

# Review of Research Trends in Sexual Health, 2020 - 2026: A Scopus-Based Bibliometric Analysis

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**Abstract:** This study aims to review the current state of research and identify major research trends in sexual health based on studies indexed in Scopus from 2020 to 2026. A theoretical research approach and review analysis were employed using the keywords “sexual” and “health,” resulting in the identification of 523 English-language articles. The findings indicate that sexual health research is inherently interdisciplinary, with prominent contributions from psychology, social sciences, and medicine. The distribution of publications across countries, research institutions, and authors was uneven. Six major research trends were identified: sexual health education; the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse populations; HIV/STI prevention; digital transformation; inequalities and psychosocial factors; and sexual functioning and quality of life. These findings provide a scientific basis for advancing research, education, and policy development in the field of sexual health.

**Key Word:** health; sexuality; education; adolescents; Scopus; research trends.

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## I. Introduction

Sexual health is a critical component of human health and is closely associated with physical and psychological well-being, emotional health, social relationships, and quality of life. In recent years, research on sexual health has shifted from an approach primarily centered on disease and risk prevention toward a more comprehensive, positive, and rights-based perspective. According to Manão, Brazão, and Pascoal (2025), sexual health is an essential dimension of overall health, influencing physical, psychological, and social well-being. Individuals' perceptions of sexual health may also shape their behaviors, access to healthcare services, interactions with sexual partners, and engagement with relevant information and policies. The findings of this study indicate that sexual health is a multidimensional construct encompassing physical-biological, cognitive-behavioral, and relational dimensions, as well as factors embedded within the broader sociopolitical context [1].

The multidimensional conceptualization of sexual health is also clearly reflected in studies that develop and apply theoretical frameworks. Liddell and McKinley (2022)[2], through the Framework for Integrated Reproductive and Sexual Health Theory (FIRSHT), emphasize the reciprocal relationships among factors influencing reproductive and sexual health experiences, highlighting the need to simultaneously consider reproductive justice, resilience, the life course, ecosystems, and sociocultural contexts. From a different perspective, Girard et al. (2023) proposed the Sexual Health and Integrative Pleasure (SHIP) Model, which encompasses systemic foundations, intersectionality, biopsychosocial perspectives, a life-course approach, and empiricism, along with components such as sexual knowledge, adaptability and resilience, relational intimacy, positive sexuality oriented toward pleasure, and multidisciplinary care. These models demonstrate that research on sexual health needs to move beyond isolated disease-related indicators and simultaneously consider individual, relational, and social-environmental resources [3].

This comprehensive approach is further supported by de Wit et al. (2024) [4], who conceptualized sexual health as encompassing physical, emotional, mental, and social dimensions related to sexuality. Their study indicates that sexual preferences and behaviors, relationships, gender identity, education, and social support are all important aspects that should be considered when assessing sexual health. Similarly, Rodrigues and de Visser (2026) [5] emphasize that sexual health and well-being encompass both physical and emotional dimensions and cannot be understood simply as the absence of disease. Their findings suggest that an exclusive focus on risk prevention may help protect sexual health but does not necessarily ensure sexual well-being; conversely, integrating safety goals with positive sexual experiences may produce more balanced outcomes. This perspective is consistent with the argument put forward by Coleman, Corona-Vargas, and Ford (2021)[6], who consider sexual pleasure an important component of sexual health and sexual rights, with broader implications for overall health and human well-being.

For adolescents, sexual health is particularly significant because this developmental stage involves simultaneous changes in physical and psychological well-being, identity, relationships, and the process of sexual socialization. A study by Arabkari et al. (2025) identified four major dimensions constituting the sexual health of adolescent girls: physical-sexual health, emotional-psychological well-being, sexual socialization, and moral-spiritual beliefs. The authors argue that adolescent girls' sexual health cannot be separated from sexual well-being and overall health and is strongly influenced by cultural and social contexts. Therefore, promoting sexual health among adolescents requires an approach that is responsive to their developmental characteristics and living environments, rather than focusing solely on controlling risk-related behaviors [7].

At the level of the social environment, Gerchow et al. (2024) demonstrated that adolescents' sexual health decision-making is simultaneously influenced by family, schools, healthcare systems, social media, contraceptive access, and gender norms. The lack of comprehensive sexual health education and consistent contraceptive counseling may constrain adolescents' capacity to make informed decisions. Parents and healthcare providers are perceived by adolescents as important sources of support; however, discomfort in communication, paternalistic attitudes, and bias may constitute barriers to accessing sexual health information and services [8]. Consistent with these findings, Howell (2020) showed that parent-adolescent communication contributes to the development of attitudes, beliefs, decision-making processes, and behaviors related to sexual health. Nevertheless, adolescents continue to express a need for more comprehensive knowledge and greater opportunities for dialogue concerning sexual health and decision-making.

Furthermore, the diversity of adolescent populations warrants greater attention in both research and intervention efforts [9]. Shao et al. (2024) [10] emphasize that sexual health and well-being are important components of overall health and quality of life. Research involving autistic adolescents in Canada indicates that the assessment of sexual health should take into account gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure, relationship satisfaction, and health-protective behaviors. More broadly, Dupont et al. (2022) demonstrated that research and policy priorities related to sexual health are context-dependent. In particular, the integration of sexual health into healthcare and education systems, comprehensive sexuality education in schools, and the prevention of sexual violence were identified by experts as priority areas [11].

Taken together, recent studies indicate that sexual health is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional, positive, and rights-based construct closely associated with well-being, encompassing the interplay of physical, psychological and emotional, cognitive and behavioral, relational, cultural, and social factors. For adolescents, sexual health extends beyond the prevention of unintended pregnancy, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) to encompass knowledge, decision-making capacity, safety, relationship quality, identity, sexual rights, and overall health. However, considerable diversity in definitions, theoretical frameworks, populations, and research contexts underscores the need to systematically synthesize the existing body of knowledge. Against this background, the present study, entitled "Research on Sexual Health from 2020 to 2026: A Scopus-Based Review" was conducted to identify major research trends, clarify how sexual health is conceptualized and its constituent dimensions, and examine research directions related to adolescent sexual health. The study aims to provide a scientific basis for further research, education, practice, and policy development in the field of sexual health.

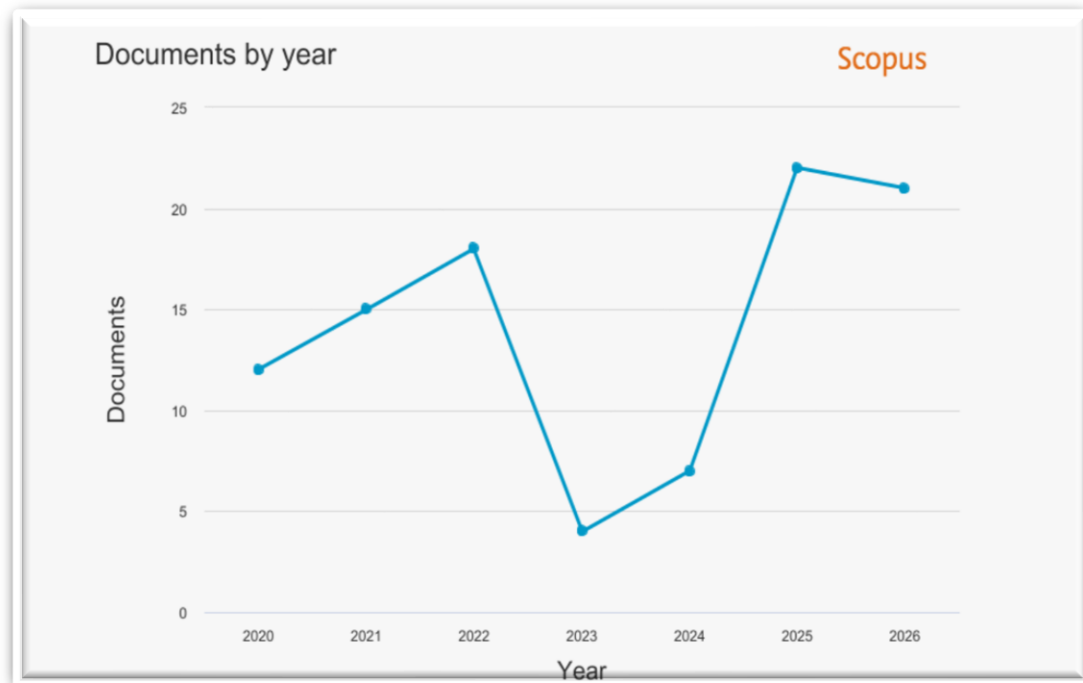
## **II. Research Methods**

A theoretical research approach was employed, based on a review and analysis of studies indexed in the Scopus database. The search was conducted using the keywords "sexual" and "health", with the publication period restricted to January 2020 through July 2026. The search was further limited to records classified within the Social Sciences subject area, published in journals, and available in English. The search identified 523 articles published in reputable Scopus-indexed journals addressing topics related to sexual health. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database on July 21, 2026

## **III. Result**

### **3.1. Number and Trends of Scopus-Indexed Articles on Sexual Health, 2020–2026**

The figure shows that the number of articles on sexual health indexed in Scopus from 2020 to 2026 exhibited an overall upward trend, although substantial fluctuations were observed across individual years. Between 2020 and 2022, the number of publications increased relatively steadily, from 12 articles in 2020 to 15 in 2021 and 18 in 2022, indicating growing scholarly interest in the field. However, 2023 witnessed a sharp decline, with only four publications, representing the lowest number recorded during the study period, followed by a recovery to seven publications in 2024. Notably, the number of publications increased substantially to 22 in 2025, the highest level observed during the study period, and remained high at 21 publications in 2026. Overall, despite a marked disruption during 2023–2024, the long-term trend indicates increasing scholarly attention to sexual health. The substantial growth in publications in recent years may reflect greater recognition of the importance of sexual health within public health and comprehensive healthcare.



**Figure 1. Number of Articles on Sexual Health by Year**

Our analysis identified six major research trends related to sexual health. The first trend concerns sexual health education for adolescents and young people. A substantial body of research has focused on sexual health education in schools, families, and communities, with an increasing shift from the provision of knowledge alone toward the development of skills and the promotion of positive attitudes and behaviors. Studies have examined comprehensive educational content, the roles of teachers and parents, and the extent to which educational programs are responsive to adolescents' and young people's actual needs. At the same time, intervention models have increasingly adopted interactive approaches and incorporated systematic evaluations of their effectiveness. These findings suggest that sexual health education is increasingly recognized as an early and systematic preventive strategy [12], [13].

The second trend involves research focusing on the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other gender-diverse populations. This body of research reflects a shift from a predominantly risk and behavior-oriented approach toward perspectives grounded in rights, equity, and population-specific healthcare needs. Common research topics include stigma, minority stress, access to healthcare services, mental health, sexual behaviors, and identity-affirming interventions. Notably, some studies have developed or evaluated specialized therapeutic models designed to simultaneously improve mental and sexual health outcomes. This trend highlights an increasing emphasis on person-centered and gender-diversity-responsive care [14], [15].

The third trend concerns HIV/STI prevention, which remains a major research focus; however, the scope of research has expanded beyond condom use and testing to include biomedical prevention strategies such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), as well as the integration of prevention into sexual health services. Studies have examined not only preventive behaviors but also perceived risk, access to services, communication with healthcare providers, and social barriers affecting service utilization. In particular, PrEP has been extensively investigated among men who have sex with men (MSM) and other populations at elevated risk, reflecting a clear shift toward combined and personalized prevention approaches [16], [17].

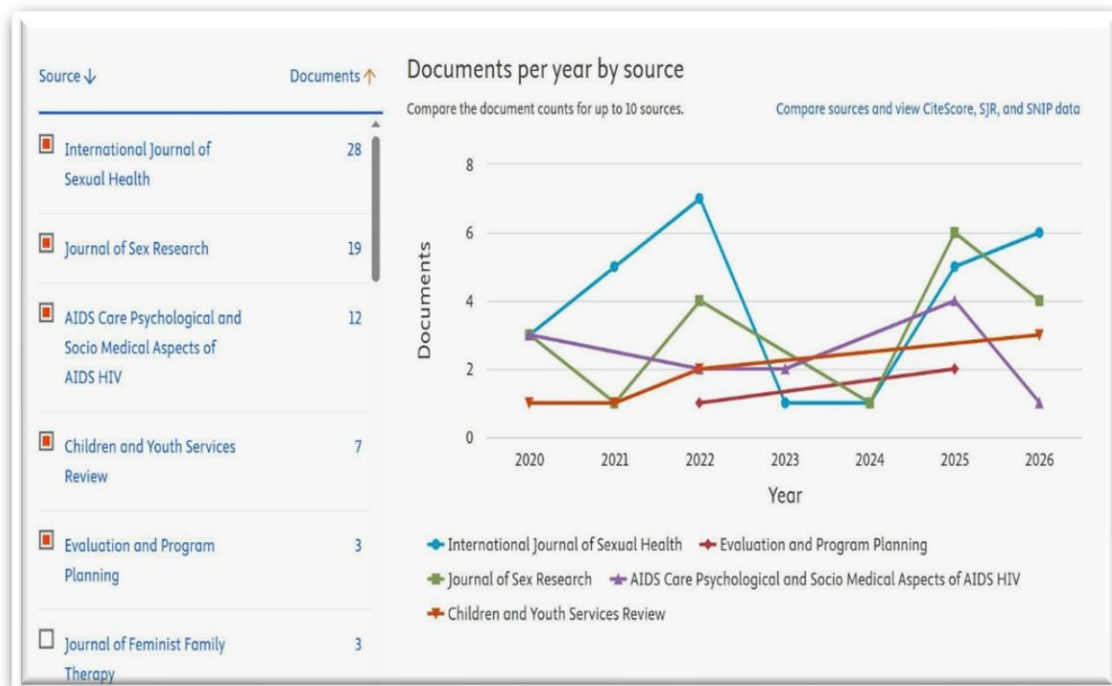
The fourth trend concerns digital transformation in sexual health communication, education, and service delivery. Digital technologies have emerged as an increasingly prominent area of research, encompassing social media, dating applications, web-based platforms, telemedicine, and online educational programs. Studies have simultaneously examined both the opportunities and risks associated with digital technologies. These technologies can expand access to information, enhance privacy, and facilitate remote interventions, while also raising concerns regarding the reliability of online information, risk-related behaviors, and online stigma. Research on telemedicine, web-based interventions, and social media-based applications indicates that sexual health is gradually becoming integrated into the broader digital health and digital communication ecosystem [18], [19].

The fifth trend focuses on inequalities, stigma, and psychosocial factors affecting sexual health, conceptualizing sexual health in relation to broader social determinants such as race, gender, poverty, migration, stigma, psychological trauma, and violence. This perspective demonstrates that sexual health is not merely an

outcome of individual choices but is also strongly shaped by social structures and lived circumstances. Many studies have focused on vulnerable and marginalized populations, examining the mechanisms underlying inequalities in access to healthcare services and disparities in health outcomes. This trend reflects an increasing shift toward ecological-social and health equity perspectives in sexual health research [20], [21].

The sixth trend reflects an expansion of sexual health research toward quality of life, sexual functioning, and condition-specific populations. Increasingly, research has moved beyond disease prevention to address sexual functioning, pleasure, satisfaction, communication, and quality of life among individuals living with chronic conditions and across different stages of the life course. Notably, studies involving cancer survivors, older adults, and people with disabilities have increasingly recognized sexual health as an integral component of comprehensive care. This trend reflects a broader shift from a disease-prevention model toward a positive sexual health framework, in which quality of life and the right to a healthy and fulfilling sexual life are recognized as important outcomes [22], [23].

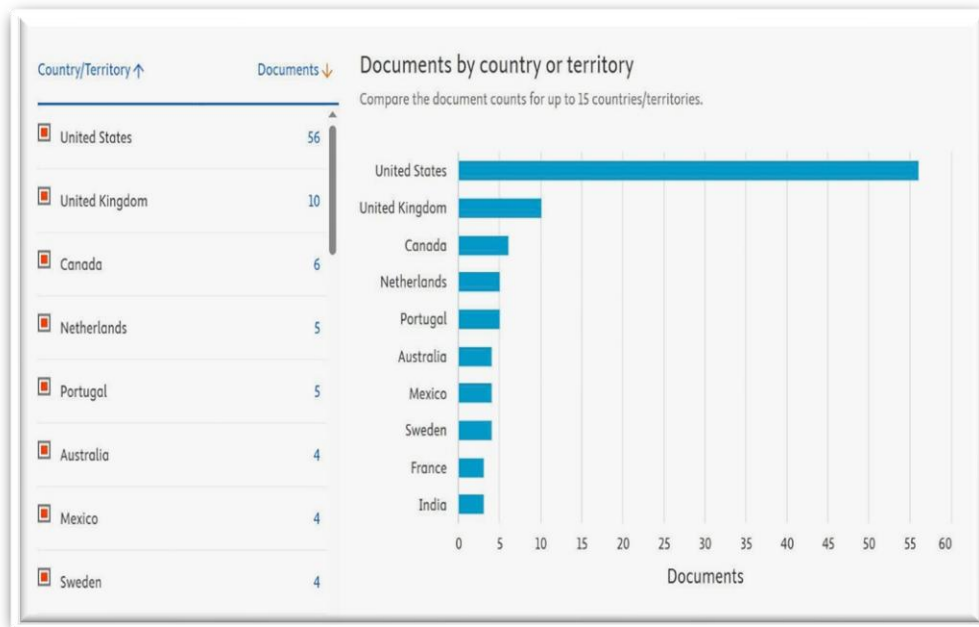
### 3.2. Journals Publishing Research on Sexual Health



**Figure 2. Journals Publishing Articles on Sexual Health**

Figure 2 shows that research on sexual health is distributed across a wide range of journals, although the concentration of publications varies considerably. The *International Journal of Sexual Health* ranks first, with 28 articles, and maintained relatively consistent publication activity throughout the 2020–2026 period, reaching a peak of approximately seven articles in 2022. The *Journal of Sex Research* ranks second, with 19 articles; the number of publications fluctuated substantially, peaking at approximately six articles in 2025. *AIDS Care: Psychological and Socio-Medical Aspects of AIDS/HIV* follows with 12 articles, indicating that sexual health continues to be extensively investigated in relation to HIV/AIDS and its psychosocial dimensions. Meanwhile, *Children and Youth Services Review* published seven articles, whereas *Evaluation and Program Planning* published three. Overall, these findings demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of sexual health research, while also revealing a notable concentration of publications in journals specializing in sexology and sexual health.

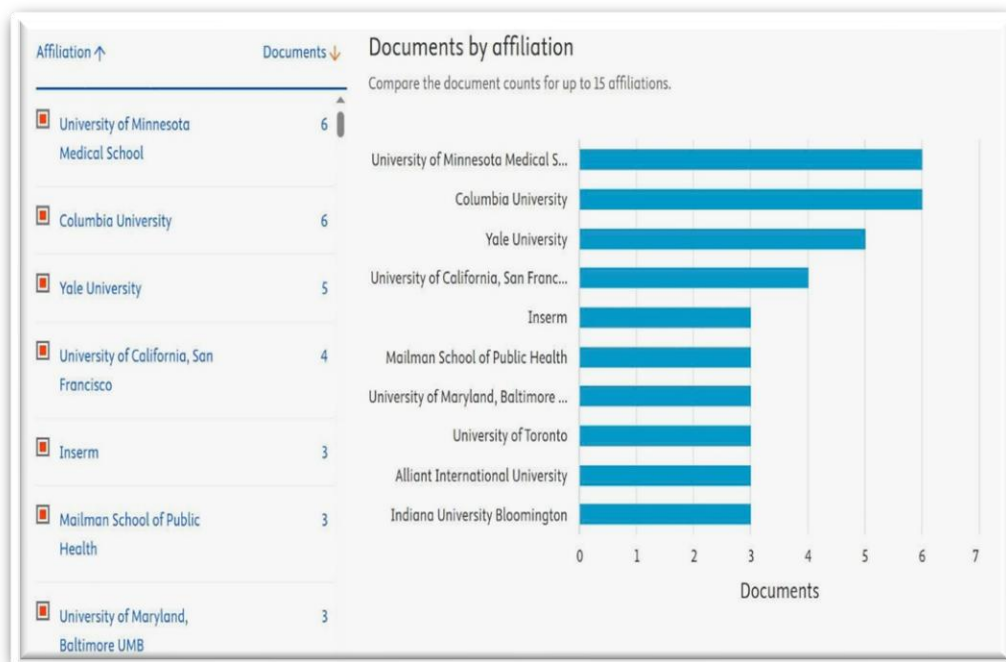
### 3.3. Countries Conducting Research on Sexual Health



**Figure 3. Countries with Research Publications on Sexual Health**

The data presented in Figure 3 reveal substantial disparities in the distribution of sexual health research publications across countries. The United States is the leading contributor, with 56 articles, substantially exceeding all other countries and highlighting its central role in sexual health research. The United Kingdom ranks second with 10 articles, representing approximately 18% of the U.S. output. Canada follows with six articles, while the Netherlands and Portugal each contributed five. Australia, Mexico, and Sweden each accounted for four articles, whereas France and India had lower publication outputs. Overall, publications were concentrated predominantly in the United States and high-income countries in Europe and North America. This marked disparity suggests that the existing evidence base may disproportionately reflect the contexts of high-income countries, underscoring the need to expand research in regions and countries that remain underrepresented in the current literature.

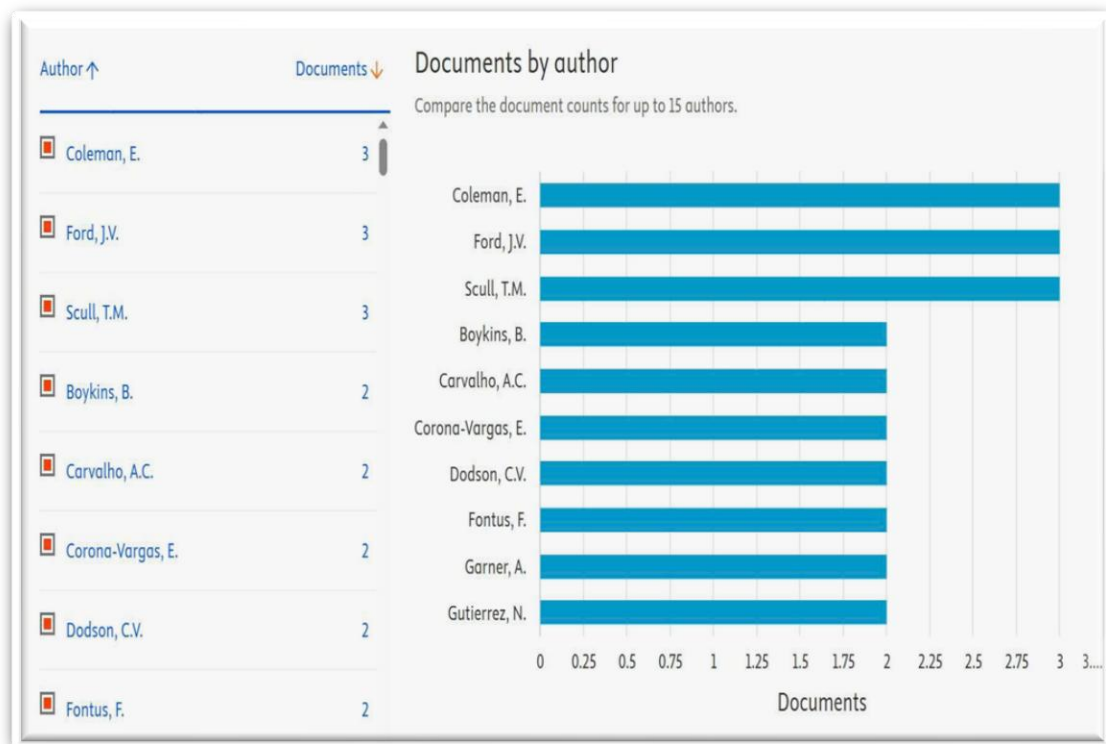
### 3.4. Universities Conducting Research on Sexual Health



**Figure 4. Universities and Research Institutions Contributing to Sexual Health Research**

Analysis of the data presented in Figure 4 indicates that sexual health research is conducted across a wide range of academic institutions, although their levels of contribution vary considerably. The University of Minnesota Medical School and Columbia University lead the dataset, with six publications each, highlighting the prominent contribution of U.S.-based research institutions to the field. Yale University follows with five publications, while the University of California, San Francisco accounts for four. Several other institutions, including Inserm, the Mailman School of Public Health, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, the University of Toronto, Alliant International University, and Indiana University Bloomington, contributed approximately three publications each. Overall, institutions with the highest publication outputs are predominantly located in the United States, consistent with the country's leading position in the overall publication landscape. At the same time, the presence of medical schools and schools of public health highlights the interdisciplinary nature of sexual health research, integrating perspectives from clinical medicine, public health, and behavioral sciences.

### 3.5. Authors with the Highest Number of Publications on Sexual Health



**Figure 5. Leading Authors in Sexual Health Research**

Figure 5 shows that sexual health research is relatively dispersed across authors, with no single researcher accounting for a disproportionately large share of publications. Coleman, E.; Ford, J. V.; and Scull, T. M. are the three most prolific authors, with three publications each. The next group includes Boykins, B.; Carvalho, A. C.; Corona-Vargas, E.; Dodson, C. V.; Fontus, F.; Garner, A.; and Gutierrez, N., each with two publications. The relatively small difference in publication output between the leading authors and the remaining contributors suggests that sexual health research involves a broad network of scholars, rather than being dominated by a small group of highly prolific authors. Notably, even the most productive authors contributed only three publications, further reflecting the diversity of the research community and the interdisciplinary nature of sexual health research.

### 3.6. Scientific Disciplines Represented in Sexual Health Research

The data presented in Figure 6 demonstrate the multidisciplinary nature of sexual health research, with particularly strong representation from Psychology and Social Sciences. Each of these fields accounted for 99 publications, corresponding to 35.4% of the total number of subject-area classifications. This distribution indicates that sexual health is extensively examined from psychological, behavioral, and social perspectives, highlighting the roles of knowledge, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and broader social contexts in shaping sexual health. Medicine ranked third, with 49 publications (17.5%) reflecting substantial scholarly attention to clinical, preventive, and healthcare-related dimensions. Arts and Humanities accounted for 20 publications (7.1%), indicating an expansion of research toward cultural and social dimensions. Other disciplines represented only a

small proportion of the overall research output. Overall, this disciplinary distribution confirms that sexual health is not merely a biomedical issue but an inherently interdisciplinary field, in which psychosocial factors play a particularly important role.

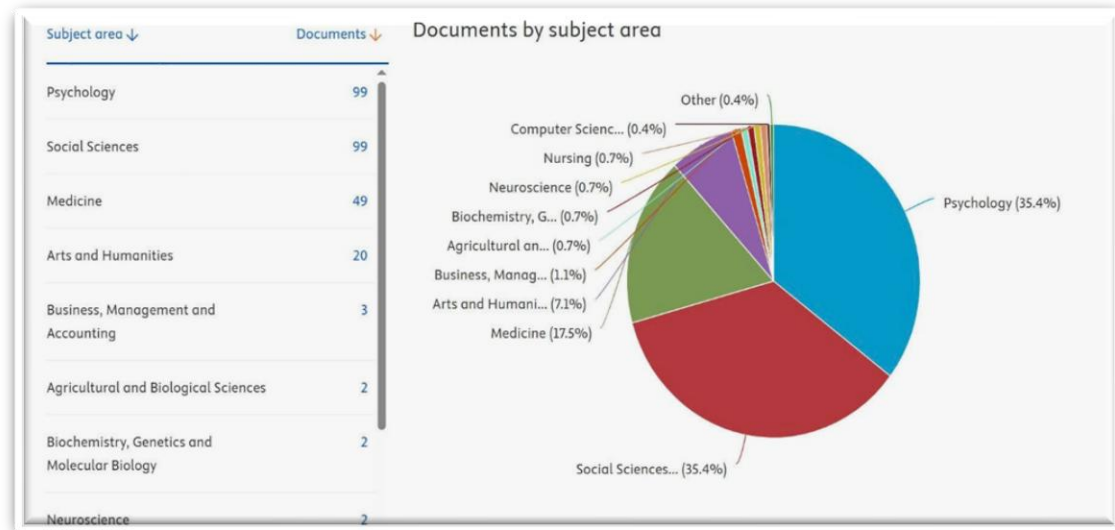


Figure 6. Scientific Disciplines Represented in Sexual Health Research

#### IV. Conclusions and Research Directions

The findings of this review demonstrate that sexual health is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary field of research, with a clear shift from predominantly disease, risk, and prevention-oriented approaches toward more holistic, positive, rights-based, and quality-of-life-oriented perspectives. Research published between 2020 and 2026 has focused on six major trends: sexual health education for adolescents and young people; sexual health among LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse populations; HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention; the application of digital technologies in sexual health education and service delivery; inequalities, stigma, and psychosocial factors; and sexual functioning, sexual well-being, and quality of life among specific population groups. The prominent representation of Psychology, Social Sciences, and Medicine further underscores the inherently interdisciplinary nature of sexual health research.

The findings also reveal an uneven distribution of research, with a substantial concentration of publications in the United States and at academic institutions in high-income countries. This pattern underscores the need to expand the evidence base to countries and population groups that remain underrepresented in the existing literature. Future research should place greater emphasis on longitudinal designs, intervention studies, and cross-cultural comparative research to elucidate causal mechanisms and assess the long-term effectiveness of sexual health programs. Particular attention should be given to adolescents, LGBTQ+ populations, people with disabilities, older adults, and groups experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. In addition, the development and evaluation of comprehensive sexual health education models, the application of digital technologies, the integration of sexual health into primary healthcare, and the simultaneous consideration of safety, sexual rights, pleasure, and sexual well-being represent important directions for future research. In the Vietnamese context, greater emphasis should be placed on empirical research that is responsive to local sociocultural characteristics to establish a robust evidence base for sexual health education, interventions, and policy development.

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