenomenon of giving, where the other is welcomed unconditionally as a gift, rather than consumed as an object. Therefore, the primary pastoral task is structural in nature: namely, the creation of a church environment where dignity, the meaning of marriage, and the sacramental transparency of the human body are continually celebrated, lived out, and protected.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a critical analysis of the phenomenon of cybersex from the perspective of John Paul II's Theology of the Body, integrated with insights from continental phenomenology, digital anthropology, and empirical psychology. The analysis demonstrates that cybersex is not merely a behavioral or moral issue, but rather reflects a deeper anthropological-theological crisis: a systematic distortion, through digitally mediated structures of consumption and objectification, of the vocation inscribed in the human body to be a gift in love.

Within John Paul II's theological-anthropological framework, the body is understood as a personal sacrament imbued with spousal significance. Cybersex structurally distorts this meaning: it reduces the other's body to a visually consumable representation, replaces self-giving with self-gratification, and accustoms the individual to a mode of perception that is structurally lustful. These distortions are not merely personal sins; they are the traces of a cultural logic that systematically contradicts the anthropological truth of the human person.

The response called for by this analysis must be comprehensive. It must include: individual pastoral accompaniment and moral formation; critical cultural engagement with the economic and digital structures that produce cybersex;

interdisciplinary theological scholarship that brings the sources of the Theology of the Body into dialogue with empirical and philosophical analysis; and the construction of authentically embodied communities of love that offer a credible counter-witness.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. As a theoretical-analytical contribution, this study does not include empirical data from primary research with cybersex users or pastoral practitioners. Future research should pursue a mixed-methods approach that integrates theological-philosophical analysis with qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation within specific cultural contexts, including the Indonesian context. Furthermore, this analysis focuses primarily on the cybersex experiences of adults; the specific dynamics among adolescents and other vulnerable groups deserve separate attention in future research.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on digital sexuality and theological anthropology by demonstrating the enduring relevance and analytical power of John Paul II's Theology of the Body. In a digital age systematically tempted by the logic of consumption and simulation, the Theology of the Body's insistence on the irreducible dignity, relational vocation, and sacramental transparency of the human body is not merely a theological assertion, but a prophetic anthropological truth deserving of ongoing engagement across disciplines and cultures.

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