



“Maybe We Should Destigmatize It”: Young Adults’ Perceptions about Instruction on Sexual Consent and Sexual Coercion During Adolescence

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Résumé de l'article

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Methods: This study utilized five focus groups to assess 32 college students’ perceptions about their adolescent experiences with instruction on consent and coercion in formal and informal sex education. The mean participant age was 22, and most were women, heterosexual, and Latinx.

Results: The results indicated that these young adults did not learn about sexual consent and coercion while in high school, but believed that these topics should have been addressed. They also believed that formal sex education should move away from abstinence-only or abstinence-forward education, and should not be rooted in fear-mongering. Gender impacted whether and what youth learned about sexual consent from parents and peers. While mothers talked to sons about using contraceptives and also about obtaining consent, they talked to daughters about negative sex outcomes, such as a ruined reputation or early pregnancy. Fathers were less likely to talk to their children about sex, especially daughters. Young men talked to peers about whether they had sex, while young women talked to their friends about the physical experience of having sex.

Implications: Implications support the implementation of sex education in high schools that facilitates not only physically safe, but also emotionally healthy relationships, as well as an urgency for a cultural shift towards the acknowledgment of intimate behaviours as normative processes among adolescents.

“Maybe We Should Destigmatize It”: Young Adults’ Perceptions about Instruction on Sexual Consent and Sexual Coercion During Adolescence

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Abstract

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Keywords: Sex education, adolescents, sexual consent, sexual coercion, teen dating.

Introduction

The #MeToo movement has reignited conversations about sexual consent and coercion, with many discussions revolving around how these concepts are not typically present in formal sex education (Burton et al., 2022; Cary et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2019). Failure to adequately discuss consent and coercion in educational settings is problematic as both terms have notoriously vague definitions (Beres, 2014; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Sexual consent can refer to an internal desire to engage in sex, an external agreement to have sex, and/or another person’s interpretation of consent to have sex (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Scholars have also distinguished between consenting to and wanting sex; one does not necessarily imply the other (e.g., only consenting to sex to please a partner; Katz & Tirone, 2009; 2010; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Sexual coercion has generally been defined as verbal persuasion to participate in sex and can range from mild, positive coaxing to extremely aggressive swearing and belittlement (Livingston et al., 2004; Pugh & Becker, 2018). Other research has also shown coercion to potentially include physical force or the administration of drugs or alcohol (Daspe et al., 2016; Strang et al., 2013). When persuasion is used to obtain sex, consent is not considered to be present, yet verbal coercion seems to be a prevalent component of sexual negotiation (Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007). Put more simply, the behaviours or statements that one person might perceive as consent or coercion, might not be perceived the same by someone else. Moreover, consent and coercion are often affected by contextual characteristics such as gender (e.g., Jozkowski et al., 2014), and intoxication (e.g., Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). Unclear definitions and the impact of contextual factors leave room for ambiguity and interpretation. Given the complexities associated with understanding and interpreting consent and coercion, education about sexual consent and coercion is one key avenue, among others, to encouraging healthy and wanted sexual behaviours.

Universities have started to pave the way in this regard, with many universities mandating affirmative consent policies (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). That being said, sex education for younger groups in the United States remains limited and controversial (Hall et al., 2016; Landry et al., 2000; 2003), partly as a result of unwarranted concerns that talking to youth about sex will drive earlier onset of sexual activity (Kramer, 2019; Unis & Sällström, 2020; Weaver et al., 2005). Regardless of these debates, it is not uncommon for teenagers to engage in sexual behaviours (including, but not limited to, intercourse; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018; Olmstead, 2020). All of this highlights the need for sex education that discusses healthy intimate behaviours.

When youth are exposed to sex education in school, the content tends to focus on the anatomy of the reproductive system, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and pregnancy prevention, with little to no content about navigating sexual encounters (e.g., communicating and interpreting consent or dealing with pressure to have sex; Burton et al., 2022; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2019). The CDC’s Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance research urges schools to increase efforts to implement and improve instruction on condom and contraceptive use among youth (Szucs et al., 2020), but there is also room for additional topics that speak to the complexities involved in sexual interactions. Over the past few decades, American sexual health advocates have pushed for the implementation of comprehensive sexual education (CSE) initiatives for school-based sex education curricula (over the traditional abstinence-only until marriage [AOUM] approach), which in more recent years has also started to include topics associated with sexual consent and healthy relationships (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2016). CSE, especially with sex-positive messages, such as those offered in a number of European countries, is associated with better health outcomes for adolescents, such as having safe and protected sex, and does not lower the age at which adolescents engage in sexual intercourse for the first time (Weaver et al., 2005; Unis & Sällström, 2020). Despite these encouraging observations about the health benefits of CSE, implementation of CSE in the United States remains inhibited (Hall et al., 2016), and even when it is taught, the content and focus is not universal across jurisdictions (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2016; Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2022).

Of course, youth can also learn about sex, and sexual consent and coercion, through other means, such as parents, friends and media. Parent-child communications about sex are somewhat normative, and the majority of parents reported talking to their children about at least one sexual topic (Dilorio et al., 2003; Widman et al., 2014). However, studies have suggested that the frequency and complexity of parent-child communications about sex are less than desirable and are rarely focused on sexual consent (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Padilla-Walker, 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020) or sexual coercion (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). Parents also reported feeling uncomfortable talking to their children about sex, and wanted to share the responsibility to broach the topic with schools (Weaver et al., 2001; Byers

& Sears, 2012). Little is known about conversations with peers about sex, but one study suggested gender differences exist, in which boys talk to their friends about condom use and STIs, while girls talk to their friends about whether or not they have had sex (Dilorio et al., 1999). There is no known research available to discern whether adolescents talk to their peers about consent or coercion, yet since it is not a common topic in sex education or in conversations with parents, it might be unlikely that youth would have the appropriate terminology or aptitude to talk to their peers about it. Although recent social media campaigns, such as #MeToo, might have impacted youth’s knowledge of sexual consent and coercion, some argue that these social movements have had little impact on ordinary American life (Taub, 2019). It has been observed that young people’s understanding of consent continues to be affected by traditional gendered sexual scripts in the aftermath of this movement (Setty, 2021). Finally, young people also consider mass and social media, including pornography, as a source of sex education (Hust et al., 2014; Simon et al., 2014), but they also reported that these sources do not always adequately convey information about communicating or interpreting consent (Cary et al., 2022; Rothman & Adhia, 2015). Considering that many adolescents engage in sexual conduct with similarly aged individuals and that navigating sexual interactions is complex, it is important to evaluate the information adolescents receive, including content of formal and informal sex education.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the information young adults received during adolescence about sexual consent and coercion through formal and informal sources (i.e., sex education in school, parents, friends and media). The study also sought to identify which sources young adults found most useful during adolescence. In addition, this research assessed the factors that facilitated a growing understanding of consent and coercion after high school. Finally, this study gathered information about young adults’ perceptions about strategies to improve formal sex education in high school, particularly the instruction on sexual consent and coercion.

Method

Data Collection

During the Spring of 2021, five focus groups were conducted via Zoom among college students at a racially diverse and public university in central California. The student population is largely Latinx, who commute to campus daily. College students were chosen, since they fairly recently finished high school in grade 12 and could likely recall their experiences with formal and informal sex education. They also could provide suggestions on how to improve sex education based on what they know now. Focus groups on sensitive topics like sex education have been found to be useful. Being in a group of peers can be conducive to sharing and elaborating on reflections on learning about sex (Cary et al., 2022; Frith, 2000; Herrman et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2019; Setty, 2021; Unis & Sällström, 2020). We were mindful of sensitive information being shared in the groups and sent participants information on campus support services following the focus group meetings; this information was also included in the consent form.

At the time of recruitment and during facilitation of focus groups, many universities remained under COVID-19 restrictions, so all procedures were conducted through digital techniques. Potential participants were recruited via email, through a process that randomly selected any student at the target university. The email invitation, automated and supported by Qualtrics, informed potential participants of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation in the study (which could be withdrawn at any time), and incentives provided for their time (\$50 gift card). Interested individuals were then prompted to complete a very brief survey linked in the invitation email. They were first asked to identify their gender identity (i.e., male, female, non-binary, transgender, other, prefer not to share) and sexual orientation (gay or lesbian, straight, bisexual, intersexual, queer, other, prefer not to share) in efforts to place them in pre-scheduled focus groups based on their responses. The focus groups were pre-scheduled to alleviate any attrition that may have resulted from multiple communications with potential participants. The purpose of categorizing participants into specific focus groups based on gender identity and sexual orientation was intended to increase participant comfortability, since content matter included possibly uncomfortable topics (e.g., content of discussion with parents and friends about sex). None of the potential participants identified as non-binary, transgender, other, or preferred not to answer. Once potential participants completed these initial questions, they were automatically provided the time and date of their respective focus groups (i.e., heterosexual men, heterosexual women, LGBTQ+ men, LGBTQ+ women) and asked if they were available to participate at that time.

Upon confirming availability to participate, the participants were sent an informed consent form via DocuSign (i.e., an electronic signature software). Focus groups were held through video conferencing on Zoom, which has

become a somewhat normative methodology as a result of social distancing requirements (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Video capabilities for all respondents, excluding the researchers, were disabled. Participants were instructed how to set up a pseudonym as their screen name, thereby enhancing confidentiality. Respondents were also asked to be somewhere private when they signed into the online meeting. Ethical approval was received from the researchers’ institution.

In total, 32 individuals participated in five focus groups, with each group ranging from four to 11 people. Two focus groups consisted of heterosexual women (group 1, $n=6$; group 2, $n=11$), while the remaining three groups consisted of a heterosexual men’s group ($n=5$), an LGBTQ+ women’s group ($n=6$), and an LGBTQ+ men’s group ($n=4$). The invitation was sent out to a total of 4,000 students (originally 2,000, followed up by another 2,000 to attain an increased sample), with 103 completed responses (many of which included interested students who could not attend the pre-scheduled focus group). Response rates were rather low, which was potentially due to the content matter being discussed, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to have pre-scheduled meeting dates. Content matter may have mattered most, as an identical research invitation, with no incentives to participate, was sent out the previous year and even fewer people were interested in participating. COVID-19 may have impacted some students, who may have become less likely to check university emails as a result of disrupted family lives and work schedules. The final sample of 32 students represented only those who were willing to participate, and were available during the pre-scheduled focus group times. Focus groups were scheduled in the early evening in attempts to accommodate a student population who often have numerous and overlapping school, work and family responsibilities. Data saturation was reached, since no additional themes emerged after the fourth focus group (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Focus groups ranged from 52 to 93 minutes, with the mean time allotment equaling 71 minutes. On average, focus group participants were 22 years old, at the time of the study. The majority of participants identified as women (71.9%). A little more than half identified as Latinx (52.2%), and other participants identified as White (28.7%), Black (8.6%), and Asian (10%). Two-thirds of the sample consisted of participants who identified as heterosexual, while the other third identified as LGBTQ+. Participants graduated from high school, on average, about five years prior to study participation. Although the average age and years from graduation might suggest that more advanced students participated in the study as compared to beginner students, the targeted university enrolls fewer students aged 18-21 as compared to the national average.

Focus groups were semi-structured and based on nine primary questions that asked participants about their experiences with formal and informal sources of sexual knowledge during adolescence. For instance, participants were asked about the nature and content of sex education in school, their understanding of sexual consent and coercion at the time, their discussions with parents and friends about sex, and what they found to be the most useful source of information. They were also asked about their perceptions on how to improve sex education, and how their understandings of sexual consent and coercion have changed since high school.

Both researchers identify as cisgender women and as heterosexual. One of us grew up in the United States and one of us in Europe, in a country where formal sex education is potentially more embedded in schools, comprehensive and repetitive than it is in the United States. Both of us have experience doing in-depth interviews with vulnerable populations (e.g., victims of violence, incarcerated women), as well as doing focus group interviews. The first author took the lead in the focus group interviews, with the second author taking notes during the interviews, and asking for clarification and follow-up during the interviews. We debriefed immediately following each interview and shared field notes, for instance, on how we had both felt and appreciated the respondents’ willingness to share their views, how their views concurred, and their eagerness to see change for future generations. The concurrence in the participants’ perspectives was remarkable, and the mutual support among participants was palpable, despite being in an online focus group without the use of cameras (participants would express agreement verbally or use emojis, including the thumbs up, heart, or clapping hands emoji, to demonstrate immediate reactions and not to interrupt the participant who was speaking).

Data Analyses

Focus group audio files were transcribed and then manually coded. Analyzing the data was an inductive process, in which open coding was used to develop themes (Williams & Moser, 2019), in line with a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). Both researchers conducted line-by-line coding independently and then subsequently assembled themes into a coding structure based on the research questions (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Interrater reliability was established through consistent meetings to discuss identified codes.

The coding structure resulted in seven primary codes. Generally, the literature suggests that a theme (i.e., primary code) can be established if it occurs within 50% of the sample (Campbell-Reed et al., 2013). However, this measure is somewhat less relevant in relation to focus group data as the sample refers to each group, rather than individual responses. Nonetheless, in this study, themes were established if they were identified in at least three out of the five focus groups. These overarching themes appeared in the various gender and sexual orientation groups, rather than being unique to a particular gender or sexual orientation. The researchers did identify themes specific to gender and LGBTQ+ groups; however, variations between groups is not within the scope of this study, and will be discussed in separate publications. In addition to primary codes, “sub codes” were similarly identified and illustrated specific phenomena related to primary codes. For instance, “sex education as physically relevant, but mentally improper” was identified as a primary code for formal sex education, with several sub codes (e.g., abstinence-focused, shame invoking, fear-mongering approach) characterizing the primary code. Some group differences were identified among sub codes.

The primary codes or “content themes” provided information about (1) access to sex education; (2) young adults' perceptions about the nature and content of sex education in schools; (3) the content of conversations about sex with parents as well as with friends; (4) the most relied upon resources for sex among adolescents; (5) their understanding of consent and coercion while in high school; and (6) the information young adults wished they had received about sex, sexual consent, and coercion during their teenage years.

Results

Making Do with Little Education

The results suggested that focus group participants usually experienced some form of exposure to sex education, but that these instances might have been extremely momentary. For some, an introduction to sex education occurred in middle school (grades 5-8), but not in high school (grades 9-12). When focus groups did mention having received sex education in high school, they often reported very limited instruction, since it was not its own curriculum. For instance, Nate, an LGBTQ+ man, stated, “... [it] was actually a summer school class and a summer course over a period of four weeks. So, it wasn't even in, you know, the general curriculum”. Instead, sex education often supplemented already existing courses or were additional, non-required electives. Most participants stated that sex education in high school ranged between one class period to around a week’s worth of instruction.

Similarly, many participants did not talk to their parents about sex at all. Among those that did talk to their parents, a few respondents indicated that they had received helpful information, but most mentioned these conversations as infrequent occurrences that lacked depth and clarity, and/or were shrouded in shame. For instance, Stephanie, a heterosexual woman, discussed her confusion with her mother’s attempt to provide sex education while watching a popular TV show when she was 8 or 9 years old, and the lack of support she received at a later age:

...My mom had kind of given me, like, “the talk” and her version of the talk was making me watch [...] ‘16 and pregnant’. [...] I didn’t even really know what sex was and she was just having me watch this show as kind of like, almost like a scare tactic into scaring me into not having sex [...], having a boyfriend or getting in a relationship with a partner, and at the time I was just more confused because she didn’t explain what sex was. [...] As I got older the only time that we had readdressed sex with my family was after my first relationship and I had been sexually coerced, and so I opened up to my mom about that and it was definitely a lot of shame. [...] So for [my parents] it was like [...] “you should have just never gotten in the relationship in the first place,” instead of actually, like, looking at the hurt I had gone through or the manipulation.

Formal Sex Education as Physically Relevant, but Mentally Improper

The nature of sex education in high school has been highly focused on maintaining abstinence and characterized by a social inappropriateness of talking about sex openly. Statements indicating that young adults felt fear and/or shame when learning or trying to communicate about sex with instructors while in high school was a common theme across all focus groups. Strategies to promote abstinence also often involved fear mongering, in which youth were instructed on the potentially devastating consequences of sexual behaviour on their future lives. In speaking about sex education in his school, Brad, a heterosexual man, stated:

...my high school just had an [STI] class and from what I recall, it was just basically designed to scare me into not having [sex]...like even the teacher, she brought in someone from outside and [the

speaker] was just like going into all the negatives about it and like, she'd tell us like all these negative stories of like kids that had sex in like high school and whatever, and then like their lives are ruined.

Focus group discussions about problems with the content of sex education were nearly universally shared. When youth experienced some form of sex education in school, the curricula revolved around anatomy of the sexual reproductive system, as well as STI and pregnancy prevention, and again, it is important to note that the overarching goal was to promote abstinence. As explained by Rebecca, a heterosexual woman, “Mine definitely referred to abstinence. I remember my teacher saying that the only safe sex is with yourself. And also they highlighted the different [STIs]. I remember that I was very scared”.

Although some aspects of sex were covered in formal sex education, young adults also mentioned that sex itself was not clearly addressed nor was there much instruction on what to do if there were consequences to sex or how to prevent them. Erica, an LGBTQ+ woman, said: “They taught us that there were all these sexual diseases, but not really what to do about them... nothing more in depth”. The general consensus apparent in all of the focus groups was one in which the participants seemed to be realizing that they did not learn much about sexual behaviour (or what to do in a variety of subsequent situations) in high school.

Participants also referred to the fact that sex education seemed outdated and ineffective. Cynthia, a heterosexual woman, recalled the curriculum as, “videos that came straight [out of] the 90s type of thing,” while Karina, an LGBTQ+ woman, said:

I don't even know if I felt like those were effective... because there was so much [sic] people [...]. I feel like it was more like they were trying to manage our behaviour or like, the gossip and people like laughing and having side conversations, more than anything else, so our class was like, overly crowded with this like short-term lesson that we had.

Here, the participants highlighted the potential importance of the facilitation of sex education in school, suggesting, again, that sex education is not conveyed as an important topic of discussion for youth. Outdated and ineffective sex education was also evident when participants talked about it being heteronormative. Carlos (LGBTQ+ man) was fortunate to have parents that he felt comfortable talking to about sex, because he certainly did not feel as if he would learn about LGBTQ+ experiences in formal sex education:

Since I am gay, like anything, all the sexual education that I had been taught, you know, if any, was also just heterosexual and so going to my dad and my stepmom about like, how to be safe and like, what it all entails and what, you know, having sex would mean and everything like that... I did talk with them a lot, and so they were informed, very informative.

Finally, several women participants noted that their sex education ignored women’s sexuality and an obvious, yet not discussed, aspect of sex: it can be enjoyable, and not just for men. Cynthia, a heterosexual woman, believed that not talking about women’s pleasure was concerning, because of the potential implications for understanding consent:

It's about how you get a woman pregnant, not anything about female pleasure... which I think is very problematic. When we don't talk about some sexual activities and women enjoying the sexual act, and not just happening to partake in it, it starts to you know, uh, confuse what consent means, and you know this leads to a whole host of problems that could probably be prevented if we just talked about the emotional sides of sex.

Prioritizing Abstinence is Potentially Harmful.

Given the findings thus far, it was not surprising that the participants in the focus groups did not report learning much about sexual consent or coercion during formal sex education in high school. Cynthia, a heterosexual woman, mentioned being taught that, “... if you didn’t want something to happen to you, then you don’t participate”, reinforcing that the focus was on abstaining from sexual activity rather than teaching youth about how to develop healthy relationships. In another focus group, two LGBTQ+ women alluded to how the failure to talk about the nuances of consent and coercion might leave individuals without the appropriate tools to navigate them. For instance, Karina explained that she felt disempowered to negotiate consent: “I wasn’t really informed on consent and it wasn’t something that I kind of knew or felt like I had the power to say no and remove myself from some positions”. Charlotte referred specifically to the lack of nuance provided about consent (and potentially coercion as well): “They never gave

us ideas or scenarios that we could apply to... they didn’t give us the full knowledge, it was just you were either raped or you consented, that’s it”.

Several participants shared direct or indirect experiences that spoke to the importance of in-depth teaching about sexual consent and navigating sexual coercion. Erica, an LGBTQ+ woman, talked about the experiences of other girls and believed that coercion was normative behaviour among boys: “I definitely know that, like, many girls were, like, coerced into having sex with their boyfriends when they weren’t really, like, into it, but at the time I was like, ‘oh that’s normal, it’s what boys do’.” Direct experiences, such as Stephanie’s (a heterosexual woman), highlighted the emotional turmoil that can result from not knowing about healthy sexual behaviours:

I was actually sexually coerced in my very first relationship, and I didn't actually learn what that even meant until a year after that relationship had ended. [...] I really felt manipulated in that relationship. But [...] I didn't know what the words were, and definitions for what had happened until actually learning about the information about a year later. After that relationship ended, it was actually very hurtful and [...] I felt very alone [...]. I just felt really sad, really depressed and really lonely, but then actually being able to put words to what had happened and learning about it made me feel a lot more comfortable knowing that what I had gone through was not uncommon.

Stephanie eventually learned about sexual coercion, which validated how she felt about her previous relationship. Had Stephanie received information about sexual coercion earlier, she could have felt this validation sooner.

Parent-Child Conversations (Mostly) Mirror School Content

Be Abstinent and Avoid Sexual Consequences.

While many participants mentioned that they did not talk about sex with their parents at all, others did. When young adults did talk to their parents about sex during adolescence, abstinence remained a prominent area of discussion, and participants associated this with culture and religiosity. For example, Billy, a heterosexual man, stated, “My family is kind of traditional, so more of the conversation was around abstinence and the consequences that come with sex so you know, just preparing yourself?”

Boys, Be Safe, Girls, Don’t Do It!

The content shared by parents varied by gender, and this often included parent gender as well. Mothers were more likely than fathers to talk to their children about sex overall, and the content varied based on the gender of the child. The focus group involving only heterosexual men suggested that parents (disproportionately mothers) talked to their sons about the possible consequences of sexual activity (e.g., pregnancy), protection (i.e., condoms), and the need to ensure sexual consent. Although most of these statements did not specify the term consent, the comments highlighted the need for the boys to ensure that both people are comfortable with engaging in sex. Jose, a heterosexual man, did refer to consent, but stated that the majority of content from parents was about protection:

The most we ever talked about was like, just protection and also like, kind of consent, like make sure both parties are okay with it. You know, anytime there’s any like, discrepancy or you know, where somebody is uncomfortable, you know, make sure you... stop with that, but you know, it’s just mostly like protection and that kind of stuff...

Although heterosexual men’s statements did not refer specifically to pregnancy or STIs, several comments suggested that parents talked to adolescent men about the potential outcomes of sexual behaviour.

Parents (again, disproportionately mothers) did not, however, talk to daughters about consent, and instead seemed to mostly focus, with a few exceptions, on the potentially negative consequences that can occur through sexual involvement. Sometimes, mothers used the possibility of a ruined reputation or non-supported parenthood as tactics to inhibit girls from having sex. Karina, an LGBTQ woman, talked about interactions with her mother that made her feel unable to talk to her parents about sex:

I strongly avoided it and I think my mother did as well. Or, what she would say was like, “if you had sex, you are either a whore or a slut, and those girls who are having sex in high school are that,” so, [...] I was like, “I’m never going to tell her this”... I just pretended like that’s not even something I’m thinking about at all.

Other maternal tactics to induce fear in their daughters involved discussing the life-long consequences of sex, such as pregnancy. Rebecca, a heterosexual woman, discussed how her mom let her know that she would be on her own in the case that she got pregnant:

My mom did tell me, like, “If you get pregnant, that’s your baby. I’m not gonna be taking care of it. If you need to get a job, you get a job to pay for diapers. [...] I’m not gonna raise another one.” So, that really scared me straight. I was like, “Wow, okay.”

Several women also emphasized that they could not talk to their fathers about sex. Cynthia, a heterosexual woman, believed her dad would have recoiled at any mention of sex:

...um, but like in regards to my dad, if you mention anything sexual, he gets like, really like, flustered and like, does not want to talk about it. He still thinks I’m six years old, so you know, it’s one of those things.

Most Friends Don’t Know Much Either

Due to the fact that sex education in school and through conversations with parents is so lacking, some pursued information through friends. Both gender and sexual orientation influenced the information that participants sought out from friends in high school. Men discussed conversations with peers as simple verification as to whether or not they had sex, with Billy, a heterosexual man, saying, “... so we did not kiss and tell in terms of details, but just like others have stated, ‘I had sex with this person. Cool, not cool’, um, that’s it.”

On the other hand, young women did not talk much to their friends about sex. However if they did, it was sometimes to verify with more sexually experienced girls whether their parents were honest about the general sexual experience. For instance, Rebecca, a heterosexual woman, recalled several friends being fearful of the perceived pain involved with having sex:

I had five female friends and the common word that they all used was just, a pain, like, there was just the pain level and I guess that’s the only thing their parents really told them was like, it hurts. Don’t do it and that was pretty much it, and that’s probably why we, we just stayed away from sex like, it hurts. Why would I voluntarily do something that hurts?

Again, the fear-mongering used by parents to promote abstinence was apparent, and girls sometimes used their friends to gauge what to expect when they began engaging in sexual activities. In some cases, however, more sexually active girls took it upon themselves to inform other girls about available resources, and pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

LGBTQ+ men and LGBTQ+ women discussed how they sought out fellow LGBTQ+ peers to discuss sexual topics. When asked about sources for information about sex, Carlos referred to friends. In the same breath, he acknowledged that other adolescents did not necessarily have accurate information about sex:

I definitely would talk with my friends about being gay. You know, that’s kind of how we got our education. It was just talking to each other and figuring out, you know, what do you do, what you don’t do... that was kind of our education, was finding out within our own community of friends and usually people of your own age. [...] Sometimes it wasn’t all like correct, because also, you know, we were in high school. And so, we, you know, some of us had only heard things, so we talked about, like, rumors about what it would be like, so not all of it was, like, true or very informative.

Google Teaches Sex Education

More so than friends, focus group participants went to mass and social media to learn about sex. Indeed, when asked about their most useful resource for sex education while in high school, many young adults, across all focus groups, referred to media. For instance, Emmanuel, a heterosexual man, said, “On the internet, Google”, which was quickly followed up with agreement among the other participants in his group. Beyond broader Google searches, participants also referenced specific sites or social media, including Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube. They also referenced other media sources, such as textbooks. Young women varied from men in that they also referenced teen magazines or fiction novels, such as Mary (an LGBTQ+ woman):

Okay, I have to add young adult books onto that as well. [...] I can think back to the first time I ever read a sex scene and was like, “Oh my God, is that what it’s like?” That was also a huge source.

In addition, while not specifically identified as a prevalent theme, young adults also sometimes mentioned pornography within the context of media searches, but some were not as forthcoming when talking about it. Karina, an LGBTQ+ woman, for instance, was rather upfront in discussing the use of pornography to learn about sex, and she also discussed how she had to “un-learn” that information later:

I don’t know if I’d quite call it learning, especially since I feel like I’ve had to do so much unlearning, but I would definitely say porn. Porn was like, the main source that I went to, to kind of like, learn like, more physical stuff...

At the same time, the heterosexual men’s group did not overtly state that they accessed pornography on the internet until prompted by one of the interviewers. Here, the interviewer asked, “So more so Google, than pornography or anything like that?”, which was followed by two men agreeing that pornography was a source of sex education.

Insufficient Understanding of Consent and Coercion in High School

Consent Means A lot of Things.

Data suggested that participants’ understanding of sexual consent during high school was rudimentary, and some gender differences were clear. Most participants referred to their understanding of consent as a mutually existing, firm, verbal yes, providing clear indication that both parties wanted to participate in sexual activity. In addition, men participants also understood that consent could be removed at any time and that being rejected for sex should be respected. Miguel, a heterosexual man, illustrated this point when he said, “Yeah, well for me it would just be like both having to agree, and I guess whenever someone felt uncomfortable, that was like, what drew the line. That’s when you, you know, knew to stop”. While findings pertaining to a mutual, verbal communication as indicative of consent existed among both men and women, women did not spontaneously mention that consent could be removed. Women participants focused mostly on verbal affirmation for consent, although a few women, in individual instances, also indicated that consent extended beyond physical activity to include the dissemination of nude photos, could require that “love” exists to occur, and that it was perceived as a concept that men needed to obtain from women. Kimberly, a heterosexual woman, provided insight about the latter:

It was more towards, like, if a male, you know, asked a female. It was never really the other way around. It was more like, if a female you know, said no. [...] It was just more basic like if they expressed no, then that’s like, not them consenting to having sex, but that’s about it.

Kimberly’s statement about men’s sole responsibility in obtaining consent was not a prevalent theme throughout the majority of focus groups, but, along with the other individual statements made by women, gave insight into possible gender differences that exist in girls’ and boys’ understanding of consent. The latter half of her statement, however, was a dominant theme, in which young men and women could not articulate much to define consent past a mutual, verbal agreement.

The Muddled Meaning of Coercion.

Findings about young adults’ knowledge of sexual coercion, during high school, indicated that youth learn even less about it than they do about consent. Focus group discussions about their high school understanding of sexual coercion typically resulted in responses indicating that sexual coercion was not a term that participants were introduced to in adolescence. Billy, a heterosexual man, provided the most often used definition of coercion by heterosexual focus group men, stating, “...the persistence of persuasion. So, persistent persuasion, so you know, [having a] current no, but [thinking to oneself] ‘let me see about advancements [to change this]’, essentially.” Heterosexual men stated that during high school, they understood that coercion meant trying to convince a person to have sex, and believing the possibility for sex remained even if the other person refused. LGBTQ+ men did not respond similarly, and instead indicated that they did not learn about coercion in high school. Beyond the broad explanation offered by heterosexual men, women’s adolescent views on coercion were somewhat limited to understanding it either as persistent persuasion or adverse experiences outside of romantic relationships, or as involving physical force or aggression within relationships, as depicted here by Mary, an LGBTQ+ woman:

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Yeah, I think at that time... sexual coercion... like the idea of that was usually rape, consisting of somebody who you didn't necessarily know that well or like, you weren't even in a relationship with. Or, if it was like, you know, maybe a couple, [...] you know... whoever, like, kind of started [coercing and] was like, really aggressive or angry.

Stephanie's (a heterosexual woman) observations further illustrate this well:

We never really talked about... what coercion would look like when you're in a relationship with someone. Um, so in high school, you know, a lot of people and myself included were, you know, in relationships and there was never any explicit conversation about the fact that even when you have a partner there is also an aspect where you could be coerced into doing something that maybe you're uncomfortable with or you weren't 100% sure that you wanted to do.

Karina, an LGBTQ+ woman, talked about how coercion was a typical behaviour among high schoolers, stating, “I do feel like it was normalized at the high school that I went to... for people to be persistent and keep asking and asking, and it was just a way of flirting”.

Participants' knowledge of sexual consent or coercion, even if the terminology was lacking, showed that adolescents tended to only have some base knowledge of these concepts, but they at least learned a little bit about it somewhere.

The Desire for a Truly Comprehensive Sex Education in High School

College and Experience Refined Sexual Knowledge.

A great deal of information about sex was learned once participants were enrolled in college, thus increasing their knowledge about sex, and sexual consent and coercion. Raquel, a heterosexual woman, explained that she received more information about the ways in which consent and coercion differ:

I kind of understood what consent was, but not really. I didn't even know what sexual coercion was except for when we took the [required university training on sexual harassment] that we have to do every year. That's when I was like, “Oh, so there's a difference”.

Learning could have also come from college courses that may have talked about similar topics. For example, Cynthia, a heterosexual woman, referred both to the mandatory university training, as well as a women's studies course as sources of new information about sex:

I took a women's studies class as a requirement and that class just, like, sparked like, you know, a passion in me to, like, really explore topics like this [in other courses].

Heterosexual men, in particular, referred to lived experiences as being a major source of information after high school, with Billy stating:

Being put in like, you know, actual situations where you actually have to, you know, recall those... you know, your education of what to do in this situation. So real life situations, more so.

Charlotte, an LGBTQ+ woman, alluded to college as an environment in which questionable situations are more visible, suggesting that it is not only direct sexual experiences that provided an enhanced understanding of nuances involved in sexual situations:

Being able to like, you know, go to football games, sometimes see a guy pulling a girl away and she doesn't look into it. You know, seeing things happen around you really expanded my thoughts and my knowledge on the situation, so I guess like the personal experience and being in a different atmosphere than in high school [...] and you're seen more as adults and it's easier to have those adult-like conversations.

Destigmatize Sex and Provide an Open Dialogue.

As a result of their experiences during and after high school, the focus groups had numerous thoughts on possible ways to improve sex education in high school. Here, the findings might best be characterized by Stephanie's (a heterosexual woman) emphatic statement in response to our question how sex education could be improved: “Man, where do I start!?” Participants wanted a multi-faceted approach within a full and focused curriculum that was offered

earlier than university. Focus groups overwhelmingly agreed on the need to move away from an abstinence-heavy approach, and remove fear-mongering and shame as a primary strategy to ensure it. Stephanie elaborated on the need to abandon abstinence-only education, because of the likelihood that youth are having sex and need tools to be safe, not shamed:

They're obviously still going to be partaking in sex, regardless of what we teach them. But if we teach them abstinence-only, then they're not going to, maybe, have the resources to know the proper protection, such as condoms, birth control, just being safe, even just in the terms of coercion and in terms of consent as well, and understanding that you don't have to partake in sex if you don't want to. There needs to be less shame involved with it, and it needs to be more of an open dialogue.

Rebecca, a heterosexual woman, added that knowledge is perhaps more effective than using scare tactics:

Sex is taught with fear like, we teach the children like, fear like, “it hurts, don't do it, you're gonna end up pregnant, you're gonna get [STIs] and then you're gonna die.” Like, I feel like we should replace that with knowledge.

Young adults also insisted that instructors and parents should acknowledge that adolescents will experiment with sexual behaviours and therefore, should be provided room for an open dialogue that normalizes sex. As Jose, a heterosexual man, argued, “... maybe we should destigmatize it, like, you know, it doesn't make sense to make it so scary when we all do it. We all know we do it”. Nate, an LGBTQ+ man, added that not normalizing discussions about sex could make students uncomfortable in talking to instructors about sex:

...but you know, maybe students wouldn't be comfortable telling a teacher or something, or asking a teacher a question when they're going to be with them for the rest of the school year. You know, they probably are thinking, “oh, well, what if that teacher thinks differently of me?” And again, that comes back to transparency and open communication.

Young adults across the various focus groups also strongly believed it was highly important to teach about consent and coercion, and to do so in an inclusive way. Participants thought that instruction should be sure to emphasize that each person should only be concerned about what he or she is comfortable with sexually, rather than succumbing to any peer or societal pressure. Being inclusive also referred to educating boys and girls about both sexes (e.g., women's anatomy and women's pleasure during sex), letting youth know that sex is not only about reproduction (e.g., that it is pleasurable), acknowledging all sexualities other than heterosexuality, including information about healthy and unhealthy relationships, and emphasizing that sexuality and sexual experiences are unique to each individual. Jose, a heterosexual man, for instance, talked about perceiving sex as solely a reproductive function when he was younger and the need to talk more about other sexual functions:

I think we should stop teaching sex just as maybe reproduction. You know, as a kid 'cause that's what I thought like, we just do it to make more of us. But I think we should teach it more as, like, it can be your own. You know, like, it's more... it's not just reproduction.

The need to move away from a heteronormative curriculum was emphasized in LGBTQ+ as well as heterosexual focus groups. Mary's (LGBTQ+ woman) observation, illustrates this particularly well, however:

I also think that like, a part of sex education, it's so in this little box, especially for just like, it's a man and a woman versus what like, you know, there's people who are asexual or just like I don't know, everything like that spectrum of like, the LGBTQ+ community [...] helps give a broader perspective. [...] Sex doesn't just involve, like, uh, penises, or vagina, like, it's so different for so many people.

Finally, participants perceived adults who provided comfortable spaces to talk openly about sex as a means to prevent unhealthy behaviours, increase accessibility to other resources (e.g., organizations to help with birth control), and improve general support navigating sexual topics and situations. Erica, an LGBTQ+ woman, indicated that having non-judgmental adults to talk to is important, because youth are often engaging in sexual behaviours anyway:

Underage kids having sex [in our State] is, you know, illegal, but they have it anyway and they don't have resources, like, if their parents aren't okay with it, but they're still doing it. [...] They have very limited ways to be able to get condoms or birth control, or also just to understand that certain relationships aren't healthy. They don't have people they can talk [to about] that kind of stuff, especially if they want to, but if they have to say something like, “Oh, I'm having sex with a 20-year-

old man”, there’s no one there to really tell them, “Oh my God, that’s probably really not okay and unhealthy.”

Participants believed that schools should provide a place and an adult who can meet students’ needs as related to questions or concerns about sexual behaviours. They suggested the best option would be for schools to employ a specific sexual resource person, rather than expecting a regular faculty member to fill the role. A specialized sexual resource counselor would be more comfortable with sexual topics, and would potentially reduce shame associated with sex and more likely to be inclusive of other sexualities. Fiona, a heterosexual woman, suggested that, without this space and person, students will continue to avoid talking about sex:

Most people in high school don’t feel like there is a space or a person or a part of the school where they could at any point go and get these, you know, questions addressed or needs met. [...] Kids view sex as shameful, or something that’s not meant to be talked about and you’ll continue to not talk about sex, because of that environment and that mentality.

Carlos, an LGBTQ+ man, added that using everyday faculty as a resource might be problematic if that person happens to be someone less focused and accepting of inclusivity:

I’ve also heard homophobic comments from certain teachers when they don’t think that anyone is listening and so [...] that also helps fuel the idea of having someone on the staff. [...] You know they’re going to be accepting, you know, of any sexuality, any gender, any questions, you know, heterosexual, homosexual or other. I think that would really help, because [...] in some areas, not all teachers and not all adults and authority figures are accepting.

Taken together, results suggested that participants believed that comprehensive sex education should be prioritized, normalized, and supported by like-minded individuals.

Discussion

The fact of the matter is that many adolescents engage in sexual activities (Haydon et al., 2012; Young et al., 2018), and the stigmatization of sex as a shameful behaviour, especially for girls (Sprecher et al., 2022), tends to inhibit adolescents from talking to adults about it (Motsomi et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2005). Youths’ perceived inability to talk to adults about sex, consent, and coercion is problematic as it likely limits their knowledge about healthy sexual behaviours. Our findings strongly suggested that heterosexual and LGBTQ+ individuals had mostly similar experiences with sex education, and both groups preferred comprehensive sex education that acknowledges sex as a normative, and often pleasurable, activity for both men and women, supporting similar research by Unis and Sällström (2020). The United States jurisdictions continue to implement either CSE or AOUM sex education approaches. Evaluations show that CSE is promising (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021) and includes information about making healthy, personal decisions about engaging in sex. However, the effectiveness of both approaches is measured through STI and pregnancy prevention (Blanton, 2019), rather than examining youth’s knowledge and understanding of sexually healthy behaviour, and that is an important shortcoming. Whether participants in this study received CSE or AOUM is unclear, but our results suggested that sex education was not prioritized, was abstinence-only or at least abstinence-forward, and, most importantly, consistently lacked information about the nuance that is present in sexual interactions. The latter affects young people’s understanding of sexually healthy behaviour. This is not new information. For decades, scholars and sexual health professionals have urged for improved sex education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Santelli et al., 2019), and while some progress has been made through the development and implementation of CSE, there is also evidence that sociocultural and political barriers continue to inhibit facilitation on a broader scale (Hall et al., 2016). The challenges associated with confronting these barriers highlight the importance of continually providing up-to-date, science-based evidence on best practices for sex education. This study reinforced ongoing arguments for further expansion and improvement of CSE.

Beyond wanting sex education that removes the stigma of conversing about sexual behaviour, the participants in the various focus groups also suggested numerous topics that are not currently included in CSE or AOUM curricula. Sex education tends to focus on reproductive anatomy, and STI and pregnancy prevention, without actually discussing the social components involved in sexual interactions, such as sexual consent or coercion (Burton et al., 2022; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2019). Given the role that both of these components play in sexual victimization and offending, they are more than pertinent to the curricula (Niolon, 2017; Righi et al., 2021). One recent

initiative also illustrates the potential value in speaking about consent more broadly in sex education curricula, in which consent means more than “no means no” or “yes means yes,” and instead also includes conversations about “healthy relationships, gender stereotypes, ethics, communication and empathy” (Sibosado & Webb, 2022, p. 2). This supplement to sex education curricula is referred to as “comprehensive consent education”, and can improve youth’s understanding of consent by allowing them to practice consent in lower pressure situations so that they are better prepared in higher pressure situations (Comprehensive Consent, 2022). An improved understanding of consent and coercion also empowers teenagers, which in turn may help prevent unpleasant and adverse experiences (Sprecher et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2005), and the need for more information does not cease there. Young adults felt that they did not learn about how to handle negative sexual experiences. When adverse sexual experiences occur, knowledge about sexual consent and coercion can promote victim resiliency, in which victims might be less likely to engage in self-blame and other negative cognitions associated with such experiences. For example, Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act (EAAA; also known as Flip the Script with EAAA) is a Canadian-based, university-level program founded in theory and research (see Nurius & Norris, 1996; Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Rozee & Koss, 2001; Ullman, 1997), indicating that women face challenges in confronting sexually coercive males. EAAA teaches women about the possibility that they might experience sexual coercion on the university campus, and the corresponding “red flags” of such behaviour (Senn et al., 2022). A Canadian evaluation of the program found that women who were raped post-intervention blamed themselves significantly less after participating in the EAAA program than women in the control group (Senn et al., 2022).

Participants in our focus groups also wished they had learned more about other sexualities, in which they felt that sex education was too heteronormative, and failed to include enough information about women’s anatomy and sexual experiences. These findings reinforced suggestions offered by other studies in relation to being more inclusive (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Pound et al., 2016), and for including sexual consent in sex education curricula (Willis et al., 2019).

The findings also supported best known practices by identifying the importance of well-qualified and highly trained instructors and staff, and more inclusive accessible sexual health services (i.e., inclusive in the sense of considering sexual diversity, for instance; CDC, 2022), which was also highlighted in Pound et al.’s (2016) international comparison. Participants believed that sex education instructors should specialize in the topic, rather than be a Biology teacher serving in the role as sex educator, for example. Similarly, and in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) and Weaver and colleagues’ (2005) research, the results showed that young adults should have easy access to sexual health services, of which one avenue could involve having a sex resource person available at schools. Ensuring that sex education classes are taught by a trained and qualified instructor, while also providing additional resources outside the classroom, should improve students’ comfortability (Rose et al., 2019), and potentially increase the likelihood that students will talk to qualified individuals about sex related matters. In addition, access to sexual health services might increase youths’ use of condoms and contraceptives (Ross & Hardee, 2013). Accessibility can also be tied to the frequency and duration of sex education courses. These findings highlight the need for a full, up-to-date curriculum that is presented to youth, preferably in an age-appropriate capacity (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). At the very least, improved sex education curricula should occur in middle and high school, and preferably prior to the normative age of onset of sexual activity.

Parents are another source of sex education. Although many parents discussed sex to some degree with their children (Dilorio et al., 2003; Widman et al., 2014), research has suggested that it is often lacking the depth needed to provide youth with the information required to traverse the complexities of sexual behaviour in a healthy manner (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Padilla-Walker, 2018; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). Many parents also do not talk to their children about sex, because of the possible discomfort incurred by such conversations (Byers & Sears, 2012; Weaver et al., 2001). Children also tend to feel uncomfortable about having these conversations with their parents (Motsomi et al., 2016). Initiatives should be created that inform parents about the risks associated with not teaching adolescents about sex at home and in school (in many states in the USA, parents are allowed to opt their children out of sex education courses in school, which should be discouraged based on our findings). This should include a message impressing on parents that acknowledging sexual behaviour among adolescents, and talking about the complex relational and interactional dynamics involved, does not equal encouraging risky sexual interactions. Instead, it enables adolescents to safely navigate teen dating. It is more problematic for parents to ignore or refuse to acknowledge that their adolescent children are having sex, than to have open and honest conversations about sex. Actually, more education on healthy sexual behaviours has been associated with delayed onset of sexual activity (McElwain & Bub, 2018), and, even more importantly, with safer, healthier sexual behaviours (Holman & Kellas, 2015; Rogers et al., 2015).

By and large, adolescents are not learning adequate information about sex through school or parents. As a result, they become self-reliant and seek out their own information through peers or media. Young adults reported little substance in discussions with friends about sex. Boys merely talked about whether or not they had sex, without additional details, while girls seemed less likely to talk to their friends about sex at all (with the few exceptions in which girls talked to their friends about expectations of sex). Results determining that youth do not seek out much information about sex from friends might be positive in that their friends may not have much better information than they do, given the limited formal and informal sex education they are all receiving.

Adolescents acknowledged that information from peers was likely flawed and potentially based in gossip, and indicated that they did not receive sufficient and clear information from their parents and in school. As a result, many sought out information through the internet. Young men and women used various internet sites during high school to seek out information about sex, with a few explicitly mentioning pornography. Young women also referred to magazines and fiction as a source of sex education. While there are certainly great sources of information about sex on the internet, there are also inaccurate and stereotypical sites that provide potentially harmful information. For instance, online information, especially pornography, might provide unrealistic expectations of sex and depict unhealthy consent and coercion scenarios (Watson & Smith, 2012). In addition, pornography tends to focus on men’s pleasure, which can potentially reinforce hegemonic masculinity in sexual relations (Garlick, 2010). A potential resolution to inaccurate sexual perceptions or inappropriate behaviours that might be learned through pornography might involve incorporating a program called Respectful Relationships into sex education curricula. This Australian program focuses on developing healthy relationships of all kinds, and has a component specially designed to dismantle the misogyny of mainstream pornography (O’Mara & Duncanson, 2021). Another possible improvement might involve the use of media by instructors to illustrate positive and negative sexual behaviours, and the sexual scripts that might impact their occurrence (Little, 2021). Both programs might be able to help deconstruct internalized sexual and gender scripts provided in media, while also promoting respect within interpersonal relationships. Generally, seeking out information about sex on the internet, without additional guidance, might lead to a slew of additional problems. Adolescents’ tendency to seek out privately assessed information about sex further promotes the importance of oversight by sex education facilitators.

A final, positive finding involves the heightened level of knowledge and understanding of sex, and sexual consent and coercion that occurs once young adults enrolled in higher education. All American universities that receive federal funding need to have a Title IX coordinator (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), who often organizes annual sexual harassment prevention training for incoming and current students. Similar to what Cary et al. (2022) found in their focus groups with college students on their conceptualizations of consent following the #MeToo movement, our findings suggested that these college trainings, that include information on consent and coercion, were appreciated and were often the first clear introduction to the concept of consent and coercion. Not all young adults will pursue higher education, however, and may miss out on the vital information provided there. In addition, the onset of sexual behaviour often occurs prior to university enrollment, thereby providing a need to educate youth and young adults earlier on.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the use of a one university, college-only sample, the potentially enhanced desire of participants to be a part of this research study, concerns about memory bias or the transference of current knowledge in place of retrospective understanding, and the likelihood that participants may have been unwilling to share some information with a group environment. All participants were enrolled in college at one university, so there is no information from individuals who did not have access to university training and education about sex. This may have been important regarding participants’ knowledge and understanding of sex, and sexual consent and coercion following high school, for example, if non-university enrolled individuals learned more through direct sexual experiences than university-enrolled people. The results are also not representative of the American university population. There were also many more women than men, which may have been the result of women’s increased interest in the topic. Some participants may also have been enrolled in certain university courses that heightened their intrigue to participate in this study. In addition, an average of five years had passed since participants were in high school, so it is possible that some memory bias existed among the sample. Two structured research questions asked participants about their knowledge of sexual consent and coercion during high school. Asking about their retrospective knowledge may have resulted in responses that were not fully distinct from their current knowledge, thereby potentially skewing those results. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to do their best to reflect back on their

knowledge during high school, in which they were able to verbalize that they often did not know the terms for consent or coercion, or fully understood what these concepts meant, prior to university enrollment. Finally, some of the questions asked, or content that arose in focus groups, may have made participants uncomfortable and therefore unwilling to share their experiences or perspectives. For instance, some participants were willing to talk about using pornography as a resource for sex, but it was not enough to develop a theme. It is possible that other focus group members used pornography as a sexual resource, but were too uncomfortable to share this with others.

Conclusion

This study shows the ever-present need for improvements to sex education in the United States. For decades, research has shown that traditional abstinence-focused approaches, which seem to involve fear-mongering and shaming tactics, do not inhibit adolescents from having sex (Haydon et al., 2012; Weaver et al., 2005; Young et al., 2018). Several countries outside the United States seem to have better acknowledged and responded to failures of historical sex education, with many incorporating sex education prior to high school, implementing CSE on a wider scale, and making sexual health services more easily accessible (Sex Information and Education Council of Canada [SIECCAN], 2022; Weaver et al., 2005), all practices supported by this study. These efforts should continue, and the United States should follow suit. It is time to acknowledge that youth are having sex, rather than pretending it is not happening. In order to support healthy dating during adolescence and young adulthood, a time when sexual dating violence is prevalent (Niolon et al., 2017), sex education should be a top priority in schools and should include instruction on the complexities of sexual consent and coercion, among other topics. We, other scholars, sexual health advocates, medical professionals, parents, and even the young people themselves, support sex education reform. It is beyond time to give young people, in a proactive manner and as part of a comprehensive and accurate curriculum, the words and tools they need to navigate intimate relationships and sexual activity in a safe and healthy manner.

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