Derogating from *compulsory sexuality*: Findings from a multi-sources multi-methods qualitative study on the virgin identity and its disclosure in emerging adulthood

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Emerging adulthood and Identity

❖ Moving from the ‘focal concerns’ of adolescence (i.e. sexual and peer relations) to the resolution of conflicting identities through switching from family as the main reference source to peers, to romantic partner → achieve complete independence (Henry & Kloep, 2002; Bynner, 2007)

❖ Achieving normative outcomes: formation of a stable romantic partnership and the consolidation of one’s identity: a personal AND social process

❖ Kraus (1998): To develop one’s visibility for others and one’s own sense of personal coherence, individuals must work on their individualized narrative to make it comprehensible by others. → Disclosure
Transition to sexual activity

- Sexual initiation is a normative life transition, occurring for most people in late adolescence (Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008).
- Canada: Mean and median age at 1st intercourse = 17 y.o.
- While up to 40% of Western youth remain virgins after age 18, these rates drop dramatically throughout emerging adulthood, with only 5% of males and 3% of females aged 25 to 29 remaining virgins (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005).
Social clock theory: social norms within a given cultural context dictate the ideal age window for important life transitions (Lehnart, Neyer, & Eccles, 2010). The more one undertakes a transition out of sync (off-time) with one’s peers, the more likely they are to experience challenges (Baltes, 1987; Elder, 1998).

With regards to off-time transitions to sexual activity, research traditionally focused on early initiators and experiences of virginity loss (Boislard & Poulin, 2011; Boislard et al., 2013; Halpern et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2013).

Scholars are now turning their attention to the late starters. Stigma associated with adult virginity has recently been highlighted (Gesselman et al., 2016)

- Perceived themselves to be stigmatized for inexperience
- Both nonvirgins and virgins reported a low likelihood of considering getting into a relationship with a virgin
Compulsory sexuality

❖ Describes “the assumption that all people are sexual” and the “social norms and practices that marginalize various forms of non-sexuality” (Gupta, 2015).

❖ Indicates the “diluted omnipresence of sexuality in our western contemporary present” and the “conceptualizations of the sexual imperative” (Przybylo, 2011).

❖ As such, individuals “who are not sexual enough” often experience pressure to perform the sexual expectations presented in the Western society (Gupta, 2015; Przybylo, 2011).
Study goal

❖ When EA do not comply to these norms, when and to whom do they disclose their non-doing (invisible stigma of being a late virgin)?

❖ This study aims to explore the stigma manifestations and impacts on virginity disclosure in EA.
Cultural context

- Montréal: bilingual Canadian city of 3M
- Cosmopolitan (‘cultural stew’)
- 4 Universities
- Progressive city
- Strong cultural identity
- Low religiosity in EA
Methods

A multi-methods study was conducted in Montreal (Canada) using 3 sources:

1) Semi-structured individual 90-minutes interviews were conducted with 26 heterosexual virgins aged 20-29 (63% males), recruited through posters, social media and snowballing.

2) Contents were extracted from five public virtual spaces (VS) with high volumes of interactions focusing on late virginity.

3) Twenty-eight scenes drawn from nine episodes of TV series popular among emerging adults (Girls, Jane the Virgin, Grey's Anatomy) featuring one adult female virgin character disclosing their virginity were transcribed and analyzed.
Methods

A team coding grid was developed and tested on 10% of the total data (n = 79 single-spaced pages) randomly selected and coded simultaneously by three trained assistants.

An inter-rater reliability test was performed on each coded sentence (k = 80.33) to refine the coding grid before coding the rest of the transcripts.
Content analysis (L'Écuyer, 1987)

1. Preliminary readings and establishment of a list of statements
2. Choice and definition of units of classification
3. Categorization and classification (mixed categories model)
   3.1. Statements were grouped into pre-existing and newly created categories (initial coding grid)
   3.2. Redundant categories were eliminated to create distinct categories (testing and refinement of the coding grid)
   3.3. Final categories of the coding grid were identified and defined (creation of codebook)
   3.4. All data was classified using the final coding grid
4. Quantification and statistical treatment of the data
5. Description of the results
6. Interpretation of the results
Results
The virgin identity is stigmatized in EA (1)

“For me it’s all about the stigma. If me saying “Yeah, I’m 36 years old and never had a [girlfriend] before” carried the same weight as “Yeah, I’m 36 and never been on an airplane before”, then I’d be ‘out there’ more, whatever that entails. How you’re viewed will always supercede whatever opinion you have of yourself. Doesn’t matter what you do for a living, how much [money] you take home, college degree, etc. You are ‘The Virgin’...again Stigma.” – Male, 36 y.o., VS

"[...] When I was younger it was chill, like nobody really cares that much. But then you're 25 and people don't want to date you if you're a virgin, because they're just like, "why would I do that?" – Female, 25 y.o., Interview
This stigma seems to increase over time (2)

“It only becomes more difficult once you're older. I get treated like a freak. It's like living in 2013 without a cellphone. Girls start flaking on me once they find this out about me. They know that I'm no prize. It's not like I'm at risk of being lost to another girl.” - Male, 30 y.o., VS

“But I’m at an age where my first time now represents shame, humiliation, something hard to experience [...] I would need to trust him in order to confess to him that no... I’ve never experienced anything.” - Female, 25 y.o., Interview
Stigma plays a role in the decision to disclose one’s virginity to others or not (3)

Reasons for non-disclosure

**To avoid a reaction** “The fear when you’re an adult virgin is telling someone the truth and having them react.”
-Mallory, 26
- “I'm just not ready to always hear, or not, like.. the possible reaction that it would be negative, like another "What?! Like, really? I'd rather not have to explain myself for my choice.” -Natasha, 24
- “I avoid it because of how people look at me.” -Stephanie, 24

**Never gone far enough romantically**
- “I haven't gotten to the point where I just like said it outright. I haven't had the relationship progress [...].” -Tally, 25

“It’s not necessary.” -Stephanie, 24
- "It's not their business." -Jade, 26
Stigma plays a role in the decision to disclose one’s virginity to others or not (3)

Reasons for disclosure

To be understood
"I will tell somebody I feel comfortable with. Just because I want them to be able to understand me and understand where I stand." -Jade, 26

To manage expectations (of partner)
“I'm not gonna engage in something physical with someone without them knowing because they're going to expect that we do stuff [...] If I'm doing something with a guy then I feel like I have to. It can get messy." -Viah, 25

Curiosity about partner's virgin status
”[...] it only came up because I was curious if he still was one. He never brought it up." - Natasha, 24
Responses following disclosure of one’s virginity range on a continuum (4)

Reactions from partners: A “full spectrum” of responses

“I get very understanding to ‘holy crap’ like, and just shut off, so... and in between that. [...] this one guy just said like ‘I don’t like blood.’ [...] and then just cut me off, blocked me.” – Elizabeth, 29

- "[...] either they'll try to pursue or just gonna be like "oh that's not what I was, kind of, talking about" and then it would just kind of fizzle out (laughs) and walk away." – Amanda, 28
- “Either it increases their respect for me or it makes them patronize me. [...] usually they'll be like, "yeah, yeah it's fine" but then when you start doing stuff with them then they keep pushing you to do more because they think that like every time they push a bit further then they'll get to the end.” – Viah, 25
Responses following disclosure of one’s virginity range on a continuum (4)

Reactions from peers: A mix of feelings

“[…] I can't really pinpoint something because sometimes they'll be both surprised, and like, wondering how, why, and ending on just accepting it. Or like just keeping wondering. I guess it's a mix of feelings they get. – Jade, 26

Surprise
• “What!?”

Disbelief
• “How is that possible?”

Need for explanation
• "But why?"

Acceptance
• “[...] she's never brought it up again.”
  – Natasha, 24
Responses following disclosure of one’s virginity range on a continuum (4)

Condescension
- “[...] she said 'ohh, it's so cute!' – no, it's not cute. I was 18, so now I'm 25, so it's still stressful.
  - Missy, 25

Not a big deal
- “Somebody was, like, ‘oh cool!’, somebody didn't take it as a big deal which I thought was great.”
  - Jade, 26

Responding with a disclosure of their own
- “[...] one day I’m out for drinks and it was [...] a bunch of girls and I was like 'I never had sex' and 'I never had sex either!' And 'I never had sex either!' (laughs) like too much." - Mallory, 26

Indifference
- “No one really cares. “ – Jenna, 25
Stigma following disclosure of one’s virginity is depicted in mass medias (5)

Series (Girls Season 1; Episode 4). **Context:** a virgin emerging adult female (S) is about to have sex for the first time and discloses her virginity to her partner (Matt) before they go further. He then rejects her and stops sex about to happen.

Matt: What? *(Matt stops kissing her and looks at her with a furrowed brow)*
S: What?
Matt: Yeah, it's just really not my thing. *(Matt moves off her and lays on the bed next to her, looking at the ceiling)*
S: What's not your thing?
Matt: Virgins. *(S is looking at him)*
S: Oh, okay, but, like, except for the fact that I haven't had sex, I'm, like, totally not even a virgin. I'm, like, the least virginy virgin ever. *(Continues not making eye contact with her while she looks at him.)*
Matt: Yeah, no offense, okay. I'll totally have sex with you once you've, like, already had sex. I just you know, it's like, virgins get attached or they bleed. It's like, you get attached when you bleed.
S: I so don't get attached when I bleed. You know, it's, like, amazing. I'm, like, totally not an attached bleeder.
Matt: Yeah, it's not gonna happen. *(S looks away and he looks at her.)*
Stigma following disclosure of one’s virginity is depicted in mass medias (5)

Series (Girls Season 1, Episode 12). **Context:** the same character (S) discloses her virginity to her friend (M).

S: I've never had sex, okay? A.K.A., I'm almost 22 and I'm a virgin. M: **Really?** (whispers)
S: Seriously. M: Okay. (whispers)
S: It's like everyone and their mother has had sex except for me. M: No, sex is-- sex is really, really overrated. (regular voice, calmly)

**M looks confused**
M: **Really?** (whispers) S: Yes. I have not.
M: **You haven't?** S: There was this one time at camp, and it was a few strokes up and down, but we were in the woods and it was kind of spooky, so... You think I'm a loser.
M: I don't-- I don't think you're a loser. S: I just told you that I'm a virgin. I don't--
M: **I don't know what to say. I mean, uh I hit-- I hit a puppy once with my car. I only had my learner's permit.** (quietly)

[S stares at M with furrowed eyebrows and her mouth open]
Discussion

❖ This study provides empirical evidence to the *social clock theory* in the sexual domain.
❖ EA virgins experience various manifestations of stigma, such as social pressure, rejection, exclusion, devaluation and humiliation.
❖ Impacts their decision to disclose their virginity
❖ The stereotyped representations of adult virgins in the medias may contribute to (or exacerbate) their stigma.

❖ FUTURE RESEARCH
Gender differences in disclosure process, contexts of disclosure and reactions of confidants
❖ Memes and media stereotypes of EA virgins
❖ Assess EA virgins needs (sexual education, intervention)
SO WHAT?

1) The virgin “label” is often stigmatizing
2) Increase visibility of adult virginity → a form of sexual diversity
3) Sexual education that includes critical thinking about compulsory sexuality

Thank you!
To the generous participants of the DiverJe project
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