

Emerging adults' meanings and scripts of virginity and virginity loss

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Abstract

Understandings of virginity loss experiences can influence virginity loss experiences, sexual identity construction, sexual agency, and general aspects of sexual well-being. Emerging adults, those 18 to 29 years old, are in a life stage in which exploring sexual and romantic relationships are a key aspect of their identity construction. However, there is limited research addressing what meanings of virginity emerging adults' hold and how they differ among them. The following two-part study aimed to examine the meaning of virginity and virginity scripts of college-attending emerging adults, and how they may differ. Guided by sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and a feminist critique framework (Osmond & Thorne, 1993), part-one of this study, used qualitative data to identify meanings/significance of virginity held by emerging adults. Using direct content analysis, nine codes were identified as providing emerging adults' current meanings of virginity/virginity loss, (1) *no significance*, (2) *waiting until marriage*, (3) *right partner or right time*, (4) *purity*, (5) *religion provides meaning*, (6) *entwined or bonded souls*, (7) *sexual milestone*, (8) *significant but no context*, and (9) *social construct/double standard*. A tenth and unexpected code, *changes in meaning*, represented a process of change in their meaning/significance due to a variety of factors. Gender comparisons of whether or not the code was expressed by cisgender men and cisgender women were made; however, no differences were found. In part two of this study, we used quantitative methods to examine identified virginity scripts (i.e., gift, stigma, process) of emerging adults and whether they differ by sexual orientation, gender, religiosity, and sexual experience. While no gender differences were found, relationships between sexual orientation, sexual experience, and religiosity and script endorsement were found. These findings suggest that emerging adults hold

a variety of meanings of virginity, as well as specific factors contributing to the meanings and conceptions of virginity. Establishing healthy conceptions of virginity/virginity loss can potentially contribute to decreasing gender inequities within the realm of sexuality (e.g., sexual double standard). These findings can inform sex education curriculums in terms of being aware and presenting multiple meanings of first sex, while sex researchers can work to avoid making assumptions about one's meaning or significance of virginity. Future research related to sexual well-being and relationships among this population should be pursued, in addition to seeking out diverse samples.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Human sexuality could be defined as “a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Sexuality is experienced at every stage in the life span, and intersects with feelings, experiences, and practices at all levels, from intrapersonal to interpersonal, social, and cultural” (Russel et al., 2020, p. 595). Sexuality considered in a broad view has many elements (i.e., knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, identity, orientation, roles, personality, thoughts, feelings, and relationships; SIECUS, 2018) that undeniably have the power to play a role in shaping individuals’ experiences. In U.S. culture, an importance has been placed on specific sexual behaviors, such as sexual initiation (i.e., first coitus, virginity and/or virginity loss, sexual debut), as an influential determinant of sexual well-being. As 70% of youth experience sexual debut, or first sexual intercourse, by 18 (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2009), it is a relevant investment to understand how the concept of virginity is being experienced by emerging adults (i.e., individuals between the ages of 18 to 29; Arnett, 2014).

However, definitions of and beliefs around virginity/virginity loss and sexual intercourse can be ambiguous across individuals and societal groups (e.g., Sanders et al., 2010), thus highlighting the social construction of virginity and the meaning it holds. The first part of this study aims to better understand what significance emerging adults hold around virginity as this will allow for possible insights into whether and how virginity loss is still relevant to their age group’s lived experience. It is important to note that despite the social construction of the term *virginity* and *virginity loss* and the author’s recognition of the inherent problems with the implication of incurring a *loss* with sexual behavior initiation, there is continued use of this term within sexuality literature, and thus will be used in this study.

Influences on Virginity Beliefs

As virginity is socially constructed, there are important influences and identities that may impact emerging adults' scripts and meanings around virginity, including religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or sexual experience. Firstly, concepts of virginity were introduced to Western society by colonists from Europe, their beliefs emphasized abstinence from sexual behaviors, originating from religious ideologies (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Due to the continued social construction of virginity and virginity loss, virginity has been treated as something tangible in U.S. society as purity culture efforts (Moles, 2017) and beliefs around virginity (e.g., the individual's hymen's status as a signifier of virginity; Olson & García-Moreno, 2017) have contributed to the ability of individuals to adopt normative criteria around the loss or retention of it. This includes what constitutes the loss or retention of virginity and what is considered appropriate circumstances for the loss or retention of it. Although premarital sex has become more accepted and common in U.S. society (Elias et al., 2015; Gordon, 2002), religion has been found to be associated with sexuality attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Anders & Olmstead, 2019; Koletić, 2021). Previous research has found that religion is associated with delay of sexual behavior initiation and lower frequency of coital activity among adolescents and emerging adults (see Koletić, 2021 for review of literature). Additionally, women who are non-virgins are less likely to disclose their virginity status to religious figures as compared to virgin women (Barnett et al., 2021).

Considering research presented thus far, virginity and virginity loss beliefs continue to serve functions of influencing individuals' sexual identity today, despite more accepting views of sexuality. For example, beliefs around the experience of virginity loss (e.g., virginity loss scripts) can be significant to sexual identity and sexual experiences (Carpenter, 2001). Additionally,

among college students, positive first-time experiences are associated with less sexual depression and greater sexual satisfaction (Smith & Shaffer, 2013). Understandings of sexuality are often guided and influenced by sexual scripting and begin early in life, even before the initiation of sexual behavior (Weiderman, 2005). This scripting can influence virginity loss experiences and beliefs, including sexual double standards (e.g., Carpenter, 2005; Holland et al., 2010). A previous study among adult men and women have found that scripts assigned to virginity loss (e.g., gift, stigma, process) can be associated with disempowerment of both men and women, which in turn can affect the ability to exercise sexual agency (Carpenter, 2002). Women tend to understand virginity as requiring careful management and act in accordance with social norms of appearing sexually inexperienced and accepting of conventional masculinity power dynamics (Holland et al., 2010), while also being expected to be sexually skilled (Sakaluk et al., 2014). In turn, men's virginity encounters more indifference from society (Carpenter, 2005; Kelly, 2000), apart from men being more likely to be more reluctant virgins (Sprecher & Treger, 2015), being less likely to disclose virgin status to friends and family (Barnett et al., 2021), and experiencing perceived stigma when retaining their virginity as adults (Carpenter, 2001). This aligns with views that men's masculinity is associated with their sexuality (Holland et al., 2010; Wiederman, 2005).

Along with the importance of social scripts on sexual development, emerging adults are also experiencing increased exploration and autonomy, including sexual exploration (i.e., virginity loss; Arnett, 2014). It is relevant to consider how these individuals perceive and make meaning of virginity and virginity loss as they explore, experience, and develop their sexual identity. One way of pursuing this is examining sexual experiences' relationship with meanings of virginity, which to date is limited within the literature for this life stage.

Additionally, lesbian, gay, bisexual or otherwise queer identifying (LGB+) individuals have often been excluded from research related to virginity. Although Carpenter (2001) and Humphrey's (2021) research found that virginity is similarly incorporated into queer individuals' lives, other research suggests queer individuals may not feel attached to their virginity (e.g., Averett et al., 2014). The heteronormativity in U.S. society (e.g., Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) has left those who are not heterosexual to experience dominant social scripts that do not always align with their lived experiences, leaving room for further consideration of how sexual orientation and virginity beliefs interact among emerging adults developing their sexual identities.

To address this, the second part of this study aims to understand endorsement of virginity loss scripts endorsed by emerging adults and how these beliefs vary by gender, sexual experience, sexual orientation, and religiosity. The majority of virginity related research has been done among adults across an age range that does not focus on emerging adults (e.g., Carpenter, 2001) and focuses on heterosexual individuals' experiences or beliefs (e.g., Hans & Kimberly, 2001; Higgins, et al., 2010). Research of what virginity loss sexual scripts emerging adults endorse and how it varies among them is limited, as is what meanings of virginity and/or virginity loss are held. For example, Humphreys (2013) examined virginity scripts held by college-attending emerging adults but excluded those who had not experienced first sexual intercourse. Current coverage of the concept of virginity focuses experiences at sexual debut (e.g., Higgins, et al., 2010), purity pledging and their outcomes/effectiveness (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2005; Brückner & Bearman, 2005; Landor & Simmons 2014), and predictors of initiation of sexual behavior or the delay of sexual debut (e.g., Laflin et al., 2008; Lammers et al., 2000). Overall, the literature has dominantly included heterosexual individuals and women's experiences surrounding the topic, limiting insight on men and others' experiences (e.g.,

Higgins, et al., 2010; Morrison-Beedy, 2008; Stamper & Blackburn, 2019). A focus on women within this topic may be due to the nature of virginity being emphasized more so within women's social scripts as compared to men (Berger & Werner, 1973). There also exists a gap in research when it comes to the relationship between sexual experience and conceptualizations of virginity and/or virginity loss, apart from finding that sexual experience of colleges students was not associated with virginity definitions (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Considering emerging adults experience increases in exploration and identity construction (Arnett, 2014), engaging in sexual behavior or experiencing virginity loss could influence their interpretation of virginity.

Considering the potential impacts of how scripts and meanings of virginity can affect individuals' well-being and experiences (Carpenter, 2001; Carpenter, 2002), understanding the scripts and meanings emerging adults hold around the concept is an important topic to explore. Thus, guided by sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and a feminist framework (Osmond & Thorne, 1993), the purpose of this two-part study is to examine what meanings and scripts emerging adults hold about virginity and how these differ among them in terms gender, sexual experience, sexual orientation, and religiosity. Using sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) will help guide our understanding of what scripts are endorsed by the emerging adult age group that can affect individuals' behavior at the interpersonal, intrapsychic, and cultural levels. Using a feminist framework will allow for understanding gender inequalities and differing experiences that exist due to patriarchal influences on all genders. This is particularly important as gender differences were found in previous studies regarding virginity loss scripts (e.g., Carpenter 2002), as well as findings that point to sexual double standards impacting gendered experiences of sexuality (e.g., Crawford & Popp, 2003). Understanding what significance virginity loss holds for emerging adults can guide future research as well as inform

sex education policy and programming, emancipatory functions of feminism, sexual well-being, and healthy sexual development of this age group and throughout the life course.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Emerging Adulthood and Sexuality

Theorists and subsequent researchers have emphasized the emergence and importance of sexuality development during the period of adolescence (e.g., see Tolman & McClelland, 2011 for review) and into young adulthood (e.g., Olmstead, 2020). In particular, emerging adulthood is a time of identity development, exploration, and meaning making, including in the realm of sexuality (Arnett, 2014). Emerging adulthood is considered as a life stage between adolescence and adulthood, typically focused on 18- to 29-year-olds, that has become a salient phenomenon in industrialized societies as social changes have allowed for delay of adopting adult roles (Arnett, 2014). According to the theorist behind emerging adulthood, it is characterized by five features: identity exploration, instability, possibilities, self-focus, feeling in-between (Arnett, 2004). Explorations or changes can occur in the realms of, but are not limited to, interpersonal relations, religious views, and sexuality (Lefkowitz, 2005). Often, emerging adults are experiencing increasing independence or autonomy from their family of origin as they explore and defer adopting adult roles (Arnett, 2014).

Additionally, emerging adulthood is found to be a time when these individuals specifically explore romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2004). These relationships or interactions are often shaped and influenced by normative scripts within their society and other important systems in which they reside (e.g., families and friends). On a societal level, some relationship and sexual behaviors are impacted by societal norms and acceptance around the behavior (Clark et al., 2020). This suggests varying degrees of constraints on sexual behaviors relative to their normalcy in the individuals' society or context thus creating more difficulties if/when engaging in those less socially normative behaviors. The normalcy and acceptance of

such behaviors also tends to shift with age (e.g., a 14-year-old engaging in sex versus a 19-year-old; Clark et al, 2020). Societal approval/disapproval enabling and constraining certain sexual behaviors individuals engage in is relevant to consider as it has been found that women's sexual self-concept forms as a result of sexual behavior and regulates future behavior (Hensel et al., 2010).

Although it is important to recognize that emerging adulthood can include college and non-college attending emerging adults, for the purpose of this study we focus on college attending emerging adults as their meanings and beliefs around sex can be affected by cultural scripts unique to college campuses, such as the established prevalence of hook-up cultures (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Previous research on virginity among college attending emerging adults has focused on virginity definitions (e.g., Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Although sexual experience of college students was not significantly related to sexual definitions (e.g., having sex, losing virginity, or who they would consider a sexual partner; Trotter & Alderson, 2007), the relationship between sexual experience and conceptions of virginity meaning, or scripts, has not been explored among this age group. Considering this life stage's emphasis on exploration and increased autonomy, sexual exploration (i.e., virginity loss) may have impacts on how these individuals conceptualize virginity's significance. As Carpenter (2001) highlights, beliefs around the experience of virginity loss (e.g., virginity loss scripts) can be significant to sexual identity and sexual experiences. Therefore, understanding how the concept of virginity is being experienced by emerging adults and how it may differ among them as they continue to develop their sexual identities is needed.

Meaning of Virginity and Virginity Loss

Importantly, the constructs of virginity and subsequently virginity loss (i.e., initiation of sexual activity, typically considered penile-vaginal sexual intercourse) are socially constructed. Therefore, the meanings of virginity and its loss or retention criteria are influenced by society's explicit or implicit criteria. As heteronormative and patriarchal influences are still active in our society, research shows much more agreement upon what *defines* virginity loss, including penile-vaginal intercourse being considered sex, among emerging adults (e.g., Peck et al., 2016). Importantly, individuals' definitions and interpretations of virginity, or the loss of virginity, can have implications for sexual experiences and sexual identity construction (Carpenter, 2001; Humphreys, 2013). However, less is known about what *meaning* or *significance* emerging adults currently hold around virginity and virginity loss. Considering this life stage is characterized by identity construction, meaning making, exploration, and self-focus (Arnett, 2014), including within the realm of sexuality, virginity loss conceptions and experiences (before, during and after virginity loss) have the potential to be powerful lived narratives for this age group as they develop their sexual identities. For example, pointing towards the importance of healthy development and positive conceptions of sexual behavior initiation, Smith and Shaffer (2013) found that among undergraduate students, those who experienced more positive virginity-loss interactions (e.g., respect, intimacy) had greater perceived sexual satisfaction and less sexual depression.

U.S. society's (and other Westernized societies') acceptance of virginity as a possession that can be lost has enabled the social construction of normative criteria around the loss or retention of it (i.e., what constitutes the loss or retention of virginity and what scenarios are considered acceptable or ideal for the loss or retention of it). Virginity ideology in U.S. society

was carried to the region first by colonists from Europe, their beliefs stemming from religious ideologies that emphasized abstinence from specific sexual behaviors (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988). These ideologies were not equal as varying expectations across certain gender identities and social classes existed. For example, historically women were considered to have more complete or obvious virginity than men due to perceptions around their physiology (e.g., hymens as a perceived indicator of virginity; Olson & García-Moreno, 2017), contributing even more so to the indifference towards men’s virginity in the past and in today’s society and scholarship (Carpenter, 2005; Kelly, 2000). Considering characteristics of the life stage of emerging adulthood (e.g., increased autonomy and exploration), two areas that have been shown to be points of exploration are religion and sexuality (Vasilenko & Lefkowitz, 2014). Although premarital sex has become more normative or accepted for men and women (Elias et al., 2015; Gordon, 2002), research has continued to find relationships between religion and sexuality. For example, religion has been found to be associated with sexuality attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of emerging adults (e.g., Anders & Olmstead, 2019; Koletić, 2021). Higher religiosity or religious involvement is also associated with delay of sexual behavior initiation and lower frequency of coital activity among adolescents and emerging adults (see Koletić, 2021 for review of literature). Although, some research points to the relationship of religiosity and sexual behavior to be sex-specific, as females seem to act in alignment with religious norms more than males (e.g., Penhollow et al., 2012; Štulhofer et al., 2011).

Throughout the centuries cultural shifts have accompanied virginity and social norms surrounding it. Although religious beliefs influenced the beginning of virginity norms and do have influence today, the sexual revolution of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s came with more acceptable standards for women to experience virginity loss outside of marriage, partly due to

the development of the birth control pill and feminist movement (Elias et al., 2015; Gordon, 2002). Although, there continues to be a double standard across men and women, with women being expected to only experience these things while in a relationship or in love in terms of premarital virginity loss and sex, while casual sex is more acceptable for men (Armstrong et al., 2010). The purity culture, or modesty movement related to abstinence until marriage and closely tied to religious values, also gained traction and is still relevant in society (Valenti, 2009).

Virginity Beliefs and Scripts

One of the most significant contributions to attempt coverage of adults' meaning of virginity and virginity loss was done by Carpenter (2002). She identified three virginity loss scripts (i.e., *gift*, *stigma*, *process*), or metaphors, through qualitative interviews. The three scripts identified by Carpenter (2002) were found to have connection to physical and emotional health regarding before, during, and after virginity loss. Those who endorsed the *gift script* tended to place a high value on their virginity as a possession and saw it as something to be shared with someone who had been carefully chosen as the right person, often considering love as an important factor in the decision. These individuals also viewed experiencing virginity loss with their partners to strengthen their relationship and often viewed it as a reciprocal process. Gift script oriented individuals also tended to date their virginity-loss partners for longer durations and were more likely to use birth control and sexually transmitted infection (STI) protection compared to those who endorsed the other two scripts.

Those who endorsed the *stigma script* viewed their virginity status at some point in their lives as embarrassing and negative. These individuals held shame about their status, would often hide it from potential partners, did not place strong importance on love or romance in their virginity loss beliefs, and were more concerned with their pleasure than viewing it as reciprocal.

As compared to other groups, these individuals were also less likely to use protection to prevent STIs and pregnancy.

For those who identified with the *process script*, virginity loss was perceived as a process that individuals go through as part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These individuals viewed it as a process by which one gains experience and knowledge about sexuality. Experimenting with increasingly intimate sexual behaviors within relationships was approached as an opportunity while mistakes were more likely to be viewed as chances for learning rather than shame in contrast to stigma-oriented individuals. These individuals also placed less emphasis on their virginity loss experiences requiring love or having chosen the perfect partner (Carpenter, 2002). Gender differences were found across the different scripts with women being more likely to view virginity loss through the gift script, while men were more likely to endorse the stigma script (Carpenter, 2002).

Gendered Differences, Heteronormativity, and Sexual Double Standards

Due to the social construction of virginity, it is not surprising that the meaning of virginity can vary across genders. In a seminal article on virginity loss and social scripts, Berger and Wegner (1973) emphasized virginity variability as it is societally valued by both men and women but may be experienced differently by each gender. For example, the authors introduced that this varied concept of virginity serves both of these genders, such that women may value virginity in the sense that it is of sexual value to their partners and offered as an item of enticement (an economical view), while men are served in an ego-maintaining fashion by causing the loss of a partner's virginity (a psychological view). Considering these views focus on the women's virginity, these authors called attention to the lack of focus on men's virginity and the function of the double standard regarding virginity (Berger & Werner, 1973).

More recent research on this topic has found that virginity loss is something that must be highly managed by women. For example, Holland and colleagues (2010) found women's management of first intercourse are influenced by heteronormative sexual standards that women were to appear sexually inexperienced and allow for conventional masculinity power dynamics to play out, while also attempting to advocate for safer sex practices or refuse unsafe sex practices as well as considering their sexual reputation. As for men within the same context, they tended to hold the role of playing out conventional masculinity, which creates a standard of first intercourse being an induction into masculinity, such as menstruation marking entry into womanhood in our society. Therefore, men can hold first sexual intercourse as being an achievement related to obtaining manhood (Holland et al., 2010). Research by Sakaluk and colleagues (2014) exploring heterosexual sexual scripts align with previously mentioned findings related to gendered experiences and norms. For example, the scripts assigned to men set up expectations to be sexually skilled and knowledgeable, have a physical approach to sex, always ready for sex, and rewarded for being sexual. Although women's scripts aligned with expectations to be inhibitory of their sexual expression (excluding being within a committed relationship), have an emotional/relational approach to sex, be sexually skilled and knowledgeable (with certain sanctions on how they acquired the skills/knowledge), be gatekeepers of sexual behaviors, and be judged negatively for appearing sexual if single (Sakaluk et al., 2014).

Although norms around sexuality are often centered around men and their pleasure in more contexts than women's pleasure (Armstrong et al., 2012), men are still impacted by patriarchal standards such as their sexuality being related to their masculinity (Holland et al., 2010; Wiederman, 2005). Sprecher and Treger (2015) found college attending men were more

reluctant virgins and had more negative affective reactions to their virginity as compared to women counterparts. Men are encouraged to explore and experiment with sexuality in a number of relationship dynamics, not being exclusive to committed relationships while women are often constrained when it comes to accepted social norms (Reid et al., 2011). This can be seen within Barnett and colleagues' (2021) work, as they found men who were virgins disclosed less readily to family and peers compared to virgin women. Considering the current research, virginity being perceived as a negative trait among men (e.g., Carpenter, 2001; Sprecher & Treger, 2015) as they are socially expected to be sexually skilled, knowledgeable, and ready to engage in sexual behaviors (e.g., Holland et al., 2010) can impact lived experiences of men within the emerging adult life stage.

This stigma, as well as cultural scripts, may be affected in an additional facet when considering college campus sub-cultures (e.g., hook up/casual sex culture; Heldman & Wade, 2010). Hook-ups typically consist of sexual behaviors that occur outside of a committed or romantic relationship (Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Although casual sex or hook-up experiences are a norm among college campuses in the U.S. (e.g., Bogle, 2008), research has highlighted pluralistic ignorance, or misconceptions of the casual sex culture, and gender differences as salient topics that may impact experiences regarding sexuality (e.g., Anders et al., 2017; Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Specifically, pluralistic ignorance among college-attending emerging adults in regard to hook-up culture is the misconception that peers are more comfortable than they are engaging in casual sex behaviors, and in turn they act as if they are more comfortable with the behaviors to be in accordance with perceived group norms (Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Both college attending men and women overestimated the opposite sex's comfort levels with sexual behaviors, contributing to both men and women being affected by pluralistic ignorance which

suggests college sex cultures may play a role in how this population explores and makes meanings around sexuality, including virginity loss or retention. For example, within three methodologically diverse studies among college students, Gesselman and colleagues (2017) found that sexually inexperienced emerging adults perceived themselves as being stigmatized and not as a desirable romantic partner. Gesselman and colleagues (2017) suggest this adds to the discussion that society has moved away from strict norms around sex occurring within a marriage and research has found having too much sexual experience can be perceived as negative, having no sexual experience can also be accompanied by negative associations.

These findings align with Carpenter's (2005) virginity beliefs study in which women were more likely to endorse the gift script while men were more likely to endorse the stigma script. These findings also align with traditional sexual scripts and double standards that imply women's need to safeguard their virginity while men are considered sexual beings who are knowledgeable, eager, and willing to engage in sexual activity (e.g., Wiederman, 2005). Women tend to adopt a gatekeeping role, as there seems to be a desirability and/or pressure for alignment with the traditional sexual scripts for women (Wiederman, 2005). These gendered experiences in sexual activity are guided and influenced by sexual scripting and typically begin early in life, even before the initiation of sexual behavior, and play an important influence on virginity loss experiences and beliefs. Although heterosexual sexual scripts have been explored within research, cisgender and heterosexual individuals most likely find these scripts to provide more relevant guidance than those who are queer or gender non-conforming.

Heteronormative perspectives have dominated U.S. society understandings of sex, and virginity or virginity loss. Heterosexuality has been centered as either the only form of sexual attraction or the only non-deviant form, setting up primacy of male-female intimate relationships

(Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This includes the emphasis and widely agreed upon virginity loss or sexual intercourse experience focusing on penile-vaginal penetration, while more disagreement exists across other sexual behaviors (e.g., oral sex) being classified as sex, or consistent with virginity loss (e.g., Peck et al., 2016; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Notably, Peck and colleagues (2016) findings displayed higher agreement across types of sexual behaviors considered as sex compared to previous research (e.g., Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Although, they noted this higher agreement may be due to a more diverse sample in terms of sexual orientation and age (Peck et al., 2016). For example, for cis gay men, receptive-anal sex was an agreed upon sexual act leading to virginity loss, while heterosexual men were less likely to agree to this (Huang, 2018). Although findings of what is considered sex among cis gay and heterosexual men are focused on penile penetration, women who have sex with women (WSW), have been found to have less strict definitions of what constitutes virginity loss, as typical sexual behaviors among this group are more consistent with behaviors that heterosexual individuals would consider foreplay or those that would maintain virginity (Dion & Boislard, 2020; Horowitz & Bedford, 2016). The absence of a penis or penetration within sexual encounters of queer individuals (two factors that have dominated heteronormative and cis-normative assumptions of sex) does not negate these individuals' interpretations or meanings related to virginity loss, or first-time sex, experiences (e.g., Carpenter, 2001).

Carpenter (2001) included LGB individuals in the initial exploration of virginity interpretations. Although, the limited research of LGB individuals' interpretations of virginity have been mixed, with findings suggesting these individuals either do not feel attached to their virginity (e.g., Averett et al., 2014) or that virginity is understood and incorporated into their lives (Carpenter, 2001; Humphreys, 2013). Specifically, Carpenter (2001) found that LGB

individuals were more likely to endorse the process scripts compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Additionally, Babin and Humphreys (2021) explored virginity scripts endorsed by LGB individuals who experienced what the researchers referred to as second virginity loss, as these individuals had first-sex experiences with same-sex and different-sex partners. Although this study was conducted with participants across a large age range, qualitative findings suggested that LGB individuals hold stronger process scripts for both of their first-sex experiences and their understanding of virginity was intertwined with identity exploration and validation of their sexual identity. Heterosexual men and women both have strong socially scripted expectations around sexuality and their virginity loss (e.g., Holland et al., 2010; Horowitz & Bedford, 2016; Sakaluk et al., 2014) that align with expecting them to endorse the stigma and gift scripts respectively. Considering this previous research across scripts of heterosexual and LGB individuals, sexual orientation may affect emerging adults' meanings and interpretations of virginity based on availability of cultural scripts that align with their lived experience (e.g., sexual or romantic attraction). Therefore, sexual orientation should be examined as a comparison factor when exploring emerging adults' meanings and scripts related to virginity or virginity loss within research endeavors.

Theoretical Frameworks

Due to the social construction of virginity and scripts, one way in which to better understand emerging adults' virginity scripts is through sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual script theory, like script theory, endorses the belief that no behavior occurs without social scripting. Social scripting occurs at three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. Cultural scenarios are those of collective meanings, such meanings that guide what roles individuals have available for them to choose from, enact, and

exit and enter within their social experience. Although, as variability exists in circumstances and contexts, individuals will encounter conflicts or ambiguities in scripted cultural scenarios which calls for solutions to be made at the interpersonal scripting level (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For example, when it comes to virginity loss, as a society, we have placed men as the sexual initiator and one to desire sexual activity, while women are placed as gatekeepers or passive actors (Holland et al., 2010). This cultural scenario serves as a guide that actors will draw from to present their own representations of the appropriate feelings in the context of a virginity loss experience.

Interpersonal scripting is “the application of specific cultural scenarios by a specific individual in a specific social context” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 97). Interpersonal scripting allows for the actor to adjust the script to a variation of the cultural scenario to be context-specific in an effort to manage the experience to best align to expectations. By requiring behavior to be scripted for oneself and assuming others’ behaviors to be scripted as well, internal rehearsals can take place. Depending on the extensivity and intensity of this internal rehearsal, intrapsychic scripting occurs proportionately and aides in addressing complexities or ambiguities that are more than interpersonal scripting alone can address. The intrapsychic scripting is a private form of considering desires and wishes that is applied to oneself as an autonomous actor. For example, when it comes to virginity, intrapsychic scripting can serve an individual in terms of fantasies, mental rehearsals, or considering desires that serve working out what is possible for their expectations and understandings of virginity loss, and in turn the ability enact them successfully through interpersonal scripts within cultural scenarios (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). One’s desires then become linked to social meanings. The need for each level of scripting varies in all social settings, where one setting may only call for the cultural scenario level as there is a

high degree of shared meanings (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For example, when it comes to virginity loss, cultural scenarios in a community may be shared to a degree that creates little to no ambiguity of what is expected around the experience and context of virginity loss, including religious or spiritual norms.

A feminist critique framework (Osmond & Thorne, 1993) also guides this study to contribute to examining gendered scripts of virginity loss and guides a focus of emancipatory actions in relation to harmful patriarchal influences. Although variations exist, common assumptions of a feminist framework include the women's experience as central, that it has many voices and has emancipatory purposes. It also proposes that gender structures experiences and that in all societies women are devalued and oppressed (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Using this framework will contribute to the literature to further understand gender's relation to virginity scripts and directions to consider moving forward in education, emancipatory actions, considering young women's experiences and how imposed patriarchal standards may affect women's sexual experiences and well-being, as well or compared to other genders' experiences.

A previous study among adult men and women have found the scripts, specifically gift and stigma scripts, assigned to virginity loss can be associated with disempowerment of both men and women affecting the ability to exercise sexual agency (Carpenter, 2002). As the societal pressures that have accompanied the concept of virginity have historically been imposed on women in a stricter manner than for men, scholars also consider the culturally imposed passivity to affect women's agency and therefore leave them to be more vulnerable to STIs and unintended pregnancies (Debold, 1996; Tolman, 2002). Although, some feminist scholars note that adolescent girls' and young women's sexual agency should not be considered something that may not exist, but rather a matter of fact. This feminist lens argues that the enactment of

women's sexual agency is inherently affected by social injustices creating those who hold sexual agency to still enact it on occasion by sexual compliance, compromise, and concession. This lens calls for the emancipatory action to be taken on the systems that create such circumstances for women, rather than action to be taken that places responsibility on women to enact their agency as protection against and in response to threats (Bay-Cheng, 2019).

The Present Study

Research on the significance of virginity and virginity loss among the emerging adult age group in the United States is lacking, with the majority of the literature involving participants who are adults across a large age range rather than emerging adult specifically. Further, coverage of virginity for emerging adults has rarely focused on identifying virginity scripts held by this group specifically or the scripts' relation to gender, religiosity, sexual orientation, or sexual experience. The majority of literature covering or including the concept of virginity focuses on the differences in experiences at sexual debut (e.g., Higgins, et al., 2010), purity pledges (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2005; Brückner & Bearman, 2005), predictors and risk factors of initiation of sexual behavior or decisions to delay sexual debut (e.g., Laflin et al., 2008; Lammers et al., 2000), and has dominantly included heterosexual individuals' and women's experiences surrounding the topic, limiting men and others' experiences (e.g., Higgins, et al., 2010; Morrison-Beedy, 2008; Stamper & Blackburn, 2019). The majority of sexual script and virginity research among adults' and heterosexual individuals' experiences of the previously mentioned topics relies on participants to recall their experiences and beliefs of virginity loss. Additionally, what is known about this topic has lacked a critique of the gendered and patriarchal norms that impact emerging adults' beliefs and meanings they hold around virginity and virginity loss. Therefore, the present study aims to add to the literature and contribute to filling this gap in two

parts. Part one of this study will address this gap by qualitatively seeking to capture this populations' meanings of virginity through the following research questions:

RQ1: What meaning/significance do emerging adults hold around virginity?

RQ2: Does the meaning of virginity differ based on gender identity?

For part two of this study, we aim to use a quantitative approach to better understand the scripts (i.e., gift, stigma, process) that emerging adults hold around virginity and virginity loss through the following research question and hypotheses:

RQ3: What virginity and virginity loss scripts do emerging adults endorse and how do they differ based on gender identity, sexual experience, sexual orientation, and religiosity?

Hypotheses

Based on previous research and theory related to virginity beliefs, I hypothesize the following associations between virginity beliefs scripts (e.g., gift, stigma, process) and specific demographic factors (e.g., gender, sexual experience, sexual orientation, religiosity).

H1: Women will be more likely to endorse a gift script, while men will be more likely to endorse process and stigma scripts.

H2: Higher religiosity will have a positive association with the gift script while higher religiosity will be negatively associated with the stigma and process scripts.

H3: Those who have not had sexual intercourse will be more likely to endorse the gift script while those who have had sexual intercourse will be more likely to endorse the stigma and process scripts.

H4: Those who are not heterosexual will be more likely to endorse the process script, while those who are heterosexual will be more likely to endorse the gift and stigma scripts.

Chapter 3 - Methods

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, college students at a Midwestern university were recruited to participate in an online survey focused on measures related to college students' beliefs and experiences regarding sexuality. Participants accessed the survey online via a Qualtrics link provided by instructors within their respective courses. Participants electronically signed a consent form prior to completing the survey. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and offered as an extra credit opportunity by the instructors of designated courses. The survey and took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Although data for this study were drawn from the larger aforementioned survey, only specific relevant measures were used in this current study (see Appendix B for survey questions). Specifically, I focused on measures related to select demographic factors (e.g., gender, sexual experience, sexual orientation, religiosity) and an author constructed open-ended question of virginity meanings. Based on these measures, a mixed methods approach was employed, using open-ended question and quantitative measures within the survey.

Sample

Participants for this study were emerging adults enrolled at a large Midwestern university. Inclusion criteria to participate in this data collection included: (a) being between the ages 18 to 29 years-old and (b) being enrolled in one of the large Midwestern university's classes. The initial sample size was 175. Based on inclusion criteria, 27 were removed for the following reasons: 13 were removed due to being outside the range of age for emerging adulthood, eight were removed due to not reporting their age, five were removed for not completing the qualitative measures, and one was removed due to not passing the attention

checks. Group sizes were too small to conduct analyses on those who had genders other than man or woman, so two additional participants were excluded from the sample (e.g., non-binary, agender/questioning or unsure). The final sample size used for both study one and study two was 146 individuals. The final sample of emerging adults was majority women (89.7%) and an average age of 20.3 years of age (*range* = 18-29). The sample was also majority White or Caucasian (90.5%) while the remaining sample self-reported as Black or African American (3%), Multiracial (2.7%), other (1%; e.g., Latina, Australian), American Indian or Alaska Native (0.7%) or Asian (0.7%). The majority also reported being non-Hispanic (95.2%). The sample was also mostly heterosexual (88.4%) while the remaining participants were bisexual (4.1%), gay (2.1%), asexual (1.4%), questioning or unsure (1.4%), pansexual (0.7%), lesbian (0.7%), queer (0.7%), or preferred not to disclose (0.7%). Most of the sample identified as Christian (84.9%; e.g., Baptist; Catholic; Lutheran) while the remaining sample fell within the non-religious category (12.3%; i.e., not religious, agnostic, atheist), and other (2.7%; i.e., voodoo, spiritual). The mean score of religious intensity of the sample was 11.6 on a 20-point Likert scale with 0 indicating *not at all intense* and 20 indicating *very intense*. The mean age of first intercourse was 16.8 years of age, while the mean number of sexual intercourse partners was 2.2 partners. Approximately one-third (32.9%) of the sample reported they had not had sexual intercourse. The majority of the sample was single (43.8%), nearly the same amount was involved in a serious relationship (41.8%), while the remaining participants were casually dating one partner (13.7%) or casually dating multiple partners (0.7%).

Measures

Study One Measures

Significance of Virginity. To gain a better understanding of the meaning that emerging adults hold around virginity, participants were given the following author-constructed open-ended qualitative question “What, if any, meaning or significance does virginity have for you?” Participants were provided with an open-ended textbox where they discussed what significance virginity has for them.

Gender Identity. Respondents who reported their gender identity were able to select all that apply from the following options: (1) *man*, (2) *woman*, (3) *agender*, (4) *genderqueer or genderfluid*, (5) *non-binary*, (6) *questioning or unsure*, (7) *two-spirit*, (8) *prefer not to disclose*, (9) *additional gender category/identity not listed* with open text box provided. Due to a limited number of participants reporting a gender identity other than man or woman (i.e., two participants), this measure was dichotomized to (0) *man* and (1) *woman* with the two other participants being removed. All participants who identified as a man or woman also identified as cisgender and will be referred to as such throughout this study.

Study Two Measures

Participants were asked to report the demographic factors of gender identity (discussed above), sexual orientation, sexual experience, and religiosity along with completing measures related to scripts around virginity and virginity loss.

Sexual Orientation. Participants reported their sexual orientation and had the option to select all that apply: (1) *aromantic*, (2) *asexual*, (3) *bisexual*, (4) *fluid*, (5) *gay*, (6) *lesbian*, (7) *pansexual*, (8) *queer*, (9) *questioning or unsure*, (10) *straight (heterosexual)*, (11) *prefer not to disclose*, (12) *additional category/identity not listed* with open text box provided. Due to lack of variability in responses and small group sizes, we dichotomized the measure into those who

identified as *heterosexual* (1) and those who identified as *LGB+* (2). Those who selected *prefer not to disclose* were removed from analyses ($n = 1$).

Sexual Experience. Participants' sexual experience was measured by asking participants to report the number of sexual intercourse partners they have had. Specifically, the participants were asked "With how many people have you ever had consensual sexual intercourse?" They were able to choose from the options: (1) *1 person*, (2) *2 people*, (3) *3 people*, (4) *4 people*, (5) *5 people*, (6) *6 or more people*, (7) *I have never had sexual intercourse*. After conducting a preliminary analysis of the distribution of this data, we found the data had issues with skewness and kurtosis as a large proportion reported no sexual experience and the rest of the responses were varied across the other options. To adjust for this, this measure was dichotomized into those who *have not had sexual intercourse* (1) and those who *have had sexual intercourse* (2).

Religiosity. Respondents reported the intensity level of their religious or spiritual beliefs. Specifically, they were asked to indicate the intensity of their religious or spiritual beliefs on a 20-point Likert scale with 0 indicating *not at all intense* and 20 indicating *very intense*.

Virginity Beliefs Scale (VBS). An adapted version of the 22-item *Virginity Beliefs Scale* (Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014) was used for this study. The original scale assessed an individual's endorsement of three virginity metaphors: *gift* (e.g., "My virginity was a gift to my first partner"), *stigma* (e.g., "I regarded my virginity as something negative.") and *process* (e.g., "I felt that losing my virginity was an important step toward becoming a man/woman."), which consisted of 8, 10, and 4 items, respectively. These items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale with 1 indicating *Strongly disagree* and 7 indicating *Strongly agree*. Cronbach's alphas calculated during confirmatory factor analysis of this scale were as follows: *gift* ($\alpha = .90$; 10

items), *stigma* ($\alpha = .86$; 8 items), and *process* ($\alpha = .80$, 4 items;) (Eriksson & Humphreys, 2014).

The original scale was focused only on those who had engaged in sexual intercourse (i.e., virginity loss) and used binary language (i.e., man/woman) and thus was exclusionary to those who have not yet engaged in sexual activity and those who are gender non-conforming and/or LGB+; therefore, the author of the current study adapted the measure to include those who have not experienced sexual intercourse yet as well as adapting the questions to be inclusive of all gender identities. Specifically, the scale used in this study was adapted for emerging adults to remove the qualifier that the participants had already experienced virginity loss and allow for completion of the questionnaire regardless of their sexual experience status, as well as removing binary gender language. For example, *gift* (e.g., “I consider my virginity to be a gift to my partner”), *stigma* (e.g., “I have regarded my virginity as something negative”) and *process* (e.g., “I believe that losing my virginity is an important step toward becoming an adult”).

Data Analysis

Data cleaning strategies were applied first to the data set to ensure integrity of the data. Participants who were outside of the age range of emerging adults, did not provide an age, did not complete qualitative measures, or did not pass 100% of the attention checks were omitted from the data. Following data cleaning, data for this two-part study was analyzed using a mixed methods approach to better understand (1) the meanings emerging adults hold around virginity and how these differ by gender and (2) differences in their beliefs and scripts around virginity loss by gender identity, religiosity, sexual experience, and sexual orientation.

Open-Ended Response Coding.

Part one of this study focused on the qualitative responses around the meaning/significance emerging adults hold around virginity provided by the participants. Specifically, upon completion of data collection, the open-ended question was analyzed by directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, preliminary categories of significance of virginity were identified through the open-ended responses to understand the dominant or varying significance or meaning emerging adults hold of virginity (RQ1). The following steps were conducted to analyze the open-ended responses from the participants. A team of three trained coders (i.e., the first author, faculty member, and a doctoral student) completed the following: (1) independently read all responses to identify common categories, (2) met to discuss the common categories and create a coding sheet of the categories, (3) coded the first 50 responses as a team to establish agreement among coders and make adaptations as necessary, (4) independently coded the responses using the coding sheet, and (5) met on a regular basis to compare and discuss codes. When disagreements occurred regarding coding of responses, the coders discussed the differences until agreement was reached (i.e., 100% intercoder agreement). Coders also established that responses could be double coded or assigned multiple codes when participants wrote multiple meanings within the same response (i.e., they provided lengthy responses that included multiple meanings of virginity). Fleiss' Kappa was run to calculate interrater reliability of the three coders (Gisev et al., 2013). There was fair agreement between the three coders judgements $\kappa = .251$, 95% CI [.229, .273], $p < .001$. To address RQ2, differences in gender and meaning based on coding of the qualitative analysis was analyzed using Fishers exact test.

Quantitative Analysis.

Part two of this study used a quantitative approach to examine emerging adults' beliefs around virginity and virginity loss scripts. To address the third research question (RQ3), we conducted descriptive analyses to examine what virginity scripts (i.e., *VBS*) emerging adults endorse (i.e., gift, process, stigma). Next, to test Hypothesis 1, we conducted a series of independent sample t-tests to examine the relationship between the endorsement of virginity scripts and gender identity (i.e., cisgender men and cisgender women) as this sample did not include a large enough sample of gender non-conforming individuals to be included in analyses. To test Hypothesis 2, we conducted a series of bivariate linear regressions to examine the relationship between virginity scripts and religiosity. To test Hypothesis 3, we conducted a series of independent sample t-tests to examine the relationship between virginity scripts and sexual experience (i.e., have or have not had sexual intercourse). Finally, to test Hypothesis 4, we conducted a series of independent sample t-tests to examine the relationship between virginity scripts and sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual and LBG+).

Chapter 4 - Results

Study One

The first part of this study focused on answering the questions “What meaning/significance do emerging adults hold around virginity?” (RQ1) and “Does meaning/significance of virginity differ based on gender identity?” (RQ2). Using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) nine codes were identified within participants’ open-ended responses that focused on the current meaning the participant held around virginity. Codes represented meanings or significance emerging adults associated with virginity/virginity loss and included: (1) *no significance*, (2) *waiting until marriage*, (3) *right partner or right time*, (4) *purity*, (5) *religion provides meaning*, (6) *entwined or bonded souls*, (7) *sexual milestone*, (8) *significant but no context*, and (9) *social construct/double standard*. An additional and unexpected tenth code that did not fit into the current meaning of virginity but was an important representation of the process occurring by the participants around meaning making of virginity was identified by the coders. Specifically, this code focused on *changes in meaning/significance* around virginity and was salient in 9.0% of responses, and was an important representation of how meanings and scripts change across time and experience; thus it was included in the below results (see Table 1 in Appendix A). Further, responses were given multiple codes when appropriate to capturing their significance/meaning of virginity. Lastly, one participant provided a response that did not fit within the nine codes, so they were removed from further analyses (i.e., response focused on experience of sexual assault resulting in virginity loss).

Fisher’s exact tests were conducted based on RQ2 to examine whether there were statistically significant gender differences in the proportion of each gender who reported each code. However, upon conducting these analyses, no significant gender differences in what

meaning or significance emerging adults held of virginity and virginity loss were found for any of the codes (results presented in Table 2 in Appendix A). Therefore, I will only present basic information around each code and the individuals who fell within it in the description below.

No significance

The largest code identified was that of *no significance* with 30.8% of participants stating that virginity had no significance to them. Cisgender men (40.0%) offered responses consistent with this code at a higher percentage than cisgender women (29.8%). These responses included explicit mentions of virginity holding no meaning or significance, such as “does not have any” (cisgender woman) or “serves none” (cisgender woman) as well as many responding “I have none” (cisgender man) or “n/a” (cisgender man). Responses that included n/a were coded as *no significance* as coders agreed the wording of the survey question (i.e., What, *if any*, meaning or significance does virginity have for you?) allowed us to assume n/a meant virginity did not have any applicable significance or meaning, particularly as compared to those who left the response blank. Those who left the response blank were not included in the codes. Further, this code did not allow for any misinterpretation and focused on the meaning/significance being absolute, rather than including phrases such as: some, not much, or little.

Waiting Until Marriage

The second largest code was that of *waiting until marriage* with 17.8% of participants having discussed some version of this meaning. While 19.1% of cisgender women reported this meaning, only 6.7% of cisgender men did. These responses were focused on the sexual behaviors and experiences, including virginity loss, being important experiences that should occur within marriage. Some responses included context of why waiting until marriage was important along

with remaining a virgin until marriage being of the upmost significance, as being able to give their virginity to their spouse was meaningful. For example, a respondent explained:

It does have a significance to me because the context of sexual pleasure is something I believe is meant to be shared between a husband and wife and I don't want to experience it with anyone but my future husband (cisgender woman).

Additionally, one participant stated, "Virginity has great significance to me. Sex is a sacred act between a married couple to consummate their marriage. It's the body physically renewing the promise/vow that was made to the other at the altar..." (cisgender woman). Other responses included, "I personally would like to save myself for marriage, which is the expectation in my community" (cisgender woman) and "Saving yourself for your future spouse" (cisgender man).

Right Partner or Right Time

The third largest code was focused on the *right partner or right time* with 17.1% of the sample discussing the significance of choosing the right context to experience virginity loss, especially in terms of selecting the right partner and/or the right time. Cisgender women (18.3%) offered responses consistent with this code at a higher rate than cisgender men (6.7%). For example, a participant stating, "Choosing when and with who you 'loose' (sic) your virginity to" (cisgender woman) captured both of these concepts. These responses did not include a specific emphasis on marriage as the only context in which it should occur, but rather having an established connection, respect, or commitment to the chosen partner, such as when participants stated, "...Having sex with someone you love and connect on an already deep level with is the most ideal situation" (cisgender woman) and "The meaning for me is that it is when you are committed to your partner" (cisgender man). Some of these responses also included the importance of choosing the right partner in retrospect and feelings of regret, "I wish mine was

with someone else” (cisgender woman). Other responses represented more broad messages of significance in terms of taking one’s time for the right context such as, “Losing your virginity (to me) is a very special thing that should take a lot of thought and consideration” (cisgender woman).

Purity

Purity as the meaning or significance of virginity was discussed by 11.6% of participants. Cisgender men discussed this meaning in 20.0% of their responses compared to cisgender women discussing it in 10.7% of their responses. These individuals emphasized messages around purity, innocence, morality, dignity, self-worth, self-respect, or respect from others. For example, respondents shared, “I think that virginity is a form of pureness and a sign of high morals” (cisgender man) and “Virginity holds meaning in a sense that it is pure and innocent. It portrays self-respect and dignity” (cisgender woman). Additionally, many of the responses implied incurring a loss or giving something away with virginity loss experience, aligning with the long-held belief of the tangibility of virginity. For example, these respondents communicated the significance as “The loss of something that you can never get back” (cisgender woman) and “It is something I like having and I want to keep this purity for myself until marriage” (cisgender woman).

Significant but No Context

Responses consistent with this code appeared in 10.3% of the sample. Cisgender men discussed this meaning in 13.3% of their responses while cisgender women discussed it in 9.9% of their responses. Responses within this code mentioned virginity/virginity loss’ significance but either did not provide other contextualization or provided a very minimal response around it other than saying it is significant to them. However, these responses existed on a spectrum from

little or some significance to very significant. For example, one participant represented less significance by stating, “Not much meaning” (cisgender woman), while another reported some significance by stating, “It has some significance to me. It is somewhat special” (cisgender woman). However, other participants highlighted strong significance for them (without other context), such as when participants stated, “I would say a lot. I felt it was a big deal when I lost my virginity” (cisgender woman) and “I think it a very special thing and treated different by everyone. For me it has a big significance” (cisgender woman). Some had even less context and did not use language that identified virginity as having a little or a lot of significance, just that it was significant. For example, “It does have a meaning I just don't really know how to explain it” (cisgender woman).

Social Construct/Double Standard

The social construction of virginity or existence of double standards was discussed by 7.5% of the sample. Although no cisgender men (i.e., 0.0%) reported this meaning, 8.4% of cisgender women did. Responses that were coded as *social construct/double standard* included those that explicitly mentioned the social construction of virginity, societal pressure or messages around it, double standards between men and women, or the oppressive nature of the concept. The following response highlights the significance of double standards and oppression:

Honestly, I think the whole concept of virginity is overrated and that the stigma of ‘popping that cherry’ is so degrading and honestly a way to put down (mostly) women. For men if someone has no experience, they are not good enough but you can't be with someone who has been with people. (cisgender woman)

Another participant highlighted this by stating, “...I just think it's a social construct the patriarchy made up that makes women seem like whores and men seem like alpha males even if

they have the same number of sexual partners” (cisgender woman). Other responses demonstrated social pressures experienced in terms of virginity status, including:

Virginity is meaningful to me and is something that I wish I did not have so much shame around. I felt a lot of negativity and pressure from being a virgin and this pushed me into relationships and actions that I truly did not want to have with others. (cisgender woman)

One participant demonstrated its social construction by simply stating, “...I believe it is a social construct” (cisgender woman).

Religion Provides Meaning

Religion provides the meaning or significance of virginity appeared in 6.8% of participants’ responses. No cisgender men (i.e., 0.0%) offered responses consistent with this code but 7.6% of cisgender women did. These individuals explicitly discussed the importance of how their religion informed the meaning they hold about virginity. Although many responses make mention of virginity loss occurring within marriage, this code highlighted when participants specifically emphasized a focus on religion’s role in their meaning of virginity. For instance, respondents communicated: “Having sex outside of marriage is forbidden by the Bible and comes with a variety of physical and emotional consequences” (cisgender woman) and

I believe anything that involves removing clothing and touching below the waistline is inappropriate until marriage. I believe that God's design is perfect. It isn't that way to keep something good from us but rather to keep something that is good safe. To keep sex from getting twisted, perverted, and hurtful as it often becomes in Western society. (cisgender woman)

Although these previous responses detailed consequences or risks, other responses were more general to religion providing guidance on their meaning “I think that it is important *due to my*

religion since I've been raised to believe that people should wait till [sic] marriage" (cisgender woman).

Entwined or Bonded Souls

This meaning was reported by 5.5% of all participants. Although no cisgender men reported this meaning (i.e., 0.0%), 6.1% of cisgender women did. These responses emphasized how sexual intercourse had the purpose or potential to bind sexual partners on a deeper level. For example, one participant explained virginity's significance as the following:

It has significance to me only because sex has significance. I believe having sex with someone is so intimate that it connects you to them on a spiritual level, and still having your virginity means you are not connected to anyone in that specific way. (cisgender woman)

Another participant stated, "It's chemically, emotionally, physiologically, and spiritually connecting you to another person. It's meant to bind you to another individual! Every time you enter the sexual embrace with someone, a piece of your heart is given to that person" (cisgender woman).

Some respondents that emphasized the deeper connection that sexual intercourse can create also mentioned the value of remaining virgins until marriage to experience this bond only with their future spouse, "...I view virginity as a sign of purity, and by saving sex for when I am married, it would be more rewarding and would create *a stronger bond* between me and my husband..." (cisgender woman).

Sexual Milestone

The *sexual milestone* code represented 3.4% of the responses. A higher percentage of cisgender men (13.3%) discussed this code compared to cisgender women (2.3%). These

responses emphasized the significance of virginity existed as a developmental process or experience related to growing up and gaining experience for sexual and romantic relationships. For example, one participant said, “Doesn't have much meaning to me. Just wanted to get it over with and become better at it for future partners” (cisgender man) whereas another participant stated, “It doesn't have any significance, as I was ‘old enough’ and took the right measures to ensure my safety. Overall, it put me in a different maturity ‘category’ and gave me a new perceive (sic) on relationships” (cisgender woman). Lastly, one participant nicely represented the milestone nature of this code by stating, “... You are no longer a kid you have grown” (cisgender man).

Changes in Meaning/Significance

The *changes in meaning* code was an unexpected finding within the participants' responses as it did not fit into the category of current meanings of virginity, but was experienced by participants and discussed as a process they went through around the meaning of virginity for them. Of the responses, 9.0% were consistent with this code. Thus, these responses were double coded to capture participants' current meaning, in addition to the *change in meaning*. While no cisgender men (i.e., 0.0%) offered responses consistent with this code, 10.0% of cisgender women did. This code was characterized by respondents discussing changes in meaning around virginity due to various reasons such as: experiences, time passing or age/maturation, religious changes, etc. and an emphasis on that it holds different meaning to them now. Interestingly, the *changes in meanings* included shifts towards virginity becoming either more or less significant. For example, a participant summarized it becoming less significant by stating, “Virginity has no significance to me now, but it was more significant before I had sex” (cisgender woman). Another participant demonstrated the meaning becoming more significant by stating, “yes it does

have a very big meaning to me, I was not waiting to marriage but now I do wish I had” (cisgender woman). Interestingly, one participant highlighted changes in meaning related to it being seen as more of a social construct by stating, “It hard (sic) a very large significance to me when I was young because I was raised Christian. Now I believe it is a social construct” (cisgender woman).

Study Two

The second part of this study focused on answering RQ3, “What virginity and virginity loss scripts do emerging adults endorse?” and examining whether these scripts differ based on sexual experience, sexual orientation, religiosity, or gender. Results are presented in Tables 3 and 4 in Appendix A of this study and described in detail below.

Virginity Script Endorsement

Descriptive statistics revealed mean endorsement of each virginity script for emerging adults, with higher means representing stronger endorsement of the virginity script, on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Emerging adults scored an average 2.05 ($SD = 1.19$) on the endorsement of the stigma script, an average of 4.73 ($SD = 1.53$) on endorsement of the gift script and an average 3.59 ($SD = 1.54$). on the endorsement of the process script.

Gender Differences in Scripts

A series of independent-samples t-tests were ran to determine if there were statistically significant gender differences (i.e., cisgender man vs. cisgender woman) of the above endorsed scripts (i.e., stigma, gift, process). We predicted that cisgender women would be more likely to endorse a gift script, while cisgender men would be more likely to endorse a process and stigma script. Our analyses showed there were no significant gender differences for any of the scripts.

Specifically, no significant difference was found between the endorsement of the stigma script by cisgender men ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.20$) and cisgender women ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.19$); 95% CI [-0.13, 1.15], $t(143) = -1.56$, $p = 0.120$). Further, no significant difference was found between the endorsement of the gift script by cisgender men ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.53$) and cisgender women ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.52$); (95% CI [-1.45, 0.20], $t(144) = -1.50$, $p = 0.135$). Lastly, no significant difference was found between the endorsement of the process script by cisgender men ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.41$) and cisgender women ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.55$); 95% CI [-0.20, 1.46], $t(144) = -1.50$, $p = 0.135$). Based on these results, this hypothesis was rejected.

Religiosity and Scripts

I predicted that higher religiosity would have a positive association with the gift script while higher religiosity would be negatively associated with the stigma and process scripts. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a series of bivariate linear regressions. First, I examined the association between religiosity and endorsement of the gift script. Endorsement of the gift script had a moderate, positive correlation with religiosity ($r = .43$, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, it was found that higher endorsement of the gift script was statistically related to higher religiosity, ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.068, 0.140], $p < .001$). Religiosity accounted for 18.4% of the explained variability in gift script endorsement, $R^2 = 0.184$, $F(1, 144) = 32.48$, $p < .001$. Second, we examined the association between religiosity and endorsement of the stigma script. The stigma script was found to be moderately, negatively correlated to religiosity ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$) with higher endorsement of the stigma script being significantly related to lower religiosity ($\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI [-0.104, -0.046], $p < .001$). Religiosity accounted for 15.7% of the explained variability in stigma script endorsement, $R^2 = 0.157$, $F(1, 143) = 26.55$, $p < .001$. Third, we examined the association between religiosity and endorsement of the process script. The process script was

found to be moderately, negatively correlated with religiosity ($r = -.42, p < .001$) with higher endorsement of the process script being statistically related to lower religiosity, ($\beta = -0.10, 95\%$ CI $[-0.139, -0.066], p < .001$). Religiosity accounted for 17.6% of the explained variability in script endorsement, $R^2 = 0.176, F(1, 144) = 30.75, p < .001$. Based on these results, our hypothesis was supported.

Sexual Experience and Scripts

We conducted a series of independent-samples t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences between endorsement of each of the three scripts and sexual experience (i.e., have or have not had sexual intercourse). We predicted that those who have not had sexual intercourse would be more likely to endorse the gift script while those who have had sexual intercourse would be more likely to endorse the stigma and process scripts. Upon examining the assumption of homogeneity of variances, two of the scripts (stigma and gift script) were found to have violated this assumption as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p = .002; p = .038$, respectively), thus we ran Welch t-tests for these two analyses. Those who have had sexual intercourse ($M = 2.28, SD = 1.26$) were more likely to endorse the stigma script compared to those who have not had sexual intercourse ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.88; 95\%$ CI $[-1.07, -0.35], t(123.78) = -3.92, p < 0.001$). Those who have had sexual intercourse ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.44$) were less likely to endorse the gift script compared to those who have not had sexual intercourse ($M = 5.73, SD = 1.21; 95\%$ CI $[1.02, 1.93], t(106.28) = 6.45, p < 0.001$). Those who have had sexual intercourse ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.43$) were more likely to endorse the process script compared to those who have not had sexual intercourse ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.53; 95\%$ CI $[-1.60, -0.58], t(144) = -4.22, p < 0.001$). These results indicated that sexual experience

was significantly related to all three scripts (i.e., gift, stigma, process). Based on these results, our hypothesis was supported.

Sexual Orientation and Scripts

We predicted that those who were LGB+ not heterosexual would be more likely to endorse the process script while those who were heterosexual would be more likely to endorse the stigma and gift scripts. A series of independent-samples t-tests were used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the endorsed scripts and sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual and LGB+). From these tests, we found that sexual orientation was significantly related to the stigma script, but not the gift or process script. Contrary to our hypothesis, those who identified as heterosexual ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.19$) were less likely to endorse the stigma script compared to those who identified as LGB+ ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.11$; 95% CI [-1.26, -0.02], $t(142) = -2.05$, $p = 0.021$). No significant difference was found between the endorsement of the gift script by heterosexual identifying individuals ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.55$) and LGB+ identifying individuals ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.29$); 95% CI [-0.09, 1.51], $t(143) = 1.76$, $p = 0.081$). No significant difference was found between the endorsement of the process script by heterosexual identifying individuals ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.60$) and LGB+ identifying individuals ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.23$); 95% CI [-1.00, 0.62], $t(143) = -0.47$, $p = 0.638$). Based on these results, this hypothesis was rejected.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Sexuality is an important aspect of the human experience across the life span, interacting with individuals' lived experiences within intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, and cultural realms (Russel et al., 2020). Within U.S. society, initiation of sexual behavior, including virginity loss, has been emphasized as an important experience, even with specific norms around virginity shifting throughout history (e.g., acceptance and prevalence of pre-marital sex), with initial beliefs emphasizing abstinence prior to marriage stemming from religious ideologies (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1989). Although virginity/virginity loss and its meaning are socially constructed, definitions and interpretations of virginity can have implications for individuals' sexuality (e.g., identity construction, sexual agency, virginity loss experiences; Carpenter, 2001, 2002, 2005). When considering past research, sexuality as well as virginity interpretations have varied by gender, often aligning with gendered sexual scripting (Carpenter, 2001; Weideman, 2005). Although meanings/interpretations of virginity have not been examined extensively, Carpenter (2001) looked at adults' interpretations of virginity and identified three scripts/metaphors (i.e., stigma, gift, process) that have been incorporated into additional studies. Considering differences in interpretations, men were found to be more likely to endorse the stigma script while women are more likely to endorse the gift script. Additionally, LGB individuals were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to endorse the process scripts (Carpenter, 2001).

For emerging adults, those 18 to 29 years-old, the majority have or will experience first sexual intercourse by or within this age range (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2009). The theorist behind emerging adulthood has emphasized the features of this life stage as being identity exploration,

instability, possibilities, self-focus, and feeling in-between (Arnett, 2004). Sexuality and religion are common realms of this exploration and identity development (Lefkowitz, 2005), as these emerging adults are often experiencing increased autonomy from their families of origin (Arnett, 2014). In addition to these characteristics being relevant to all emerging adults, college-attending adults may be affected by unique college cultures, such as hook-up cultures (Heldman & Wade, 2010), that influence their sexual beliefs and behaviors, and potentially sexual scripts.

The aim of these studies was to explore and examine the meanings and scripts of virginity that emerging adults hold and how they differ among them. Specifically, the first part of this study focused on qualitatively identifying what meaning/significance emerging adults held around virginity and if they differed by gender. The second part of this study focused on a quantitative approach to identifying emerging adults' endorsement of virginity beliefs scripts and how do they differ based on gender identity, sexual experience, sexual orientation, and religiosity.

To guide understandings and interpretations of emerging adults' virginity scripts and meanings, sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and a feminist critique framework (Osmond & Thorne, 1993) were used. Sexual script theory posits that no behavior occurs without social scripting, which occurs at three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. This applies to virginity loss experiences as well. Further, as gendered and patriarchal standards continue to exist within U.S. society, using a feminist critique framework allows for examination of virginity meanings and/or scripts while considering the differing experiences among genders and emancipatory functions of feminism for all genders.

Meaning/Significance of Virginity

The first part of this study used qualitative methodology to examine the meanings and significance that virginity holds for college-attending emerging adults. Overall, participants reported a variety of different meanings and significance around virginity with nine prevalent codes being identified. The identified codes can be understood as influenced by social or sexual scripting (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), guiding the normative meanings around virginity/virginity loss for emerging adults. Although no statistically significant gender differences were found among meanings/significance, some codes represented only cisgender women's responses (i.e., 0.0% of men reporting it) or notable differences in the proportion of either gender group reporting of a code.

No Significance

No significance was the most reported code at 30.0% of the sample. This code indicated that many emerging adults did not hold a significant meaning around virginity and/or virginity loss. This code could represent a discontinuation of traditional virginity norms that place emphasis on acceptable contexts of sexual behavior initiation, including increases in acceptance of premarital sex within U.S. society. As approximately two-thirds of the sample had engaged in sexual intercourse, this code may be partially explained by the experience of virginity loss already taking place. Research has shown that women tend to see virginity loss as something they must highly managed (Holland et al. 2010), and men typically are more reluctant virgins (Sprecher & Treger, 2015), therefore, having already experienced first sexual intercourse may render the meaning as having reduced or no significance, especially as emerging adults continue to explore and construct their sexual identity (Arnett, 2014).

Additionally, this code could be explained by the increase in acceptance around pre-marital sexual intercourse for men and women (Gordon, 2002; Elias et al., 2015), the social expectation of all genders to have some sexual experience or skill regardless of gender (Sakaluk et al., 2014), and perceived undesirability of being an adult virgin or sexually inexperienced (Gesselman et al., 2017). Considering sexual script theory, dominant cultural scenarios present on college campuses, such as hook-up culture, may guide behavior and beliefs around virginity's meaning (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Within the context of college culture, hook-up culture has created a norm of casual sex (Heldman & Wade, 2010) which may position individuals to place less significance on initiation of sexual behavior, such as virginity loss.

Waiting Until Marriage, Purity, Religion Provides Meaning, Entwined or Bonded Souls

Overall, a large portion of the participants reported meanings of virginity that represent a continuation of traditional or conservative beliefs regarding virginity and sexual behavior, including the codes of *waiting until marriage, purity, religion provides meaning, and entwined or bonded souls*. *Waiting until marriage* aligns with traditional beliefs in terms of abstinence until marriage has benefits, or provides protection from unwanted consequences (Valenti, 2009). The *purity* code was representative of the traditional messages around virginity in that individuals' virginity retention, specifically women's, was a celebrated virtue to be maintained until marriage and has connections to morality and self-respect (Valenti, 2009). Purity messaging continues in modern society with purity pledges, the modesty movement, abstinence-only sex education, and many religious entities' endorsement (Valenti, 2009). Religiosity has ties to the purity messaging as scholars link its origin to American Evangelicals (Moles, 2017). There was also language within these codes, especially purity messaging, that suggests one incurs a loss or is giving something away with virginity loss experience. This supports previous discussion of the

long-held belief of the tangibility of virginity that if often applied to women more intensely due to their physiology (e.g., Olson & García-Moreno, 2017). Further, while characteristics of the *religion provides meaning* code did include emphasis on virginity loss occurring within a marriage and occasionally purity elements, religious beliefs or interpretations were the focus of these responses and participants often stated that these meanings existed *due to or in alignment with their religion*. Historically, religious ideologies strengthened and perpetuated both waiting until marriage (e.g., abstinence from sexual behavior until marriage) and the virtue of virginity (e.g., purity; Carpenter, 2005; Valenti, 2009). Additionally, the *entwined or bonded souls* meaning emphasized the ability of virginity loss, and sexual intercourse, to strengthen or create a connection, or bond, between sexual partners. Although this code highlighted the power of sexual intercourse to strengthen bonds between partners, it also represented beliefs that as bonds are created with more partners, the less the bonds would mean among each additional partner, specifically a long-term partner or spouse. It highlighted this as a consequence of sexual intercourse, which often informed those who provided this code to discuss the value of waiting until marriage to engage in sexual behaviors or the value of choosing a partner that one would be likely to marry, as well as the concept of purity. This code, along with the previously mentioned three, represents socially normative beliefs around meanings and interpretations of virginity/virginity loss in some capacity (Carpenter, 2005).

When considering gender differences and social scripts, all four of these codes appeared to be socially normative messages held by young women which aligns with previous research (e.g., Valenti, 2009). The second highest reported code overall, *waiting until marriage*, was reported by nearly one-fifth of women but only 6.7% of men. Responses within *waiting until marriage* elaborated on the act of giving a partner your virginity (i.e., virginity loss), typically by

women, and aligns with Carpenter's (2001) finding that women tend to see their virginity as a gift to a partner and are expected to experience virginity loss or sex within a committed relationship (Armstrong et al., 2010). Through a feminist critique framework, women placing more emphasis on their virginity as a valuable gift, typically to be received by a committed partner, can be understood first as gender structuring experiences (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Further, the value of one's virginity highlights a gendered understanding of a woman's virginity being a positive trait, reflecting meanings of morality or self-respect as presented by purity culture and the *purity* code in this study (Valenti, 2009). Although, considering elements of our society that position women as sexual gatekeepers, along with the imposed positive character attributes of remaining a virgin while men are expected to pursue, initiate, and even pressure partners for sex (Holland et al., 2010). Thus, gendered power relations, typical of patriarchal societies, could be involved in how women are able to experience sexual agency when managing virginity loss experiences due to conflicting societal messages that act as the larger cultural scenarios scripting behaviors (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Additionally, women made up every response of the *religion provides meaning* code. Cisgender women expressing meaning of virginity being guided by religion at higher rates than men would align with the historically established focus on women's virginity, as well as findings that support religiosity's relationship with sexuality being sex-specific to females (e.g., Penhollow et al., 2012; Štulhofer et al., 2011). Further, cisgender women made up all responses within the *entwined or bonded souls* meaning, representing 6.1% of cisgender women in the sample, while 0.0% of cisgender men discussed this meaning, which may represent virginity or social scripts within culture that place an expectation on women to be more emotionally vulnerable or emotionally invested when sexual behavior with a partner occurs (Wiederman,

2005). This aligns with findings by Weiderman (2005) that highlight sexual scripts that place men as engaging in sex more indiscriminately while enjoying self-esteem boosts with new partners, while women are more likely to experience self-esteem boosts when the interaction is marked by exceptional potential of a relationship forming based on male partner's willingness.

Interestingly, no statistically significant gender differences were found, a higher percentage of men (20.0%) reported the *purity* code than women (10.7%). This illustrates messages around virginity and the concept of purity, which typically are emphasized for women, are being received by men within this age group. However, the cisgender men's responses within this sample were very limited with only one- or two-word phrasing such as "pure" and "purity." These responses provided limited context, with only one response elaborating further on the connection of purity to morality. In comparison, cisgender women's discussion around purity offered more consistent elaboration and context. This included the discussion around being able to give or save one's purity/virginity for their future spouse or marriage, its representation of innocence and self-respect, or the implications of a loss that cannot be restored. The emphasis on a *loss* during a first-sex experience, as well as the perceived decrease in connection provided as sexual partners increase highlighted in the *entwined or bonded souls* code, may have implications for how women experience sexual agency and their own sexual identity construction. Interestingly, although ultimately these codes were found to be unique from one another and held important unique implications, several of the participants provided multi-faceted meanings around virginity that lead to several responses being double coded (e.g., *waiting until marriage* and *purity*) that demonstrated how these meanings may tie together and/or be influenced by larger social and cultural scripting (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Significant but No Context, Right Partner or Right Time

Although lacking context of virginity's significance as compared to other codes, *significant but no context* represented emerging adults' continued value on sexual debut experiences. This code aligns with previous research as most individuals will have had, or will have, their first sexual intercourse within this life stage. Knowing exploration of sexual and romantic relationship is common across this life stage (Arnett, 2014), in addition to society's social scripts placing importance of sexual behavior initiation, emerging adults placing significance on virginity or virginity loss is expected. Additionally, the code *right partner or right time*, continues this theme of first sex being considered as an important experience, as emerging adults valued their choice of an ideal partner (e.g., respectful, loving, committed, safe) or choice of time (e.g., feeling ready or prepared to experience sexual behavior). These codes continue traditional messages of first-sex being an important experience but separate the focus from first sex being ideal within marriage or that it must be a long-term partner. This may be an example of emerging adults redefining the meaning of virginity loss, rather than discarding its significance altogether. This could represent the practice of interpersonal scripting, as these individuals are adapting an accepted cultural script (e.g., virginity being significant, especially within marriage) to fit within the expectation while serving their specific context (e.g., wanting to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage or a relationship while placing significance on the experience; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Sexual Milestone, Social Construct/Double Standard

In contrast to participants' focus on the significance of waiting and purity around virginity, many participants discussed how virginity/virginity loss are nothing more than a milestone to get past or simply a social construction that society has made up. Specifically, participants' responses that fell within the *sexual milestone* code emphasized the significance of

virginity was simply a process or experience that individuals just needed to go through. Within those responses it was discussed that experiencing virginity loss provided a threshold for growing up (e.g., being old enough to engage in sexual behavior, gaining new perceptions on relationships), a start to becoming more sexually skilled for future partners, or simply an anatomical process of having sexual intercourse. This code aligns with research by Carpenter (2001) that established the process scripts, which emphasized similar conceptualizations of virginity or virginity loss by adults. Additionally, this code aligns with theoretical assumptions around emerging adulthood and previous research in that these emerging adults are exploring romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2014). Specifically, emerging adults today are often expected to have multiple partners to gain experience from forming and dissolving romantic and sexual relationships while delaying adult roles such as marriage (Arnett, 2014).

For others, virginity/virginity loss was simply a *social construction* and did not have any true meaning other than what society has given it. This code highlighted the social construction and oppressive nature of virginity, as well as highlighting the double standards across and experiences of virginity stigmatization. This code aligns with previous research as findings have pointed to gendered experiences across sexuality (Crawford & Popp, 2003) and the emphasis on women's virginity compared to men's (Carpenter, 2005; Kelly, 2000). Women reporting this code is not surprising as research shows the balancing act women are experiencing (e.g., expected to be sexually skilled, but judged negatively if sexual outside of a relationship) and the pressure of managing their virginity loss experience (Holland et al., 2010; Sakaluk et al., 2014). College hook-up cultures may exacerbate this experience as college attending adults experience pluralistic ignorance influencing them to act in accordance with perceived group norms (i.e., engaging in casual sex regardless of their comfort level; Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Gendered

experiences included participants' discussion of sexual experience being perceived differently for each gender (shamed vs celebrated) in society. Additionally, in terms of pressure being felt from college hook-up culture and societal norms, shame and pressure around being a virgin was experienced and discussed as well. Highlighted by these responses was an understanding that societal expectations and norms, (i.e., cultural scenarios; Simon & Gagnon, 1986), play into how virginity is thought of conceptually by emerging adults as well as having effects on behavior and experiences.

When examining gender differences of these codes, although non-significant, a higher percentage of cisgender men reported the *sexual milestone* code than cisgender women. In contrast, no cisgender men reported the *social construct/double standard* code, while 8.4% of cisgender women did. The differences in these codes and who is reporting them highlights the continued double standard between men and women (e.g., Crawford & Popp, 2003; Reid et al., 2011). This may be related to previous research in that men experience more indifference or stigmatization of their virginity, thus allowing men to conceptualize virginity loss in a more neutral sense such as a sexual milestone or process scripts (Carpenter, 2001; Holland et al., 2010). Additionally, masculinity is often tied to one's sexuality, as men's sexual desire exists within social scripts as an expectation, while in contrast women expressing or having sexual desire is limited or even perceived negatively (Sakaluk et al., 2014). Conflicting cultural scripts (e.g., women's sexual desire being perceived negatively but sexual inexperience being negative) that are more often applied to women, place them in a position to experience sexual double standards as a salient factor in their lives and their experience of sexuality (Gesselman et al., 2017; Sakaluk et al., 2014). Although men experience stigmatization based on cultural scripts due to sexual inexperience, or virgin status, Carpenter (2002) established this stigma-orientation

may dissipate following first sex. In turn, women experience on-going sexual double standards in terms of expressing and constructing their sexual identity based on their available cultural scripts within a patriarchal society (Simon & Gagnon, 1986)

Changes in Meaning

The unexpected code *changes in meaning* identified a focus on how these important meanings they hold changed across time. This aligns with the concept that emerging adults' exploration can be accompanied by changes in beliefs, including in the realm of sexuality and religion (Arnett, 2014). Participants expressed these changes were due to various factors ranging from specific experiences (e.g., having had sexual intercourse), time passing or age/maturation (e.g., getting older, growing up), and/or changes in religious beliefs. For some, these changes meant virginity becoming less significant to them, whereas for others it became more significant. For example, some participants discussed that their initial meaning was influenced by their religion or desires to wait until marriage, but with age/time they have come to see it as a social construct or to have oppressive qualities (e.g., gendered double standard). Other participants focused on how at a younger age, or prior to having sex, it seemed more significant and now does not seem as significant if at all. This aligns with Carpenter's (2002) finding that men who once held a stronger stigma endorsement before and during virginity loss, adopted a process script following the experience. Considering a change towards more significance, some responses discussed after engaging in sexual intercourse, their meaning shifted towards wishing they had waited until marriage or choosing the right partner as significant, and the feeling of regret was highlighted. Considering this code holistically, these changes in beliefs expected of emerging adults (Arnett, 2014) could also be understood as interpersonal scripting, as they have

adjusted and critiqued cultural scenarios to fit into their new context of emerging adulthood, experiences, and beliefs (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Virginity Belief Scripts

Emerging adults within the sample endorsed the *gift scripts* the strongest, followed by the *process scripts* and lastly by the *stigma scripts*. One possible explanation for the gift script endorsement being the highest of the scripts is that the sample was majority women who identified as Christian with an average religiosity score of 11.60. Considering the prevalence of hook-up culture, established experience of pluralistic ignorance (Reiber & Garcia, 2010), along with being a sexually inexperienced adult being stigmatized (Gesselman et al., 2017), emerging adults endorsing a lower average score of stigma scripts contradicts this research. Although, as two-thirds of the sample have experienced first sexual intercourse, stigma script endorsement may have reduced concerns focused on virginity status, aligning with Carpenter's (2002) finding that following sexual debut, stigma-oriented individuals proceeded to adopt process scripts.

Gender Differences and Scripts

No gender differences were found between any of the endorsed scripts. This contradicts previous research (Carpenter, 2001) and what previous research would guide us to expect due to gendered sexual experiences that emphasize men's sexual behavior being expected and women's sexuality being constrained (Holland et al., 2010). However, one explanation may be due to the differences between an all-adult sample (Carpenter, 2001) versus our college attending emerging adult sample, and may point to differences in scripts across age groups and/or generations. Additionally, this was unexpected as research has found college-aged men as more reluctant virgins (Sprecher & Treger, 2015), and, when sexually inexperienced, perceive themselves as less desirable romantic partners (Gesselman et al., 2017), which would position men to endorse the

stigma script more so than women. Additionally, women would be expected to endorse the gift scripts more strongly than men, as previously found in the research (Carpenter, 2001) and knowing that women are also socially expected to be more sexual within relationships, rather than engage in casual sex, which is characteristic of the gift script (Armstrong et al., 2010). As the U.S. exists within a patriarchal society, feminist frameworks would expect women to have differing experiences and conceptions of sexuality, including virginity loss experiences, as compared to men. Although, college-attending women and men are both immersed in a college hook-up culture and the pluralistic ignorance of this culture which may impact typical gendered experiences, cultural scripts, and beliefs around sexuality and behaviors (Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Further, the sample was majority cisgender women with a small percentage of cisgender men. Although analyses did not show statistical concerns with the differences in group sizes, this large difference in group sizes may still account for nondifferences found that contradict prior research.

Religiosity and Scripts

As predicted, higher religiosity was associated with higher endorsement of the gift scripts while lower religiosity was associated with the stigma and process scripts. As Christianity is a dominant religion among U.S. society and typically endorses values consistent with the gift script more so than the characteristics of the other two scripts, this relationship is expected and supported. Additionally, our sample was majority Christian, further explaining the relationship between religiosity and the gift script. In alignment with Simon and Gagnon's (1986) sexual scripting theory, those who identify with a religion would take on cultural scenarios that align with such religious messages in terms of sexuality among other messages. Those with lower religiosity may have less exposure to or identify less with religious cultural scenarios that align

with gift scripts' characteristics, which allows for more influence of other social scripting to take place and guide beliefs.

Sexual Experience and Scripts

Our results supported our hypotheses as those who have had sexual intercourse were more likely to endorse the stigma and process scripts, while those who had not were more likely to endorse the gift script. This supports previous research as those who perceive their virginity as negative would seek to experience virginity loss with less consideration of partner choice, while those who endorse the gift script typically place more value on partner choice which may delay sexual debut (Carpenter, 2001). For those who endorse the process script and see sexual debut as more of a transition to adulthood likely have or will experience sexual debut within the normative age range while not pursuing an increased desire to save or discard their virgin status.

Sexual Orientation and Scripts

Results indicated the only difference between sexual orientation and script endorsement was LGB+ individuals being more likely to endorse the stigma script. These findings contradict previous research among LGB individuals that found these individuals to be more likely to endorse the process scripts as compared to the other two scripts (Babin & Humphreys, 2021) as well as previous research by Carpenter (2001) that would support our hypothesis. Our results may be explained by LGB+ emerging adults having an increased desire to validate and/or explore their sexual identities when experiencing first-sex experiences (Babin & Humphreys, 2021). For example, gender may play a role in heterosexual men holding a stigmatizing view of virginity, while sexual experience that aligns with sexual attraction may be a way to destigmatized, or validate, sexual identity for those in the queer community. Additionally, large societal scripts are not as available or not applicable to LGB+ individuals when it comes to

virginity loss compared to heterosexual individuals (e.g., the definition of sexual intercourse may not apply to LGB+). This leaves more opportunity for interpersonal and intrapsychic scripting to take place for LGB+ individuals, as these levels of scripting work to make sense of ambiguities and personal contexts to best fit the scenario within specific contexts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Although, the centering of heterosexuality (e.g., sex education not including queer experience) and cultural scripts leave these individuals with less accessible scripting in general. Further, stigmatization or shame around being LGB+ may also contribute to internalized stigma around sexual behavior, including virginity loss experiences. Although first-sex among these individuals can act as an affirmation of sexual orientation, findings by Gillespie and colleagues (2022) also point to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexual minorities (LGB+), individuals engaging in first-sex for reasons such as social expectation, which may align with findings that these individuals endorse a stigma script. Additionally, due to lack of information provided among sex education, LGB+ individuals noted having to rely on experienced partners within first-sex experiences. This may lend to explaining why virginity could be experienced as stigmatizing for these individuals (Gillespie et al., 2022). Although analyses did not show statistical concerns, as the sample was majority heterosexual individuals with a small percentage of LGB+ individuals, large difference in group sizes may still account for nondifferences and contradictions from prior research found.

Limitations

Although the research from this study offers important contributions to the larger sexuality field and holds potential contributions for applied programming, it is not without limitations. When considering demographic factors, the group sample sizes were predominately White, heterosexual, and cisgender which limited comparisons across groups and potential generalizability. Future research should pursue exploring differences among these groups, as

homogeneity of the sample limits generalizability to demographic characteristics not or minimally represented within our sample. Cultural and societal scripts may be developed, perpetuated, and acted out differently by those of different ethnicities and those who are racialized as non-White in our society. Including those who have been historically and continually oppressed or marginalized, including with their sexuality, could provide insights into how these groups conceptualize and experience virginity--as experience among a dominantly White sample cannot necessarily be generalized to these groups due to possible differences in cultural and societal scripts. Additionally, sexual scripts may look different among those who are LGB+ and gender non-conforming. Due to our analyses being limited to cisgender individuals, we were unable to understand how meaning held by gender non-conforming individuals may differ from cisgender individuals. Additionally, our sample size was limited by being predominantly cisgender women, with a small percentage of cisgender men, which may have affected comparisons among gender identities. Although we were able to run analyses based on sexual orientation, the smaller percentage of LGB+ individuals create a limitation on fully understanding the meanings or beliefs based on this sample. Notably, the small percentage may account for comparisons showing non-differences and variability from previous studies. Future research should aim to conduct a directed data collection that allows for more accurate representation of underrepresented populations.

Further, the sample was predominantly Christian. Although the sample's average religious intensity fell approximately in the middle of the scale, the sample did predominantly identify as holding Christian ideology. Examining beliefs or meanings among those of different religious beliefs (e.g., non-religious and/or non-Christian ideologies), may provide insight into differences among scripts. Further, although inherently non-problematic that this study focused

on college-attending adults due to how college culture may affect meanings and scripts, there may be differences among meanings and scripts of emerging adults who are not attending college. Future research could pursue inclusion of non-college attending adults to understand how virginity meanings or scripts may differ for those who are not attending college as cultural scripts may vary between these groups.

Further, our results may have been influenced by those who self-selected into the survey (i.e., selection bias) as the sample was recruited for predominately health science and well-being courses at one single university. Virginity beliefs and significance of those who pursue an education within the health science and well-being fields may vary from those who do not. Additionally, the survey was advertised to focus on beliefs and experiences related to sexuality, therefore those who self-selected to participate in the study may hold stronger values around sexuality than those who did not choose to participate. Future research should aim to conduct a directed data collection that allows for more accurate representation of underrepresented populations. Future research should aim to conduct research on this topic using a more diverse pool of academic backgrounds, such as diverse majors and/or universities.

Additionally, open-ended response collection via a quantitative online survey may have limited responses given by participants and did not allow for follow-up questions or clarification related to their responses. Although this approach is not inherently problematic as it has been successfully used in qualitative research historically (e.g., Anders et al., 2017). However, future research benefits from more in-depth qualitative research (i.e., interviews, focus groups) to allow for additional follow-up questions and clarification of responses.

Implications and Future Research

As we know, beliefs around the experience of virginity loss (e.g., virginity loss scripts) can be significant to sexual identity and sexual experiences (Carpenter, 2001), understanding what emerging adults' meanings and conceptualizations of virginity are has implications for future research and the sexual health and well-being of this population. As this population holds meanings that vary significantly (e.g., *no significance* as compared to *entwined or bonded souls*), future research could focus on how varying meanings may impact their sexuality in terms of sexual satisfaction, well-being, and experience of sexual debut, to name a few. Research has shown that process scripts are to be associated with more positive outcomes among adults (e.g., lack of disempowerment present with other scripts), yet messages aligned with other scripts are strong with our society as well (Carpenter, 2002). Sex education curricula should take into consideration addressing the social construction of virginity (e.g., gendered, heteronormative, cisnormative, etc.), as well as providing evidence-based information to adolescent and emerging adults regarding initiation, engagement in sexual behavior, and their sexual and relational well-being, contributing to more empowering orientations of first-sex in terms of available cultural scripts. Further, 29 states in the U.S. currently required abstinence to be stressed (e.g., stressing virginity retention until marriage) in their sex education curriculum (Guttmacher Institute, 2023). States that require emphasis on abstinence within curriculums being delivered to adolescents and emerging adults should consider the variability in what virginity means and the levels of significance as opposed to assuming or presenting one meaning. Future research could also explore differences in how different sex education sources (e.g., peers, family, formal education) impact meanings or scripts held by individuals.

Additionally, based on the lack of gender differences around the meanings of virginity and the virginity belief scripts found in this study, sexual double standards may be changing or look different than previous years. Future research should consider how we capture the sexual double standard among emerging adults, including double standards around virginity. However, importantly the sexual double standard was captured in the responses of the participants (i.e., social construct/double standard). Interestingly, no men reported the sexual double standard as a meaning. As men are in a position of power in our patriarchal society and feminist frameworks' focus on oppression and emancipatory functions, sexual double standards going unrecognized by men points to the need to continue pursuing education of the sexual double standards that exist and disempower women.

Further, these findings point to the importance of future research to be done in terms of the effects of (dis)alignment in meanings and goals around virginity of partners within sexual and romantic relationships. As great variability existed across meanings held of virginity, potential misalignment in meanings or desired outcomes of sexual or romantic relationships between partners could be associated with negative first-sex experiences. Additionally, findings from this research could highlight the need for increased encouragement and preparation of adolescents and emerging adults to communicate with partners about their meanings, goals, or beliefs around virginity or first-sex experiences and ultimately sexuality broadly. Finally, sex researchers should also take into consideration the existing variability in meanings of virginity to avoid placing any assumptions or misplaced meanings of virginity on individuals that may not apply to their lived experience.

Conclusion

This two-part study examined the meaning of virginity and virginity scripts of college-attending emerging adults, and how they may differ, using sexual script theory and a feminist critique framework. Using qualitative data, part-one of this study identified meanings/significance of virginity held by emerging adults and examined differences based on gender. Using a quantitative methodological approach, part-two of this study identified virginity scripts of emerging adults and whether they differ by sexual orientation, gender, religiosity, and sexual experience. Although no gender differences were found among meanings or virginity scripts, homogeneity of the sample points to future research seeking out more diverse samples. Implications of these findings are related to sex education, sexual double standards and emancipatory functions of feminism, sexual well-being of this population, as well as pointing to future research opportunities.

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Appendix A - Tables

Table 1.

Meanings of virginity codes (N = 146)

Code	Example Quote	Women* (n = 131) n (%)	Men* (n = 15) n (%)	Total** (n = 146) n (%)
No Significance	“Does not have any” (cisgender woman) “I have none” (cisgender man)	39 (29.8)	6 (40.0)	45 (30.8)
Waiting Until Marriage	“...Sex is a sacred act between a married couple to consummate their marriage. It's the body physically renewing the promise/vow that was made to the other at the altar...” (cisgender woman) “Saving yourself for your future spouse” (cisgender man)	25 (19.1)	1 (6.7)	26 (17.8)
Right Partner or Right Time	“Choosing when and with who you “loose” your virginity to” (cisgender woman) “The meaning for me is that it is when you are committed to your partner.” (cisgender man)	24 (18.3)	1 (6.7)	25 (17.1)
Purity	“...virginity is a form of pureness and a sign of high morals” (cisgender man) “Virginity holds meaning in a sense that it is pure and innocent. It portrays self-respect and dignity.” (cisgender woman)	14 (10.7)	3 (20.0)	17 (11.6)
Significant but No Context	“I would say a lot. I felt it was a big deal when I lost my virginity.” (cisgender woman) “It does have a meaning I just don't really know how to explain it” (cisgender woman)	13 (9.9)	2 (13.3)	15 (10.3)
Social Construct/Dou ble Standard	“...I just think it's a social construct the patriarchy made up that makes women seem like whores and men seem like alpha males even if they have the same number of sexual partners.” (cisgender woman) “Virginity is meaningful to me and is something that I wish I did not have so much shame around. I felt a lot of negativity and pressure from being a virgin and this pushed me into relationships and actions that I truly	11 (8.4)	0 (0.0)	11 (7.5)

	did not want to have with others.” (cisgender woman)			
Religion Provides Meaning	“Having sex outside of marriage is forbidden by the Bible and comes with a variety of physical and emotional consequences.” (cisgender woman) “I think that it is important <i>due to my religion</i> since I’ve been raised to believe that people should wait till marriage.” (cisgender woman)	10 (7.6)	0 (0.0)	10 (6.8)
Entwined or Bonded Souls	It’s [sex] chemically, emotionally, physiologically, and spiritually connecting you to another person. It's meant to bind you to another individual!” (cisgender woman) "I believe having sex with someone is so intimate that it connects you to them on a spiritual level, and still having your virginity means you are not connected to anyone in that specific way” (cisgender woman)	8 (6.1)	0 (0.0)	8 (5.5)
Sexual Milestone	“Doesn't have much meaning to me. Just wanted to get it over with and become better at it for future partners;” (cisgender man) “It doesn't have any significance, as I was "old enough" and took the right measures to ensure my safety. Overall, it put me in a different maturity "category" and gave me a new perceive on relationships” (cisgender woman)	3 (2.3)	2 (13.3)	5 (3.4)
Changes in Meaning *Process code	“Virginity has no significance to me now, but it was more significant before I had sex.” (cisgender woman) “It hard a very large significance to me when I was young because I was raised Christian. Now I believe it is a social construct.” (cisgender woman)	13 (10.0)	0 (0.0)	13 (9.0)

*No significant gender differences were found for any of the codes based on Fishers exact tests.

**Total % greater than 100% due to participants reporting more than one code

Table 2.*Fisher's exact tests for associations between meanings of virginity codes and gender identity*

What is your gender identity?		No significance		Waiting until marriage		Right partner or right time		Purity		Religion provides meaning	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Cisgender men	Reported code (N/Y) Count (percentage)	9 (60.0%)	6 (40.0%)	14 (93.3%)	1 (6.7%)	14 (93.3%)	1 (6.7%)	12 (80.0%)	3 (20.0%)	15 (100%)	0 (0.0%)
Cisgender women	Count (percentage)	92 (70.2%)	39 (29.8%)	106 (80.9%)	25 (19.1%)	107 (81.7%)	24 (18.3%)	117 (89.3%)	14 (10.7%)	121 (92.4%)	10 (7.6%)
Fisher's Exact Test		.555		.473		.469		.385		0.599	
What is your gender identity?		Entwined or bonded souls		Sexual milestone		Significant but no context		Social construct/ double standard			
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes		
Cisgender men	Reported Code (N/Y) Count (percentage)	15 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)	15 (100%)	0 (0.0%)		
Cisgender women	Count (percentage)	123 (93.9%)	8 (6.1%)	128 (97.7%)	3 (2.3%)	118 (90.1%)	13 (9.9%)	120 (91.6%)	11 (8.4%)		
Fisher's Exact Test		1.00		0.082		.654		0.605			

Note: No significant gender differences were found for any of the codes

Table 3.

Mean scores of virginity belief scripts (N = 146)

Script	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Stigma	2.05	1.19	5.13
Gift	4.73	1.53	6.00
Process	3.59	1.54	6.00

Note: Measured on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating higher endorsement of the script

Table 4.

Quantitative comparisons of endorsement of virginity belief scripts (N = 146)

Variable		Stigma Script			Gift Script			Process Script		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>t-score</i>
Gender										
<i>Cisgender men</i>	15	2.50 (1.20)			4.17 (1.53)			4.15 (1.41)		
<i>Cisgender women</i>	131	1.90 (1.19)	(-0.13, 1.15)	-1.56	4.79 (1.52)	(-1.45, 0.20)	-1.50	3.52 (1.55)	(-0.20, 1.46)	-1.50
Sexual experience ^a										
<i>No sexual intercourse</i>	47	1.60 (0.88)			5.73 (1.21)			2.85 (1.53)		
<i>Had sexual intercourse</i>	99	2.28 (1.26)	(-1.07, -0.35)	-3.92***	4.25 (1.44)	(1.02, 1.93)	6.45***	3.94 (1.43)	(-1.60, -0.58)	-4.22***
Sexual orientation										
<i>Heterosexual</i>	128	1.98 (1.19)			4.80 (1.55)			3.57 (1.60)		
<i>Non-heterosexual</i>	16	2.63 (1.11)	(-1.26, -0.02)	-2.05*	4.09 (1.29)	(-0.09, 1.51)	1.76	3.77 (1.23)	(-1.00, 0.62)	-0.47
Variable		Stigma Script				Gift Script				
	<i>r</i>	<i>R</i> ²	β	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>R</i> ²	β	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>F</i>
Religiosity ^b	-.40	0.16	-.08	(-0.10, 0.05)	26.55***	.43	.18	.10	(0.07, 0.14)	32.48***
	Process Script									
	<i>r</i>	<i>R</i> ²	β	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>F</i>					
	-.42	0.18	-0.10	(-0.14, -0.07)	30.75***					

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aDue to violations of the assumption of homogeneity of variances, Welch t-tests were run for stigma script and gift script

^bReligiosity was measured on a scale of 0 to 20 with 0 indicating low religious or spiritual intensity and 20 indicating high religious or spiritual intensity

Appendix B - Survey Questions

Demographics

Religiosity

Please indicate the level of intensity of your religious or spiritual beliefs (0 = not at all intense to 20 = very intense).

Sexual Orientation

Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation (select all that apply):

- ☐ aromantic
- ☐ asexual
- ☐ bisexual
- ☐ fluid
- ☐ gay
- ☐ lesbian
- ☐ pansexual
- ☐ queer
- ☐ questioning or unsure
- ☐ straight (heterosexual)
- ☐ prefer not to disclose.
- ☐ additional category/identity not listed (please specify)

Sexual Experience

- How old were you when you had consensual sexual intercourse for the first time?
 - I have never had sexual intercourse (1)
 - 8 years old or younger (2)
 - 9 years old (3)
 - 10 years old (4)
 - 11 years old (5)
 - 12 years old (6)
 - 13 years old or older (7)

With how many people have you ever had consensual sexual intercourse?

- I have never had sexual intercourse (1)
- 1 person (2)
- 2 people (3)
- 3 people (4)
- 4 people (5)
- 5 people (6)
- 6 or more people (7)

Gender Identity

Gender identity (select all that apply):

- (1) man
- (2) woman
- (3) agender
- (4) genderqueer or genderfluid
- (5) non-binary
- (6) questioning or unsure
- (7) two-spirit
- (8) prefer not to disclose
- (9) additional gender category/identity not listed (please specify below)

Gender Identity _____

Adapted Virginity Beliefs Scale (VBS)

The following set of questions ask about your and others' beliefs around virginity, regardless of your virginity status. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements, with 1 indicating *Strongly disagree* and 7 indicating *Strongly agree*.

- 1. I would be worried about what others might think if they found out I was a virgin.
- 2. I have felt, or would feel, embarrassed by being a virgin.
- 3. I have regarded my virginity as something negative.
- 4. I have felt that my virginity is/was a burden that I needed to get rid of as soon as possible.
- 5. I would be afraid to tell my partner that I am a virgin.
- 6. I would be afraid of my partner finding out I am a virgin.
- 7. I have actively tried to hide my status as a virgin.
- 8. I lost my virginity later than I would have wanted OR I want to have lost my virginity by now.
- 9. I hope(d) to feel in love with the person I lose/lost my virginity too
- 10. I believe(d) that I will stay in a relationship with the person I lose my virginity to for a long time.
- 11. I will/did plan my first-time having intercourse carefully.
- 12. I will/did choose the person I lost my virginity to with care.
- 13. It is/was important to me that the circumstances under which I lose my virginity are/were perfect.
- 14. It is/was important to me that my first-time having intercourse is/was romantic.
- 15. I plan/planned to date the person I lose my virginity to for a long time before we engage in intercourse.
- 16. I will/did plan my virginity loss with my partner.
- 17. I consider my virginity to be a gift to my partner.
- 18. The reason I did not lose my virginity earlier was because I had not found the right partner OR I have not lost my virginity yet because I have not found the right partner.
- 19. I believe that losing my virginity is an important step toward becoming an adult.
- 20. I believe losing my virginity is a step in the transition between adolescence and becoming an adult.
- 21. I believe losing my virginity is a natural step in my development.

22. I believe virginity loss is an inevitable part of growing up.
23. I believe being a virgin in high school is a good thing.
24. I believe that teens are supported if they choose to wait to have sex.
25. I believe waiting to have sex is respected by my friends.
26. I believe waiting to have sex is respected by my parents.
27. I believe waiting to have sex eliminates all worries regarding pregnancy and STIs.
28. I believe waiting to have sex allows me to stay in control of my relationship.
29. I believe waiting to have sex gives me one less thing to worry about.
30. I believe waiting to have sex demonstrates self-respect.
31. I believe waiting to have sex as a way to stay true to my moral or religious values.

Virginity Significance Open-Ended Question

1. What, if any, meaning or significance does virginity have for you?