

**“Maybe it’s not so black and white”: Experiences of virginity among a
sample of Canadian young adults**

by

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ABSTRACT

“MAYBE IT’S NOT SO BLACK AND WHITE”: EXPERIENCES OF VIRGINITY AMONG A SAMPLE OF CANADIAN YOUNG ADULTS

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The present study investigated the experiences of virginity among 21 self-identified virgins (18 females/women and 3 males) between 20 and 26 years old. Participants took part in either a face-to-face or video-chat interview and were asked about their experiences of virginity and their conceptualizations of virginity. A thematic analysis was conducted on the data. Participants varied in the amount of importance that they placed on their virginity, but the majority considered it “not a huge deal” or as “just a fact” about them. Participants accounted for their virginity by indicating that they were actively resisting a change until certain conditions were met, or attributed their virginity to situational factors. Participants also spoke about the influence of socio-cultural context, specifically religion, the media, their families, and culture. Lastly, participants differed in the ways in which they conceptualized the sexual behaviours that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
• Language use.....	2
• Literature Review.....	2
○ Defining sex.....	2
○ Conceptualizations of virginity and virginity loss.....	9
○ Predictors and correlates of virginity status.....	15
○ Sociocultural influences on the experience of virginity.....	16
○ Virginity in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities.....	18
○ Affective experiences of virginity.....	20
• Summary and Limitations of the Literature.....	26
• Objectives of the Present Study.....	30
Chapter 2: Method.....	31
• Positionality.....	31
○ Theoretical stance.....	37
○ Dual identities.....	32
• Eligibility Criteria.....	33
• Procedure.....	34
• Participant Characteristics.....	35
• Data Analysis.....	36
• Ethical Considerations.....	40
Chapter 3: Results.....	41
• (Un)Importance.....	42
• Accounting for Virginity.....	48
○ Active resistance to changing status.....	48
▪ <i>Resistance related to possible partner: “Right person”.....</i>	<i>49</i>
▪ <i>Resistance related to possible partner: Specific kind of person... ..</i>	<i>49</i>
▪ <i>Resistance related to possible partner: Special feelings.....</i>	<i>51</i>
▪ <i>Resistance related to relationship: Be in a specific kind of relationship.....</i>	<i>52</i>
▪ <i>Resistance related to relationship: Relationship characteristics..</i>	<i>54</i>
○ Situational factors related to ongoing status.....	55
• Socio-Cultural Context.....	57
○ Social psychological factors.....	57
▪ <i>Isolation.....</i>	<i>57</i>
▪ <i>Insecurities.....</i>	<i>58</i>
○ Social/Societal pressure.....	61
▪ <i>No/Not much pressure.....</i>	<i>61</i>
▪ <i>Pressure.....</i>	<i>62</i>
○ Others’ perceptions of virginity (as non-normative/problematic).....	65
○ Cultural influences.....	71
▪ <i>Religion.....</i>	<i>71</i>
▪ <i>Local/Community culture.....</i>	<i>75</i>
▪ <i>Family.....</i>	<i>75</i>

▪ <i>Media</i>	76
▪ <i>Societal influences in a broader sense</i>	77
• Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status	78
○ Penile vaginal intercourse (PVI)	79
○ PVI, anal intercourse, or oral sex.....	83
○ Anything intimate.....	83
○ Participant resistance to virginity/non-virginity dichotomy.....	85
Chapter 4: Discussion	87
• Summary of Findings	87
• Connections with Prior Research	88
○ (Un)Importance.....	88
○ Accounting for virginity.....	90
○ Socio-cultural Context.....	91
○ Sexual behaviours that constitute a change in virginity status.....	96
• Social Constructionist Perspectives on Virginity	98
• My Stake in the Research	99
• Strengths and Limitations	100
• Areas for Future Research	104
• Applications of Research	105
References	107
Appendices	113
Appendix A- REB Certificate	114
Appendix B- Recruitment Materials	115
Appendix C- Research Participation Consent Letter	118
Appendix D- Demographic Questionnaire	121
Appendix E- Interview Guide	122
Appendix F- Third Thematic Map	123
Appendix G- Final Thematic Map	124

List of Abbreviations

PVI- Penile Vaginal Intercourse

PAI- Penile Anal Intercourse

AASECT- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists

LGBTQ- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to Blank (2007), the word virgin derives from the Latin word “Virgo” which has been defined as an “unmarried woman.” Historically, virginity was solely discussed in relation to women (Blank, 2007). However, it is arguable that this is no longer the case. Current research on virginity includes both women and men as participants (e.g., Carpenter, 2005; Sprecher & Treger, 2015). The majority of Canadian young adults are non-virgins, a minority are not (Rotermann, 2012). This group of individuals varies in that there are a variety of factors that influence one’s decision to not engage in sexual activity that would constitute a change in virginity status (Haydon, Cheng, Herring, McRee, & Halpern, 2015). Virginity is an under investigated topic of study in the field of human sexuality, although it is a topic that has been present in the literature for the last several decades (e.g. Harold & Goodwin, 1981). When virginity is studied, it is often with heterosexual individuals as participants (e.g. Sprecher & Regan, 1996) and participants are usually categorized by the researchers as virgins for not having engaged in penile vaginal intercourse (PVI) (e.g. Gesselman, Webster, & Garcia, 2016; Humphreys, 2013). Categorizing individuals as virgins if they have not engaged in PVI is problematic, as other research has demonstrated that individuals vary in terms of the behaviours that they categorize as sex (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton, & Abramson, 2000; Gute, Eshbaugh, & Wiersma, 2008; Hans & Kimberly, 2011; Mehta, Sunner, Head, Crosby, & Shrier, 2011; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010). Thus, research that allows individuals to identify themselves as virgins and to determine the behaviours that would constitute a change in virginity status would make a significant contribution to the literature. This is one of the aims of the present study.

In the following section, I make a note about the use of language in this thesis. Subsequently, I provide a literature review that includes an overview of the research to date on the following: definitions of sex, conceptualizations of virginity and virginity loss, predictors and correlates of virginity status, socio-cultural influences on the experience of virginity, affective experiences of virginity, and virginity in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. I end this chapter with a summary of the objectives of this research.

Language use

In much of the past research (e.g. Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Trotter, & Alderson, 2007), a change from virginity to non-virginity is discussed in terms of “virginity loss.” However, I have made a conscious effort in both my interviews and the write-up of my thesis to avoid this language, as I believe that it can have negative connotations; loss is often associated with an unfavourable outcome. Instead, I chose to speak about “changes from virginity to non-virginity” or “changes in virginity status.” However, as is the case with the majority of language that we use, there are issues with this terminology as well. For instance, the term “status” could potentially be value laden and could possibly imply messages of importance associated with virginity, though this is not my intent.

Literature Review

Defining sex. In their seminal quantitative study, Sanders and Reinisch (1999) sought to determine what behaviour would “count” as sex, using a sample from a large university in the Midwestern United States. Undergraduates completed a questionnaire during a supervised group session that included a list of 11 different sexual behaviours. Participants were asked, “Would you say you ‘had sex’ with someone if the most intimate

behaviour you engaged in was . . .” (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999, p. 276) followed by one of the 11 sexual activities, and were asked to answer with either “yes” or “no.” Almost all participants (99.5%) indicated that they would say that they had “had sex” if the most intimate behaviour that they had ever engaged in was PVI. In addition, 81% indicated they would say that they had “had sex” if they had engaged in penile anal sex (PAI). Moreover, approximately 40% would say they had done so if they had engaged in oral-genital contact, regardless of whether they were in the giving or the receiving role. Furthermore, 15.1% of the sample stated that having a person touch their genitals was considered “having sex,” while 13.9% said the same of touching somebody else’s genitals. A minority of the sample indicated that they would indicate that they had had sex if they engaged in deep kissing (2%) or touching of the breasts or nipples (3%). Participants were inclined to label the sexual behaviours that they themselves had engaged in as “not sex.” For example, those participants who reported oral-genital contact as the most intimate sexual experience they had had were more likely than other participants to rate oral-genital contact as not counting as having “had sex” (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). These findings provided initial evidence that there is disagreement with regard to what is meant by “having sex” and that one’s own level or type of experience might influence one’s definition.

Gute, Eshbaugh, and Wiersma (2008) found that participants in their study of undergraduate students (N= 839) were more likely to report that sexual behaviours, aside from PAI and PVI, would constitute as sex if they were engaged in by a significant other outside of their committed relationship when compared to ratings if they themselves had participated. This finding provides support that contextual factors can play a role in an

individual's conceptualizations of having sex. Pitts and Rahman (2001) utilized Sanders and Reinisch's (1999) survey and found similar results using a UK sample of 190 female and 124 male undergraduate students. More specifically, the majority (98.7%) of this sample also reported experiencing PVI as having "had sex" while 77.9% reported experiencing PAI as having "had sex" and 33.6% said the same about oral sex. However, a larger proportion of this British sample including experiencing behaviours such as deep kissing and oral contact with breasts/nipples as constituting having "had sex" when compared to the American sample in Sanders and Reinisch's (1999, p. 1) study. This provides evidence that sociodemographic location might have an influence on individuals' perceptions of what should be considered as sex. Moreover, Hans, Gillen, and Akande (2010) found that participants in a sample of 477 American undergraduate students were less likely to constitute oral sex as sex than those participants in the Sanders and Reinisch (1999) sample (19.3% vs. 40.1%) which they attributed to a historical change in the sociocultural conceptualizations of oral sex.

More recent quantitative work by Sanders and colleagues (2010) utilized a representative American sample via telephone survey. Participants (N = 486) ranged in age from 18 to over 65 years. The framing of the question remained the same as in Sanders and Reinisch (1999). However, this study also examined the effect of contextual factors on participants' responses; these included condom use, duration of the sexual encounter, and whether or not female orgasm or male ejaculation occurred. Participants in Sanders et. al (2010) also varied in terms of their conceptualizations of what was meant by "having sex." This time, 92.9% of participants stated that they would consider PVI in a variety of contexts (e.g., very brief or with no male ejaculation) as "having sex,"

81% indicated the same for variations of anal sex experiences, 72% indicated this for oral sex (performed or received), and 46.5% said the same for manual stimulation (performed or received) (Sanders et al., 2010). Male ejaculation was the most salient contextual factor influencing whether or not PVI was considered to constitute “having sex.” When compared to the other variations of PVI, participants were significantly less likely to respond “yes” to PVI as constituting sex without male ejaculation than when ejaculation had not occurred. The same effect was not found with the items pertaining to penile-anal sex. For men only, there was an effect of age. When compared to the middle two age groups, the youngest and oldest male participants were least likely to state that manual stimulation of genitals and oral sex constitute having “had sex” (Sanders et al., 2010). Using similar methodology, Hans and Kimberly (2011) compared results from samples of 454 undergraduate students and 126 American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) professionals. Participants from the undergraduate sample were more likely to include different sexual behaviours, such as oral sex, as not constituting sex. This provides support that sexual knowledge and experiences can have an influence on one’s conceptualizations of sex (Hans & Kimberly, 2011).

Randall and Byers (2003) were the first to quantitatively investigate the views of university students (N = 164) in a Canadian context, focusing on participants’ definitions of sex, sexual partner, and unfaithful behaviour. These authors also sought to examine the possible effect of orgasm on students’ perceptions. They utilized the 11-item list developed by Sanders and Reinisch (1999) with an additional 4 items which included the phrase “resulting in orgasm” for genital touching, oral-genital contact, PVI, and PAI. The

behaviours that were most likely to be included in participants' definitions of "having sex" included PVI (with or without orgasm) (97.6% and 94% respectively) and PAI (with or without orgasm) (83% and 79% respectively). Overall, the sexual behaviours that involved genital-oral contact were considered by less than 25% of participants (19.5-23.2%) to constitute "having sex." The sexual activities that were least likely to be included in definitions of "having sex" were masturbating to orgasm while in contact over the telephone or computer, or deep/tongue kissing (2.4% for each). Participants were also more likely to include a behaviour in their definition of "having sex" if the behaviour resulted in orgasm than if it did not. This study provides further evidence that although many participants agree with what is meant by "having sex," there are still variations in definitions (Randall & Byers, 2003).

Most quantitative research to date on definitions of "having sex" has relied on providing examples of behaviours and contextual factors and asking participants to indicate if they consider these activities to constitute sex (Bogart et al., 2000; Gute et al., 2008; Hans & Kimberly, 2011; Mehta et al., 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010). This research suggests that there is wider agreement that PVI and PAI would be considered sex more often than oral sex or other activities. This research has also demonstrated that perceptions of what "counts" as sex vary depending whether the participant is asked to evaluate this standard for themselves, or to speak about norms or specific others (Gute et al., 2008; Hans & Kimberly, 2011; Mehta et al., 2011; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010). However, Bogart et al. (2000) adopted another measurement approach. Specifically, these authors presented their 223 undergraduate student

participants with descriptions of two fictional characters (one male and one female) and asked participants to indicate if these fictional characters would constitute different sexual behaviours as sex. The use of fictional characters was intended to increase the validity of participant responses, as the authors believed that by using fictional characters, participants would be less anxious and more likely to disclose their personal beliefs than when reporting on their own attitudes. Basing their hypotheses on the work of Sanders and Reinisch (1999), Bogart and colleagues (2000) hypothesized that participants would be more likely to classify PVI as sex than either PAI or oral sex. It was also hypothesized that participants would state that these characters would be more likely to classify sexual behaviours that resulted in orgasm as sex than behaviours that did not end in orgasm. This was predicted to be especially true for the scenarios in which the male character experienced orgasm. The authors also predicted that the participants would report the female character would have a broader definition of sex, including more activities. Lastly, the authors expected to find a significant (participant gender) by (character gender) interaction in terms of participants' categorizations of sexual behaviour: it was hypothesized that women would place more importance on the female character's orgasm and that men would place more importance on the male's orgasm (Bogart et al., 2000).

Participants (N = 223) completed an anonymous, self-report questionnaire. Participants were asked whether or not they would consider 16 different sexual behaviours as sex after reading the following scenario: "Jim and Susie meet at a bar. They go back to his apartment where they engage in... only Jim [or Susie] has an orgasm. Would Jim consider this sex? Would Susie consider this sex?" for each of the 16 sexual behaviours (Bogart et al., 2000, p.110). Participants also reported on their own prior

sexual experience. The majority (96%) of participants stated that Jim would consider PVI as sex; 98% stated the same for Susie (regardless of whether orgasm took place).

Additionally, 92% of participants reported that Jim would consider PAI as sex and 93% said the same for Susie. Almost half of participants thought Jim and Susie would consider oral sex as sex; specifically, 41% of participants stated that Jim would consider oral sex as sex and 46% said the same about Susie. Fewer participants rated oral sex as sex as compared to vaginal sex and anal sex; this difference was statistically significant.

Participants reported the highest levels of agreement between Jim and Susie as to what they considered sex in scenarios where PVI or PAI took place and both parties experienced an orgasm. There was least agreement in scenarios that included oral sex when only one party had an orgasm with participants reporting that Susie would be more likely to consider this activity as “sex” than Jim would. Lastly, participants’ responses were not influenced by their own sexual experience (Bogart et al., 2000).

In addition, Mehta et al. (2011) utilized qualitative data from a longitudinal pilot study in order to examine how women specifically define sex, what they understand to be the initiation and conclusion of a sexual event, and how these women identify unique sexual events. Participants included women between the ages of 15 and 24 years who had engaged in PVI. Researchers asked participants to define sex, what sex meant to them, and the behaviours that they would constitute as sex. All of the women in this sample agreed that PVI constitutes sex. However, there was disagreement with regards to other sexual acts (aside from kissing which was deemed as not constituting sex). In addition, some participants indicated that an instance of orgasm is necessary for an act to be considered sex. Furthermore, participants stated that the beginning of a sexual event

occurs with foreplay and typically ends with orgasm, by either partner, or a “more general feeling of satisfaction” (Mehta et al., 2001, p. 4). Although participants were not directly asked about relational context, many participants in this sample discussed this as well as distinguishing between having sex and making love (Mehta et al., 2001).

Conceptualizations of virginity and virginity loss. As seen above, a number of studies have investigated individuals’ conceptualizations of what is meant by “having sex” (e.g. Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). In 2007, Trotter and Alderson examined the ways individuals conceptualized the term virginity loss alongside definitions of “having sex.” The purpose of their study was to broaden the understanding of these terms and examine the influence of contextual factors and prior sexual experience on participant conceptualizations. These authors were also the first to utilize more than a dichotomous conceptualization of sexual behaviour (i.e., one that compares those participants who have engaged in a specific behaviour with those who have not). Instead, Trotter and Alderson asked participants about their sexual experiences using a 4-point Likert scale: “never, “once”, “few times”, “many times”. This study was also unique in that it was the first of its kind to include the effect of participants’ experience with same-sex partners. With a sample of 155 undergraduate students, Trotter and Alderson utilized the same list of items developed by Randall and Byers (2003) but also asked about orgasm experience in relation to PVI and PAI and each of the three masturbation items (in each other’s presence, while in telephone contact with one another, and while in computer contact with each other). Specifically, the engaging in those behaviours was considered in conjunction with whether “you,” “the other person,” “both of you,” or “neither of you reach orgasm.”

Regardless of whether or not orgasm occurred, scenarios including PVI (76%-99%), PAI (56%-87%), and oral-genital contact (18%-47%) were most likely to be included in definitions of “having sex” when compared to other sexual behaviours (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Touching of the genitals was more likely to be considered “having sex” if orgasm occurred (18-34%) than if it did not, regardless of the sex of the partner (Trotter & Alderson, 2007).

These results were consistent with participants’ definitions of virginity loss for PVI; 74-99% of participants included scenarios that involved PVI (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). However, participants were less likely to include scenarios that involved PAI as constituting virginity loss (49-60%) than they were to include PAI as sex. In terms of sexual acts constituting virginity loss, women were more likely to include scenarios involving same sex oral-genital contact (18-29%) than were men (7-16%) but the opposite was found regarding oral-genital contact with another sex partner (3-10% of women vs. 13-31% of men considered this behaviour to constitute virginity loss). In other words, women were more likely to consider oral sex between two partners of the same sex as sex than were men, and men were more likely to consider oral sex as sex when the partners were not the same sex (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Lastly, it is noteworthy that past sexual experience (regardless of sex of partner) was not found to have an influence on participants’ definitions of sexual terms (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). This is also arguably evidence of the pervasive influence of the idea that sex and virginity loss take place only with a partner of a different sex; those participants who had experience with a same-sex partner, and would presumably not always be able to engage in PVI, for

instance, did not differ in their views from those participants who had experience with a partner of a different sex (Trotter & Alderson, 2007).

Adopting a methodology similar to Sanders et al. (2010), but examining definitions of virginity and not sex, Bersamin, Fisher, Walker, Hill, and Grube (2007) examined adolescents' conceptualizations of virginity by using data from a large-scale study of adolescents and their exposure to the media and sexual behaviour. Participants took part in an in-home computer-assisted self-interview. Specifically, participants were asked: "Is a boy/girl still a virgin if (s)he has: (a) touched someone's genitals for a long time, (b) given oral sex to someone, (c) gotten oral sex from someone, (d) had sexual intercourse, (e) given anal intercourse to someone, and (f) gotten anal intercourse from someone?" (Bersamin et al., 2007, p. 3). Of the 932 adolescents in their sample, 83.5% stated that a teen should still be considered a virgin after engaging in genital touching; 70.6% of the sample indicated the same if the teen had engaged in oral sex while 16.1% indicated that a teen who had participated in PAI should still be considered a virgin. Lastly, 5.8% of this sample believed that a teen would still be a virgin after having had PVI. These results remained consistent even after accounting for participants' gender, age group, ethnicity, and sexual history. Participants' own sexual behaviour was predictive of their definitions of virginity for all behaviours other than PVI. Specifically, those participants who had participated in a particular sexual behaviour were between three and eight times more likely to state that an individual who participated in this behaviour retained their virginity status (Bersamin et al., 2007).

This contrasts with the findings of Trotter and Alderson (2007) who, as stated above, found that the past sexual experiences of their sample did not have an influence on

their definitions of sexual terms. It is noteworthy, however, that though the authors (Bersamin et al. 2007) aimed to examine participants' "conceptualizations" of virginity, participants were asked only to indicate which behaviours would be inconsistent or consistent with a virgin identity or status. Participants' definitions of virginity more broadly were not investigated.

Lastly, the most comprehensive qualitative study of virginity was by Carpenter (2001) who conducted 61 interviews of 33 women (67% heterosexual, 21% self-identified lesbians, 12% bisexual) and 28 men (61% heterosexual, 32% self-identified gay men, 7% bisexual) between the ages of 18 and 35 recruited from a community sample on individuals' experiences of losing their virginity. Participants were asked to discuss the salient aspects of virginity loss, definitions of virginity, their sexual history and also their social relations related to their virginity. The interviews of the 56 nonvirgin participants were conducted based on individuals' retrospective accounts of virginity loss and prior conceptualizations of their virginity (Carpenter, 2001). Carpenter has published on this sample widely, including a paper in 2001 on the ambiguity of virginity loss, a paper in 2002 on secondary virginity, and a book on virginity loss experiences in 2005. In this qualitative study using grounded theory, Carpenter (2001) found that participants varied with regards to what they constituted as virginity loss based on their sexual identity. She reported that almost all of her heterosexual participants stated that engaging in PVI would be considered virginity loss. In contrast, the majority of her queer participants also included other sexual behaviours including PAI and oral sex. Moreover, all of Carpenter's (2005) participants included activities that involved genital-to-genital contact as behaviours that would constitute a virginity loss. For instance, none of her

participants reported that virginity loss could occur after manual stimulation of the genitals. Additionally, queer participants in this sample were more likely to include sexual activities such as PAI and oral sex as behaviours that would constitute virginity loss than were heterosexual participants (Carpenter, 2005).

The above findings support the idea of “technical virginity,” the notion that an individual can engage in certain sexual behaviours and still be considered a virgin. For instance, if individuals do not consider PAI to be sex, then they can engage in this behaviour and still retain their virginity status (Uecker, Angotti, & Regnerus, 2007). Reasons cited in the literature for staying a “technical virgin” include staying “pure” for religious reasons or wanting to avoid pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection (Uecker et al., 2007). Uecker et al. (2007) was the first study to examine the phenomenon of technical virginity in adolescents. This study investigated the motivations of 15- to 19-year-old American adolescents regarding “technical virginity.” Only 12% of their sample was categorized by the authors as “technical virgins,” having engaged in PAI and/or oral sex but not PVI, while 38.8% had totally abstained from sex. It is noteworthy that participants were not given the opportunity to identify themselves (or not) as technical virgins and were labelled as such by the researchers based on the sexual behaviours that the participants reported having engaged in. Furthermore, the authors raised some doubt about the concept of “technical virginity,” suggesting that “technical virgins” may have been engaging in behaviours other than vaginal sex because they did not feel ready to have vaginal sex, rather than as a substitute for vaginal sex. In sum, the authors of this study concluded that the adolescent participants in their study were not choosing to be “technical virgins” in order to preserve their virginity but were using these other sexual

behaviours as stepping stones to vaginal sex. This counters the idea that some teens are participating in sexual behaviours, such as oral sex and/or anal sex, in order to retain their virginity status (Uecker et al., 2007).

As mentioned above, definitions of virginity vary across individuals, and even within an individual. For instance, some individuals identify as “secondary” or “born again” virgins. In other words, although they had previously experienced a change in their virginity status, these individuals continue to identify as virgins. As an example, in Carpenter’s (2001, 2005) study of adults’ prior conceptualizations of their virginity, one of the participants stated that he had been a “born again virgin” since he had engaged PVI only once and then waited until being in another committed relationship before engaging in PVI with another partner. However, Carpenter’s (2001, 2005) participants who identified as “born again” virgins stated that although they considered themselves as such, they did not believe that they were comparable to “true” virgins. It is noteworthy that women in one study were three times more likely to state that an individual can reclaim their virginity after a change in virginity status has taken place than were men (Carpenter, 2011). However, this finding has not been replicated in other studies.

Overall, the research studies above provide evidence that adolescents’ and young adults’ definitions and conceptualizations of sex (Bogart et al., 2000; Mehta et al., 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010) and of “virginity/virginity loss” vary (Bersamin et al. 2007; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). However, a common theme across all of these studies, those focused on definitions of sex and those focused on virginity, is that the majority of participants, regardless of study methodology, rated PVI as “having sex” or as constituting virginity

loss. Although definitions of virginity and ideas about the behaviours that constitute a change in virginity status have been explored in research, very little research has been conducted on individuals' perceptions of their virginity, their emotions associated with their virginity, and their reasons for remaining virgins.

Predictors and correlates of virginity status. Some research has focused on motivations for sexual abstinence or predictors of virginity status. For instance, Eisenberg, Shindel, Smith, Lue, and Walsh (2009) examined the factors related to sexual abstinence in a sample of 122 men and 104 women taken from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. Respondents who reported attending religious services at least once a week were more likely to be sexually abstinent. In addition, women with a college degree were likely to be sexually abstinent than women without a college degree but the same was not true for men. Furthermore, men were less likely to be sexually abstinent if they reported having been in prison or the military. Lastly, health status, age, or anthropomorphic variables (BMI, height, and weight) were not associated with sexual abstinence (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Moreover, using data from Waves I and III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health using respondents between the ages of 18-27 (N= 11, 407), Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, and Hallfors (2006) found that when compared to those participants that had engaged in penile vaginal sex before marriage or waited until marriage, virgins were more likely to be young, non-Black, and less physically mature. In addition, they were more likely to have higher BMI, which counters Eisenberg et al.'s (2009) findings above. However, like the findings of Eisenberg et al. (2009), these participants were more likely than non-virgins to be religious and report having parents that were perceived to be less

approving of sex during adolescence. Similar findings are reported in Lammers, Ireland, Resnick, and Blum's (2000) investigation of adolescents' decision to postpone sexual intercourse. These authors found that being a part of a dual-parent family, having a higher socio-economic status, living in a rural area, performing better at school and reporting an absence of suicidal thoughts were more likely to be characteristics of virgins than of those participants who did not postpone sexual intercourse (Lammers et al., 2000). In contrast, Holowaty (1997) found that the following factors did not significantly relate to virginity status: parent education, birthplace, religious attendance, TV/computer/phone use, physical activity, feelings of happiness, family functioning, and relationship satisfaction. In this study, being female, being Asian, and spending at least 14 hours a week on homework predicted virginity status.

Sociocultural influences on the experience of virginity. Carpenter (2005) described virginity experiences as being influenced by one's culture. However, her discussion of culture was brief and not in-depth. She (Carpenter, 2001, 2005) also made the case for one's conceptualization of virginity playing a large role in the understanding of one's sexual identity and suggested that the process of transitioning to from a virgin to a nonvirgin is a rite of passage that entails the shedding of one identity and its replacement with a new one. Abboud, Jemmott, and Sommers (2015) investigated the role of culture in their examination of the meanings of virginity in a sample of Arab and Arab American women (N=10) by conducting in depth, face-to-face qualitative interviews. For these participants, their virginity was directly linked to their identity as either Arabs or Arab Americans. These participants also reported that their virginity was something that they embodied. In addition, participants discussed virginity as something

that was felt when being intimate with a partner and spoke about not being the one to determine the value of their virginity. Participants also discussed ties to being Arab, the image of the “Good Arab Girl,” the influence of family, as well as different influences such as the desire to distinguish themselves from Americans (Abboud et al., 2015, p. 10). For instance, one participant spoke about her family’s rules against dating. Overall, participants did not mention religion as much as the authors had expected. This study provides support for the influence of culture on one’s experience of virginity (Abboud et al., 2015). Garcia (2009) also examined the influence of culture in her work on Latina girls’ sexual subjectively related to their first sex experiences using a sample of 50 Latina female youth between the ages of 13 and 18. Data included in-depth qualitative interviews from both the youth and a subset of their mothers, ethnographic fieldwork and content analysis. Many participants discussed messages of virginity and the importance of remaining a virgin from members of their family (Garcia, 2009).

In addition, some research provides support for the influence of religion on an individual’s decision to remain a virgin. For instance, in a sample of male and female college students (N=904), from the “Bible Belt,” a religious area of the United States, participants’ religiosity directed predicted virginity status (Vazsonyi & Jenkins, 2010, p. 566). Furthermore, in a sample of 1380 university students from a south-eastern United States university, Landor and Simons (2014) found that participants in their study were more likely to commit to a virginity pledge if they also reported high levels of religious commitment. Lastly, participants from the state-wide adolescent health survey mentioned above reported being more likely to delay sexual activity when reporting high levels of

religiosity and also that they felt that adults cared about their virginity (Lammers et al., 2000).

Sennott and Mollborn (2011) examined the influence of competing norms (from parents, close friends, and peers) on teens' sexual behaviour using interviews of 47 adolescents that were college-bound from a Western University in the United States. This study utilized a peer interviewing technique where students were trained in qualitative interviewing and then asked to interview an acquaintance. Participants included both virgin and non-virgin participants. Most participants stated that they believed that their peers were engaging in sex and that their parents did not approve of this fact. However, virgin participants were more likely to state that their parents were not approving of teenage sexual activity and that their close friends were "not ready" to engage in sex than were non-virgin participants (Sennott & Molborn, 2011, p. 87). In addition, virgins in this sample spoke about competing norms from peers that were encouraging engagement in sexual behaviour in contrast to norms from parents and close friends that were discouraging and disapproving of sexual behaviour. In contrast, sexually experienced participants in this sample discussed differing competing norms with parents as opposing sex but both peers and close friends as encouraging of sex. In addition, virgin participants spoke about being ready for sex as being important. The decision of whether or not an individual was ready for sex was impacted by the following: one's age, emotional maturity, potential risks, and others' views about sex (Sennott & Molborn, 2011).

Virginity in the context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. Examining the conceptualizations and experiences of virginity in a strictly LGBT context, Averett, Moore, and Price (2014) utilized focus groups and

follow-up interviews in order to examine how their LGBT identified sample defined virginity, communicated about virginity, and how the concept of virginity was viewed, valued, and critiqued by LGBT individuals. Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 18 participants. Of these 18 participants, six later took part in individual interviews. Participants spoke about the importance of penetration within their definitions of virginity. Participants also spoke about how a change in virginity status is not a one-time event and that this change is hard to define. With regard to communication about virginity, participants indicated that it was not usually discussed and when it was it was more so using the language of it being one's "first time" (p. 273). Furthermore, some participants indicated that virgins do not exist, and how the phenomenon is a heterosexual construct that was not "for" them (p. 273). For instance, when discussing virginity, a female participant stated that losing her virginity was not something that she had thought about since it is often viewed as something that occurs between a man and a woman. Lastly, participants stated that the process of "coming out" was more important than the concept of virginity and although it was sometimes associated with their "first times," this was not always the case (Averett et al., 2014, p. 273). This study is unique in that it, because of the qualitative design, allowed for participants to describe the limitations of the term virgin and for them discuss the difficulty of defining it. The study also conceptualized virginity as a process (cf. Carpenter, 2001, 2005), and acknowledged the heteronormative nature of conceptualizing sex as PVI (Averett, et al., 2014). This relates to the finding of Garcia (2009) who found that heterosexual participants included PVI as the point in which they "lost or gave" their virginity whereas lesbian participants expanded this definition and also included oral sex (Garcia, 2009, p. 605). Furthermore,

although in a sample of both lesbian (N= 25) and heterosexual women (N=25) between the ages of 21 and 25 in Singapore, most participants reported that engaging in PVI would lead to an individual no longer remaining a virgin, some of the lesbian participants questioned the necessity of defining virginity and rating its importance (Ho & Sim, 2014).

Affective experiences of virginity. Only one quantitative study, conducted by Sprecher and Regan (1996), specifically investigated the ways that heterosexual virgins (n=289), labelled as such by researchers after stating that they had never engaged in vaginal penile intercourse, perceived their current virginity. Participants were asked about their virginity, including their reasons for remaining virgins and their feelings about their virginity. Participants were given a 13-item list of reasons e.g. “I don’t feel physically attractive” and “It is against my religious beliefs” and were asked to rate each reason on a 4-point Likert Scale in terms of how important the reason was for them in deciding to remain a virgin (Sprecher & Regan, 1996, p. 7). Types of reasons were related to not enough love, personal beliefs, fear, and inadequacy/insecurity. The reason that was rated by participants, regardless of gender, as most important was “I have not been in a relationship long enough or been in love long enough.” This was followed by “fear of pregnancy” and “I was worried about contracting AIDS/another STD.” The reason for remaining a virgin that was rated as least important by participants was “Lack of sexual desire” (Sprecher & Regan, 1996, p. 8). Participants were also presented with five emotions (pride, guilt, anxiety, embarrassment, and happiness) and asked how much of each emotion they felt with regard to their status as virgins. Participants gave higher ratings to the emotions of pride, anxiety, and happiness compared their ratings of feeling

embarrassed or guilty about their virginity status. Overall, ratings of positive emotions (pride and happiness, $M=3.36$) combined were comparable to feelings of anxiety ($M=3.31$) on a 5-point scale. This suggests that participants experienced a range of emotions about their virginity, some positive, some negative, and that they held these sometimes conflicting emotions at the same time (Sprecher & Regan, 1996).

More recently, Sprecher and Treger (2015) expanded this original investigation in an attempt to incorporate a broader sample and to examine the influence of sociodemographic variables. The authors utilized data from questionnaires given to undergraduate students in a sociology of human sexuality course over a 23 year span. Participants in this study included those who had reported never having engaged in sexual intercourse, and, particularly, PVI. Similar to the original study, participants rated reasons for their virginity relating to Fear and Not Enough Love, (“not enough love” in this study referred to not having met a person that they wanted to have intercourse with or not having been in a relationship or been in love long enough), as being the most important. Again, pride was reported to be the emotion most closely related to their experience of virginity. This was followed by being: happy, anxious, embarrassed, and guilty. Women in this sample were more likely to report Personal Beliefs, Fear, and Not Enough Love as being more important than the men in the sample. Furthermore, men reported less positive affect than women (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). In addition, participants were asked about pressures to both engage in sexual intercourse and to remain a virgin. Participants reported only slight pressure for both, but the pressure to engage in sexual intercourse was rated as greater than the pressure to remain a virgin. Lastly, as compared with White participants, Black participants rated personal beliefs and fears as more

important, reported more positive affect and reported more pressure regarding their virginity (Sprecher & Treger, 2015).

Little research to date has been conducted on individuals' perceptions of their current virginity status. From the grounded theory analysis conducted interviews of 56 non-virgins and 5 virgins, Carpenter (2001, 2005) indicated that participants were likely to frame their virginity in terms of a gift, a stigma, or a step in the process of becoming an adult. She categorized 49% of her sample as gift-oriented, 56% as process-oriented, and 38% stigma-oriented. Participants who were categorized as gift oriented placed a high value on their virginity and saw their virginity loss as an exchange for things such as love, commitment, and affection. This contrasts with those whom she categorized as experiencing virginity as a stigma, something negative that they felt that they needed to rid themselves of when given the opportunity, often even if that meant via unprotected sex with a less than ideal partner (Carpenter, 2001, 2005). Lastly, those participants whom Carpenter categorized as experiencing virginity as a process perceived their virginity in more neutral terms when compared to gift-oriented or stigma-oriented individuals. Carpenter also indicated that many of her participants' virginity frameworks had changed since the time of their virginity loss experiences. This was especially true for those participants that Carpenter stated fit into the stigma-oriented framework category at the time of their virginity loss and then better fit into the process-oriented category afterwards, stating that these participants framed their virginity differently now that they were no longer virgins.

These findings support those of Sprecher and Regan (1996), who found that the highest rated emotion that participants reported feeling in relation to their virginity was

pride. These two studies differ, however, with respect to other emotions. The next highest rated emotion in Sprecher and Regan's (1996) sample was anxiety but in Carpenter (2005) those participants categorized as process-oriented arguably felt more neutral about their virginity than stigma-oriented participants.

Research has also shown that individuals differ in the importance that is placed upon virginity. For instance, in a study on Singaporean heterosexual and lesbian women using qualitative focus groups, Ho and Sim (2014) found that some participants reported that their virginity was "not relevant at all" (p. 316) whereas others believed that it was important and sacred. In addition, Childs, White, Hataway, Moneyham, and Gaiosio (2012) found in a sample of 64 African American girls between the ages of 12 and 14 that their virginity was considered by participants to be highly important. It is possible that this is due to an effect of age whereby virginity appears more important to younger individuals and becomes less important, or less central a factor of their identity with age.

In a study conducted by Humphreys (2013), based on the work of Carpenter (2001, 2005), virginity frameworks were quantitatively examined in order to investigate their effect on the decisions that were made by participants at the time of first coitus. A sample of 226 undergraduate psychology students were asked to describe their first experience of engaging in sexual intercourse, defined as "the first time you voluntarily engaged in penile-vaginal penetration" (Humphreys, 2013, p. 667). Participants were then asked to choose which of three descriptions best described their virginity framework, based on Carpenter's (2001, 2005) work. The description of the gift framework was "I saw my virginity as something special, cherished and guarded"; the description for the stigma framework was, "I saw my virginity as a label which I was ready to get rid of,

something negative and unwanted”; and lastly, the description of the process framework was, “I thought of my virginity as a stepping stone or rite of passage that everyone must go through; the starting of a process of sexuality” (Humphreys, 2013, p. 667). After choosing one of these three options, participants were asked to rate how confident they were that their selection was representative of their experience on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest level of confidence. Participants had an average confidence rating of their choices of 8.25 out of 10, which Humphreys (2013) suggested provides evidence for the face validity of these three options. Men in this sample were statistically significantly more likely to have chosen the description of the stigma framework than women were. Interestingly, individuals who chose the description of the stigma framework had a significantly higher number of lifetime sexual partners and were less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse with romantic partners than were those participants who chose either the descriptions of either the gift or process frameworks. Humphreys (2013) interpreted this finding to mean that those participants who were stigma oriented placed less importance on love and being in a romantic relationship at the time of virginity loss.

A recent study conducted by Gesselman et al. (2016) examined stigma towards individuals categorized as sexually inexperienced. Participants in this study were heterosexual adults who were categorized as sexually inexperienced by the researchers for not having previously engaged in PVI. In the first of three studies, Gesselman and colleagues (2016) investigated the age that participants (N = 560) believed was typical for an individual to be at one’s sexual debut and also the level of stigma perceived by participants regarding their lack of sexual experience. Participants in the first study

completed an online survey with questions about their sexual history, the age at which they considered it to be normal for a man/woman to have penile-vaginal intercourse for the first time, and perceived stigma. Women reported significantly older expected ages than men and sexually inexperienced participants reported significantly older expected ages than sexually experienced participants. Overall, participants stated that the normal age for engaging in penile-vaginal sex was 17 years of age. Moreover, participants categorized as sexually inexperienced reported being more stigmatized than participants categorized as sexually experienced (Gesselman et al., 2010).

In their second study, Gesselman et al. (2016) asked participants (N= 4,934), all of whom were single heterosexual adults, “How likely are you to consider getting into a committed relationship with someone who is a virgin?” along with similar questions e.g., “How likely are you to consider getting into a committed relationship with...someone who is shorter than you?” on a 4-point Likert scale (Gesselman et al., 2016, p. 5). The mean response of 2.41 was significantly lower than the theoretical scale midpoint of 2.5 and this was interpreted as meaning that participants were not likely to consider beginning a relationship with a virgin. In their third and final study, 353 heterosexual participants were presented with a fake dating profile under the guise of helping test a new online dating website. The profile included bars that represented the target’s level of relationship and sexual experience on two separate bar graphs (low, average, or high). Participants were then asked a series of questions related to the profile e.g. “How close is this person to your ideal partner?” and “How attractive do you find this person in general?” on a 7-point Likert scale (Gesselman et al., 2016, p. 7). Participants rated the profile with more relationship experience as more attractive than the profile of a target

with less relationship experience. Sexually inexperienced participants rated the target profile with less sexual experience as more attractive than the more sexually experienced target, while there was no effect found with sexually experienced participants (Gesselman et al., 2016).

Summary and Limitations of the Literature

In sum, individuals differ in terms of their definitions of sex (Bogart et al., 2000; Gute et al., 2008; Mehta, et al., 2011; Hans et al., 2010; Hans & Kimberly, 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010) and their conceptualizations of virginity and virginity loss (Bersamin et al., 2007; Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Most definitions of sex centre upon PVI (e.g. Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), and most research on virginity actually focuses on behaviours that would constitute virginity loss (e.g. Carpenter, 2001, 2002, 2005). Some researchers have focused on factors that predict virginity status (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Halpern et al., 2006; Holowaty, 19997; Lammers et al., 2000) or sociocultural factors that influence individuals' experience of virginity, such as family, or religiosity (Abboud, 2015; Averett, 2014; Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Garcia, 2009; Ho & Sims, 2014; Lammers et al., 2000; Landor & Simons, 2014; Sennott & Mollborn). A handful of studies have investigated affective experiences of virginity (Carpenter, 2001; 2005; Childs et al., 2012; Gesselman et al., 2016; Humphreys, 2013; Sprecher & Regan, 1996; Sprecher & Treger, 2015; Vazsonyi & Jenkins, 2010). However, these studies are limited in four critical ways.

First, the majority of research on this topic uses quantitative methodology. For instance, Sprecher and Regan (1996) provided their participants with different reasons for

virginity. Therefore, participants were unable to provide their own reasoning for remaining a virgin. Another example of this is the work conducted on definitions of having “had sex” in which participants were not given the opportunity to provide additional responses (e.g., Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010).

Second, participants are often categorized into categories by researchers. For example, Gesselman and colleagues (2016) categorized participants as sexually inexperienced after stating that they had not engaged in PVI. However, it is impossible to know if these participants would agree with this classification. As mentioned by Carpenter (2011), it is important not to group individuals into virgin and non-virgin categories since many individuals do not agree with these definitions, as is evident in the work cited above (e.g. Bersamin et al., 2001; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). However, Humphreys (2013) removed the data of three of his 226 participants for not having had engaged in PVI. Therefore, only categorizing participants as non-virgins after engaging in penile-vaginal sex contradicts the idea that there are a variety of sexual behaviours that individuals would consider as constituting a change in virginity status. Furthermore, Carpenter (2001, 2005) proposed a myriad of ways that individuals conceptualized their change in virginity status. However, it is possible that Carpenter’s participants could be put into different categories than the ones that she inductively came to through the analysis of her data using grounded theory methodology. For instance, she discusses an interviewee who felt that she “ought” to lose her virginity and engaged in sexual intercourse with a friend with whom she had previously engaged in other sexual behaviours such as oral sex. Carpenter (2001) suggested that this participant is gift-oriented because she did not choose to have sex with just anybody. Additionally,

Humphreys (2013) asked participants to indicate their confidence in their responses about the virginity framework that fit best for them, which does take steps to increase the validity of the findings. However, it is possible that participants were exhibiting response bias in that they might not conceptualize their virginities in this way if they had not been provided with a forced-choice question with three options. Validity could have been further enhanced if participants were provided with more or different options to choose from, or if they had been able to provide their own perspective in an open-ended format. Similarly, Carpenter's (2005) research also shows that many believe that instances of non-consent, in which an individual may be forced into participating in sexual intercourse and/ or other sexual activity unwillingly, should not be considered virginity loss experiences. Among her sample of 61 participants, 43% stated that an individual would no longer be considered a virgin after engaging in non-consensual sex, while 36% participants disagreed, and 21% were undecided (Carpenter, 2005). Thus, it is important to take contextual factors into account when considering an individual's experience of virginity.

Third, the reliance on PVI as the single behaviour to bring about a change in virginity status is evidence of the heteronormative construction of virginity (Averett et al., 2014) and virginity research. Most definitions of virginity included in research indicate that a change in status results from PVI even though an individual who may have had sexual encounters with someone with the same genitalia may not identify as a virgin. It is necessary to be inclusive and incorporate individuals of varying sexual orientations in this area of research (Averett et al., 2014).

Finally, research on virginity is also limited by a reliance on participants who no longer identify as virgins being asked to report on their past experience of virginity and virginity loss (i.e., Carpenter, 2001). Though these perceptions are valuable, it is also important to capture experiences of virginity as they are occurring, and not vulnerable to memory or recall bias.

Social constructionism is an ideal perspective from which to investigate virginity (see Carpenter, 2001, regarding social constructionist approaches to the study of sexuality more generally and virginity loss specifically). According to Burr (2006), social constructionism is a theoretical stance that critically evaluates the idea that that we can be objective and unbiased when observing the world around us. In this view, our ways of comprehending experiences are influenced by both history and culture. Furthermore, we come to gain understanding through social processes (Burr, 2006). The studies described above illustrate that virginity is a socially constructed phenomenon. In the research literature on participants' definitions, there is disagreement in terms of the ways individuals define "having sex" and virginity (Bersamin et al. 2007; Bogart et al., 2000; Mehta et al., 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders and Reinisch, 1999; Sprecher & Regan, 1996; Sanders et al., 2010; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Furthermore, some researchers drew on objectivist definitions to categorize participants (e.g. Gesselman et al., 2016; Humphreys, 2013). Research on virginity can be strengthened by a social constructionist framework in which individuals are able to self-select for participation and describe their own experiences, using their own subjective meanings and categories, rather than being required to adopt those of the researchers.

In sum, conceptualizations of what is meant by having sex and virginity vary (e.g., Bersamin et al., 2007; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). As such, it is important that individuals not be categorized by a researcher on the basis of their behaviour. Research on virginity often occurs with participants who no longer identify as virgins, or with participants who researchers have categorized as virgins or not, regardless of how participants might identify. It is essential that participants be able to identify as either as virgins or not, allowing for examination of the ways individuals conceptualize their virgin identities on their own, and why, without preconceived virginity frameworks. Qualitative research from a social constructionist perspective that allows for individuals to self-select to participate, with open-ended questions about their experiences, is the ideal way to allow for individuals to describe their own experiences.

Objectives of the Present Study

There are several key studies that examine individuals' definitions of virginity and virginity loss (Bersamin, et al., 2007; Trotter & Alderson, 2007) and having sex (Bogart, et al., 2000; Gute et al., 2008; Mehta, et al., 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010), and a handful of studies that asked about individuals' prior experiences as virgins (e.g., Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Averett et al., 2014). Given the research indicating there is little agreement on definitions of having sex and virginity, it is possible that researchers' categorizations may not match how participants define virginity for themselves. Furthermore, previous research has tended to focus on individuals' reflections about their past virginity experience subsequent to loss of virginity (e.g., Carpenter, 2005), rather than exploring current virginity experiences. Only a small number of participants in Carpenter's (2001, 2005)

research reported themselves to be virgins at the time of the interviews. The present study aimed to address these critical limitations by engaging as research participants an exclusive sample of individuals who identify themselves as current virgins. The purpose of this research was to examine the ways individuals conceptualize and experience their virginity. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do individuals who self-identify as virgins experience this identity?
2. How do individuals who self-identify as virgins conceptualize virginity?

Chapter 2: Method

Positionality

Theoretical stance. I have taken a social constructionist approach (Burr, 2006) in my research in order to develop a particular kind of understanding of knowledge about virginity as well as to respect the subjective experiences of those who identify as virgins. Social constructionism as a lens validates each individual's experience because of the critical position taken regarding the idea that there is one unbiased and objectively true definition (and experience) of virginity (Burr, 2006). As individuals vary with regard to their definitions and understandings of virginity, it is important to be cautious in the language that is used when describing these experiences, for instance, by not equating a change in virginity status with a specific sexual act or labelling an individual based on engagement in certain sexual behaviours. Social constructionism would also view knowledge about virginity as socially produced and situated, and as influenced by history and culture (Burr, 2006). All of these considerations are reflected in the kinds of research questions and interview questions that I developed.

Dual identities. As a qualitative researcher, I believe it is important to position myself within my research as a person and as a researcher. When I first started my master's program, I did not have any intention of studying virginity. It was my conversations with fellow students on the issue of stigmatization that sparked my interest on the topic. However, I would not be truthful if I was to say that I had no personal interest in the matter. At the current writing of this thesis manuscript, I am a virgin, although through studying this topic for over the last two years, I am beginning to question the importance and the meaning of this label.

I feel as though others often assume that individuals who are interested in sexuality research engage in more diverse or kinky sexual practices. As someone who identifies as both a sex researcher and also as a virgin, I have struggled in the past with the idea that others might see my identification as a virgin as contradictory to my identity as a sex researcher. In the past I have wondered if others (e.g., the students in the sexuality course for which I was a graduate teaching assistant) were to know that I am a self-identified virgin whether I would be seen as less knowledgeable or qualified to educate others on the topic than would be a non-virgin.

What I found to be surprising is that not one of my participants asked me about my own definitions, experiences, or identity with respect to the research topic. I am left wondering if this is because they simply did not care or if the topic of virginity is still seen as one that is so private that they felt uncomfortable doing so. I cannot help but to be curious to know whether or not my participants assumed that I was a virgin or whether or not these assumptions or lack thereof had an influence on their responses.

Moreover, given that I identify as a virgin, I had an “insider” perspective (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 01). It is possible that this may have enhanced my research as I had shared experiences with my participants. However, it is also possible that this perspective may have negatively impacted my research in that it is possible that I made assumptions with regards to what participants discussed and in turn did not ask follow up questions. According to Dwyer, and Buckle (2009), having group membership does not make someone better or worse as a researcher, but it is important to acknowledge one’s group involvement and the possible influences on the research being conducted.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria for the study included: identifying as a virgin, living in Canada, and being 20 years old or older. I chose a minimum age of 20 as, according to a report conducted by Statistics Canada, 86% of Canadians surveyed between the ages of 20 and 24 have reported having had engaged in sexual intercourse (Rotermann, 2012); therefore, by setting the lower age limit to 20 years, it was my hope that I would be able to access those individuals who are the minority since I felt that these individuals would be able to provide more detailed data than participants at an age where it is more common to not have engaged in sex. Furthermore, my initial interest in the topic was related to the stigmatization of virgins. Thus, by interviewing older virgins I was hoping to explore the stigma associated with virginity at an older age. I was also interested in examining the degree to which individual’s virgin identity would be incorporated into their sense of self, and hypothesized that individuals who identified as virgins at an age where it is not normative to do so would be more likely to identify this as a feature of their identity. There were no other exclusion criteria.

Procedure

This study was approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A for REB certificate). In order to recruit participants, I utilized posters, e-mail listservs, radio, social media and purposive snowball sampling (see Appendix B for Recruitment Materials). According to Teddlie and Yu (2007), purposive sampling is utilized when seeking out participants for a specific purpose, and not at random. This sampling technique is often used when trying to reach special or unique cases. This was the case with the present study, as individuals who identify as virgins who are aged 20 years or above make up a small percentage of the population. I asked participants that I recruited for their assistance in recruiting others in their social circles who fit the eligibility criteria. In order to reach a more diverse sample of participants, I made attempts to contact members of the asexuality and queer communities who, before the recruitment process, had offered to pass along my recruitment materials to potential participants. Unfortunately, these recruitment attempts were unsuccessful.

Once a participant contacted me with regard to participating in my study, I sent them a copy of the Research Participation Consent Letter (see Appendix C) and short demographic questionnaire online using Qualtrics survey software (see Appendix D). After ensuring that the participant had provided consent to participate in my study and completed the demographic questionnaire, I e-mailed the participant to set up a time for an interview either in person or via online video chat (i.e., Skype or Google Hangout). Before the start of the interviews, I reviewed the consent materials with participants, reminding them that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I also asked participants how they learned about the study and about their reasons for participating in

this study. Of the 21 participants, 15 participated in face-to-face interviews and the remaining 6 interviews were conducted using online video chat. Participants received a \$10 cinema gift card for their participation.

Participants took part in a semi-structured, qualitative interview. I used an interview guide that I developed with the help of my thesis committee (see Appendix E). Interviews started with an opening prompt, “Tell me what it’s like to be a virgin.” I then utilized probing questions, such as “What pressures, if any, do you feel with regards to your virginity?” Additional probing questions were sometimes asked that were not part of the original interview protocols. For instance, when participants discussed their conceptualizations of virginity and the behaviours that they would deem as constituting a change from virginity to non-virginity, I probed by asking participants to reflect on certain acts, including oral and anal sex. I believed that this was necessary in order to best understand their views. To allow for reflection using a broader view of sexuality, I also often prompted participants to reflect on instances of behaviour engaged in by two individuals of the same gender.

Participant Characteristics

Twenty-one participants participated in my study, 18 of which identified as either female or women and the remaining three identified as male. The mean age of participants was 21.95 years old. Seventeen participants reported that they were single and 4 stated that they were currently in a relationship. Of the 4 participants currently in a relationship, the mean relationship length was approximately 18 months. Participants reported their ethnicity as Canadian (4), White/Caucasian (13), South Asian (2), Filipino (1), and Taiwanese (1). Participants identified with the following religions: Christian or

Catholic (12), Muslim (1), Buddhist (1), and Hindu (1). Six participants reported not identifying with a religion. Participants described their sexual orientation as heterosexual/straight (16), bisexual (2), asexual (1), or indicated that they were unsure of how to label their sexual orientation (2). All participants were living in Canada with the majority (19) living in Ontario, 1 participant living in Nova Scotia, and 1 participant living in Quebec.

Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the data using Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guide in order to seek out themes, or patterns of meaning, within the data. Data analysis using this method is not linear: it is an iterative, ongoing process. During the first phase of data analysis, familiarizing myself with my data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I transcribed the audio interviews, often within 24 to 48 hours after the completion of the interview, although this was not always the case. Transcription took place using Windows Media Player and Microsoft Word. Transcripts included all instances of filler words such as “like” and “um” as well as pauses and laughter. After all of the interviews were transcribed, I listened to them again and checked to ensure that I had accurately transcribed each of the 21 audio interviews. I also read the interview transcripts multiple times in order to become more familiar with my data. Following this, I wrote a brief summary of my thoughts about each interview and took notes in order to document ideas related to future coding.

As per the second phase of thematic analysis, generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I then proceeded to code my interviews using semantic, initial coding by hand, going through each interview and generating codes. Semantic coding involves

creating short descriptors of the data that describe the data presented at an explicit level. Initial codes are the most basic, low-level building blocks of analysis, identifiers of the data (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006). During this process, I made sure to go over each of the interview transcripts in detail, giving each an equal amount of attention. During this process, I generated approximately 760 codes and created 21 spreadsheets, one for each interview, in Microsoft Excel, with the associated codes.

I was now beginning phase three of Braun and Clark's (2006) guide to conducting thematic analysis, searching for themes. Through generating the initial codes, I was able to come up with some preliminary themes, patterns within the data collated across the individual transcripts, which I wrote down in a list by hand. I proceeded to create another worksheet using Excel and wrote down these initial themes on a separate worksheet. Once the initial codes were generated, I returned continuously and cyclically to the data to perform checks and to ensure that important phenomena were not missed along the way. I continued the data analysis process by conducting closed coding whereby I categorized my codes into these themes, in addition to developing other themes that appeared necessary to encompass prominent codes. I manually added the codes into the worksheet with the themes.

After this process I had 13 candidate themes. I was also left with 155 uncategorized codes. Therefore, I went back to the relevant document and reviewed each of the codes. I also referred back to the interview transcripts in order to provide context for some codes that needed clarification. By doing so, I was able to categorize an additional 67 codes. For example, I was able to code text related to participants' experience of virginity and the assumptions that others make with regards to virginity. I

then examined the different candidate themes and associated codes and in some instances created candidate subthemes, which consist of a theme subsumed under an overarching theme, themes within a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, I looked for relations between themes. For example, I was able to detect a relationship between the subthemes named Assumptions and Culture at this point in the data analysis. These two subthemes were later renamed Others' Perceptions of Virginity and Cultural Influences. For the purpose of brevity, only the third and final thematic maps will be included in the appendices.

I then began the fourth phase of the data analysis process, reviewing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After generating themes and subthemes, I collated each code and the interview excerpt from which each code was generated and compiled 10 electronic Word documents each of which constituted a candidate theme: (Un)Importance, Conceptualizations, Choice, Experience, Assumptions, Variations, Circumstances for a Change in Status, Culture, Frameworks, and You Want to Put that Where? Dr. Robin Milhausen, my thesis advisor, reviewed each of these documents. During this process, we met multiple times in order to review the coding of my data together. Once we had come to an agreement, each of these files was sent to Dr. Clare MacMartin, my thesis advisory committee member, in order to receive her feedback and for her to conduct a third "check." This led to further discussion of how the codes fit within the different themes and how the themes and subthemes related to one another. At this point in the analysis, certain subthemes were dropped or combined. For instance we decided that there was not enough relevant data for You Want to Put that Where?, which was related to participants' lack of desire to engage in PAI, to substantiate a subtheme.

At this point the decision was made not to include the four interview questions relating to Carpenter (2005)'s virginity frameworks in the analysis of the data as we concluded that the way in which they were worded did not allow for an adequate understanding by participants. Fortunately, up until this point the analysis of the responses to these questions had been conducted separately. Therefore, there was no effect on the coding of the remaining data. We also decided not to utilize participant responses to the questions regarding other's definitions of virginity, as they did not directly relate to either of my research questions.

I continued with phase four by reviewing the themes, and subthemes that I had generated and also categorized them into higher-level themes: Accounting for Virginity, Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status, and Affective Factors. For example, we decided that certain themes, such as the ones relating to culture, pressure, and psychological factors were best categorized as subthemes under the larger main theme, Socio-Cultural Context. I also created an updated thematic map of these themes (see Appendix H for my third map) and reviewed the data to ensure that the themes I had created fit with the data set as a whole. During this time, I met with Dr. Milhausen and Dr. MacMartin to discuss the labelling, organization, and connection of themes. These activities were the beginning of the fifth phase of data analysis, defining and refining my themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As suggested by Braun and Clark (2006), attempts were made to utilize labels that were concise and would allow for the reader to have an understanding of what the theme will reference. For example, we decided to re-label Pressure as Social-Societal Pressure, and psychological factors as Social-Psychological Factors.

Before stage six during which the report of the data analysis was written, I continued further defining and refining of my themes in consultation with my thesis advisory committee. For instance, we decided that the main theme Affective Factors was in fact more related to participants' socio-cultural context and not their affect. As part of further defining and finalizing my themes, my committee and I also decided that (Un)Importance should be a higher-level theme on its own (please see Appendix I for my final thematic map). I also wrote a detailed report of the meaning and implications of each these themes, keeping in mind the story that my themes would tell and how they fit together (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

One of the concerns of the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Board was the possibility that participants in this study would come to the realization that they would no longer be categorized as virgins based on definitions provided to them. For this reason, and others related to my social constructionist positioning and respect for participants' subjective experiences, I made sure to never provide participants with a definition of virginity or imply what acts "should" or "do" constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity.

Another concern that was expressed by the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Board was that there was a possibility that a participant might disclose an experience of sexual assault as part of discussing their sexual experiences during the interview. This occurred in two of the 21 interviews. In both cases, adhering to the Research Ethics Board protocol, I informed each participant that I was sorry to hear about their experiences of assault and informed them that they did not need to continue with the

interview if they felt distressed. I also confirmed in these cases that the perpetrator of the assaults was not currently in a position of power over children as in these cases, according to the Research Ethics Board, it would have been my responsibility to report these individuals to the authorities.

Chapter 3: Results

The research questions guiding this research project were:

1. How do individuals who self-identify as virgins experience this identity?
2. How do individuals who self-identify as virgins conceptualize virginity?

In response to these questions, four major themes were generated from the data:

(Un)Importance, Accounting for Virginity, Socio-Cultural Context, and Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status (see Appendix H for Final Thematic Map). The first, second, and third theme serve to answer the first research question. The use of the prefix “un” in parentheses in the name of the first theme, (Un)Importance, captures the variability demonstrated across different participants in terms of whether they viewed their virgin status to be important; that being said, most participants indicated that their virginity was not a defining (or important) aspect of their identity. However, the themes encompassed by Accounting for Virginity provide support for the idea that participants did perceive their virginity to be counter to current norms for others their age. As such they offered a variety of explanations for their current virginity status (i.e., they had not met the right person, or had the opportunity to have sex). Participants also described a wide range of socio-cultural factors, for example, family, religion, and community, that influenced their experience of virginity, as described in the third theme. The fourth theme supports the second research question. Almost all

participants defined virginity in terms of behaviours that would constitute a change in virginity status.

The first main theme, (Un)Importance, links to Accounting for Virginity, as some participants spoke about their virginity as something that was important to them and also actively resisting a change in virginity status. This main theme also relates to one other subtheme, Others' Perceptions of Virginity, under the main theme Socio-Cultural Context. It was noteworthy that although many participants did not consider their virginity to be a prominent feature of their identity, they perceived others to consider it important. Accounting for Virginity is composed of two subthemes: Active Resistance to Changing Status and Situational Factors Related to Ongoing Status. In addition to the relationship with (Un)Importance, Accounting for Virginity relates to two additional subthemes (Social-Psychological Factors and Cultural Influences) under the major theme, Socio-Cultural Context. These connections were made because some participants spoke about their decision to resist a change in virginity status in relation to social-psychological factors and cultural influences. Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status is comprised of four subthemes: Penile Vaginal Intercourse (PVI); PVI, Anal, and Oral; Anything Intimate; and Participant Resistance to Virginity/Non-Virginity Dichotomy.

Un(Importance)

The first main theme generated from the data is (Un)Importance. Given that the primary aim of the study was to describe the ways that participants experienced their virginity, the value that they placed on a virgin identity was critical to understand. Interestingly, the majority of participants (17) discussed their virginity as something that

was largely not important. These participants emphasized that their virginity status was not a defining or central aspect of their identity. Some of these participants spoke about it in the sense that it was “just a fact about” them. This is best illustrated by the following quotation from my interview with Participant 024:

It's not really like it's not a word that I use to define myself and I know a lot of people I know for a lot of people it is a defining factor but for myself it's just more of a fact I guess. It's more-more a fact than an identity. (Extract 1)

Similarly, Participant 013 indicated:

...I mean I just think it's a fact about who I am I don't think it's necessarily an important part of who I am really... yeah i-it's really not a big part of who I am it just is a part of who I am I guess is the best way to say it. (Extract 2)

For these participants, their virginity status was simply a way of describing themselves among many others, and was not more significant than other aspects of themselves.

Moreover, one-third (7) of participants spoke about virginity as “normal.” Being a virgin was just their present state of being, and they had not experienced any other state to provide a frame of reference. For these participants, “virgin” was not a label that was actively chosen but was one that they felt had been prescribed as a default as they had not engaged in the sexual behaviour that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity. For instance, when asked to describe what it is like to be a virgin, Participant 010 stated that her virginity feels “alright” and is “just regular life.” Participant 027 further minimized the importance of her virginity status, and linked her experiences to those of other people:

Um I don't really uh notice much of a difference I don't really think it really like when it comes to day to day life it doesn't really I don't think I'm particularly different in any sort of way from other people because it doesn't -it doesn't usually it's not something that comes up in every day life so it's not something it's not a major it's not something I usually use to describe myself. (Extract 3)

That participants felt their virginity status was “normal” is in contrast to some of their descriptions of assumptions they felt others made about their virginity (described in a subsequent section). Largely, participants reported their awareness that maintaining their virginity status at their ages was outside the statistical norm, but nonetheless their virginity status felt normal to them. Also noteworthy is that Participant 027 indicated that “virgin” was not a term she frequently used to describe herself. This idea was evident in a number of other participants' answers – specifically noting that their virginity was not a central or public aspect of their virginity. Participant 007 further exemplified this point when she stated:

...Like it's not really an enormous part of my identity. It's just I haven't gotten around to certain things yet because I've been busy. Um so I don't s- really see it impacting my life in any way really. (Extract 4)

Similarly, Participant 001 indicated that her virginity is not something that comes to the forefront of her experience on a moment-to-moment basis:

It's not- I don't see it as one of the things that identifies me from a day to day life um obviously there are circumstances that will arise that it-it gets brought up but if I'm going grocery shopping it doesn't change my life. (Extract 5)

It was evident in my interviews that, for many of the participants, their virgin identity was not something that was a large part of their self-concept. Participant 004 provided an excellent example of this when acknowledging that she is in the “virgin” category, but emphasized that this isn’t significant to her “personhood”:

It’s pretty insignificant. It’s a kind of not auxiliary but not external. I’m trying to think of a word that just kind of means it-it’s incidental. It wasn’t anything I you know cultivated or you know or protected or tried to maintain it’s just something that happens to be a-a sort of category that I sort of fall into by default and haven’t taken steps that would be required to move myself out of it. I wouldn’t categorize myself as a virgin but I also understand if someone were to ask “Are you a virgin?” they mean “Have you ever had sex?” And the answer would be no. Even though I don’t think of that as remotely significant to a personhood. (Extract 6)

Similarly, almost half of participants (9) spoke about their virginity and their virginity status as something that was “not a huge deal.” An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Participant 012’s interview:

Right now it’s just like less of a huge impact on my life I feel because um well that’s kind of silly because if even if my friends knew my friends were engaging in um sexual activity I wouldn’t know because I don’t think they’d tell me and that’s totally fair um but I’ve never been in a relationship and I’ve never really thought about it as much. So it’s not something that totally impacts my life.... (Extract 7)

Some participants spoke about their virginity using several of these terms. For instance, Participant 024 talked about her virginity as something that is “just a fact” about her, not a huge deal, and also not a big part of her identity (see Extract 1).

In sum, the majority of participants (17) spoke about their virginity as not being centrally important to their identity. They talked about it being “just a fact” about them and something that was not a large part of their life.

One-third (7) of participants spoke about their virginity as being important. For instance, both Participant 022 and 025 stated that their virginity is “very important” to them. Two participants spoke about this importance in a positive light. For example, when asked how she looked at her virginity, Participant 27 indicated:

Um to me it just means um it to me personally it is something that's a little bit more um sacred I guess and that's probably because of um my background and my cultural beliefs and what I've just grew up on believing and what I've just been told by my um family and friends and my just religious leaders or something like that. It's a little bit more more sacred than maybe it is to other people but I don't necessarily but I would never judge anyone who doesn't believe that it is as sacred or as special. (Extract 8)

Participant 016 also used the word sacred, and went on to explain the circumstances that would be necessary for them to make a change in their virginity status:

Hmm I guess for me it would be, it's something that's, something that's just like it's a part of me and it's something that's very meaningful and, sacred is too strong of a word but just it's-it's a like, it's something I wouldn't just I couldn't give away to or like I couldn't yeah I guess I couldn't give away um, without

really knowing that, the person I'm with like that knowing the importance of the importance of the person that I'm with because, like it's you know once you-once you engage in um sex you don't-you're not longer a virgin so it's if I'm going to go ahead and like do that then it has to be very-it has the person has to be very significant to me. Yeah that's how I view it. (Extract 9)

These participants viewed their virginity and status as virgins is something that was meaningful and positive.

Of note, several participants spoke about associating varying levels of importance to their virginity. For instance, Participant 016 spoke about her virginity as not having a “huge impact” on her life but also being “very meaningful.” Furthermore, Participant 025 discussed his virginity as something that was “normal life” but also “very important.” Lastly, Participant 008 discussed her virginity as something that was not a huge deal but also important:

...I guess it's-it's important but not something that consumes me a lot. Like I don't think about it very much but it's important to me in that I'm not just going to sleep with the next guy I come across. (Extract 10)

Therefore, it is evident that participants varied with regard to the importance that they placed on their virginity and virginity statuses. Some participants varied within their own interviews, speaking about their virginity in multiple ways.

Conclusion. In conclusion, participants differed in the amount of importance that they placed on their virginity. The majority discussed their virginity as something that was not very important to them, using more neutral language like “just a fact” or “not a

huge deal”; other participants discussed their virginity as something that was important, and for some this also meant that it was positive.

Accounting for Virginity

The second main theme, Accounting for Virginity, relates to the justifications that participants gave for identifying as a virgin at age 20 or older. Participants generally acknowledged that virginity at their age or life stage was not common and offered a number of explanations and contextual factors that they considered to account for their virginity status. Accounting for Virginity is comprised of two subthemes, Active Resistance to Changing Status, and Situational Factors Related to Ongoing Status.

Participants largely accounted for their virginity in one of two ways, either by active resistance to changing their virginity status or because of situational factors associated with maintaining their virginity status. Participants who described maintaining their virginity as active resistance spoke about a variety of factors relating to relationships, including relationship partners, that they deemed as necessary in order for them to be willing to make the change from virginity to non-virginity. Participants also discussed their virginity as a result of circumstance, accounting for their virginity status due to situational factors.

Active resistance to changing status. When asked about their experience of virginity, almost all participants (18/21) indicated that they were actively choosing to maintain their virginity status until a number of conditions were met. These conditions usually referred to different qualities of the desired partner, specific feelings they needed to have for a partner, to a preferred type of relationship, or to characteristics of a desired relationship.

Resistance related to possible partner: "Right person." For example, some participants (6) spoke about the idea of the right person. For instance, Participant 001 stated:

...if I find the right person I definitely it is something that I want to share with somebody. It's something that you in my opinion can only really, like "lose" if you want to say th-those terms um lose once and that's why I have held off for so long because I know how easily someone can take away that type of power from you not that virginity is power but that type of umm uhh I don't know how else to say it but, that's something that you are in control of no matter what unless somebody takes it from you so I find it's something that um I would want to like choose the right person to share it with. (Extract 11)

Participant 013 also spoke about the idea of the right person, "*...really um like the reasons for it don't stem from like-like religious values or anything like it really is that I haven't sort of met the right guy that I feel like having a sexual experience with....*"(Extract 12)

Resistance related to possible partner: Specific kind of person. Some participants were more specific about the kind of person or qualities of a possibly partner who would be "worth" changing their virginity status for. For almost half of all participants (9/21), changing their virginity status was considered to be an important act and one that should take place with a special kind of person. All of these participants referred to comfort, security, honesty, and trustworthiness as characteristics that were important in eliciting a change in status. For instance, Participant 027 discussed the importance of finding a

partner that she considered to be special. Participant 027 also focused on the need for an intimate partnership, specifically the need to feel comfortable and close with a partner:

...it's not important for me to wait till I'm married but for sure it's definitely something that's important to me and so that I definitely wait until I feel very comfortable and close and I feel that I have found that special someone um that is worth losing my virginity for because it is a big part of who it is I guess it's to some extent uh a big part of like uh what makes me me I believe.... (Extract 13)

Participant 009 also spoke about the importance of being comfortable with a potential partner:

009: Um yeah and I think that's part of it too of why I'd want to wait until I'm dating someone is so that I feel comfortable with that person and um it would obviously be a new thing and something I haven't done before and it's something where you're vulnerable and um it, I think I would just I would just feel more comfortable if I'm really close with that person at that point.

M: Okay thanks. And what does being close with someone look like to you?

009: Umm just being comfortable with someone um knowing them well. Having them know you well. Um feeling comfortable spending time with that person. Being vulnerable with that person. Um, being open honest all of those sort of things I think all add to it. (Extract 14)

Similarly, Participant 002 spoke about wanting to feel both comfortable and secure with her partner. For this participant, knowing the partner was committed to the relationship and was going to “stick around” was critical to making a decision to change her virginity status:

...if I know someone's committed to sticking around and they're really sort of uhh I guess they're understanding of you they're really supportive of you um and honest then and then we have like a good relationship where I feel secure then I think I'm okay with it. Yeah. [laughter] (Extract 15)

These participants emphasized the importance of personal characteristics such as closeness, comfort, and security in order to change their status. A few participants (4) also spoke about the importance of having a partner that is honest and trustworthy. For instance, Participant 008 spoke about the importance of being in an exclusive relationship with someone who has both these qualities:

008: I guess things that go along with being e-exclusive would be just um me knowing that they're trustworthy and honest yeah.

M: Okay and then how do you know if someone is trustworthy and honest?

008: That's a great question [laughter]. Um I guess just by spending time with them and getting to know them on a deeper level. I just- it's not really something-something you can quantify. It's more just a feeling. (Extract 16)

Thus, a majority of participants (16/21) justified maintaining their virginity status due to not having found the “right” or specific kind of person. For these participants, having a specific kind of partner is a necessity and without this they would be unwilling to engage in the sexual behaviour that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity.

Resistance related to possible partner: Special feelings. Some participants (3) focused on the nature of their feelings for a partner, in addition to or rather than focusing on characteristics of their desired partner. These participants discussed the importance of having special feelings towards a partner and caring for them. For example, Participant

011 talked about wanting to engage in penile-vaginal intercourse, for him, the sole activity that would constitute a change in virginity status, with someone with whom he has a special connection, in addition to being someone he felt comfortable with:

...Um I guess the reason, that I am a virgin like it's not religious. Um I'm most definitely not waiting for marriage. For me I've just always wanted to have the first time I actually have intercourse with someone be someone I actually want to be there with. You know I don't want to be-be done and then have [laugh] a horrible feeling of like oh I really don't you know I don't really want to be with this person right now. I don't really care what anything they have to say. You know what I mean. I really just want to share that with someone that I'm comfortable with that I care about. You can call it love or you know connection....

(Extract 17)

For this participant and for others it was of importance to have special feelings towards potential partners before wanting to change their status as virgins.

Resistance related to relationship: Be in a specific kind of relationship. In addition, more than half (11) of participants spoke about wanting to be in a committed and/or significant relationship before they would be amenable to changing their virginity status. For instance, Participant 013 discussed this importance of being in a meaningful relationship before engaging in sexual activity:

...I think I-I would prefer for the like to have sex with someone whether it's my first time or like my millionth time or whatever for it to be in the context of like a meaningful relationship that's just how I feel and that's not to say I judge anyone who doesn't have sex like who has sex with someone outside of a relationship it

doesn't matter that just that's what means to me. That's how I want it to be.

(Extract 18)

A few (5) participants spoke about the importance of being married before they would change their virginity status. One of these participants was Participant 010:

...I'm Christian and just part of my beliefs is to wait until marriage to have sex so and so then again my definition of sex I mentioned that and um yeah so I really care about that commitment that I've made and holding true to that.... (Extract 19)

Similarly, Participant 006 also emphasized the importance of her religious beliefs in maintaining her virginity status. This participant noted that the security that comes with a marital relationship would give her permission to experience the vulnerability that accompanies sexual experiences associated with a change of status:

M: Okay and then so you mention love and commitment what does that look like for you?

006: Well for me-for me that looks like marriage... the examples that I've seen commitment with words in our culture just isn't enough so I would need that piece of paper signed to know that you know this man that I've that that I'm going to engage in sex with he's-he's here and he's here out of love and commitment and this is a journey that we are embarking on together so it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to be to give yourself over to someone else and I'm engaging in that commitment too and I'm going to stick this out and we're two becoming one in this moment of and it's symbolic of our life as a couple together. That sounds very

idyllic [laughs] and not really realistic but I do think that it can be achieved if you're working towards that. Yeah. (Extract 20)

These participants indicated that they would be willing to change their virginity status when they were in a specific type of relationship, either intimate or committed. For some participants, this intimate or committed relationship would need to be a marital relationship.

Resistance related to relationship: Relationship characteristics. Participants also spoke about different relationship characteristics that they consider to be essential in order to engage in the sexual behaviour that would, for them, constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity. More specifically, participants described relationships with the following qualities: trust, respect, connection, and intimacy. For example, some participants discussed the necessity of having a basic level of trust in the relationship before engaging the activity that they would consider constituting a change in virginity status. Participant 002 spoke about her current partner:

...there's also a level of like trust and respect so even though I'm a virgin and we've like he knows about my flaws like he's chosen to stay with me and similarly I've chosen to stay with in spite of his flaws so I think like we have a basic level of trust and respect that would be necessary for me to feel like I'm comfortable with it so yeah.... (Extract 21)

These participants, therefore, placed importance on the status of being in a relationship and in order for them to decide to engage in the activity that would constitute a change in virginity status, they wished to be in a specific kind of relationship.

Situational factors related to ongoing status. When talking about their experience of virginity, a few (3) participants accounted for their virginity due to circumstances, situational factors that did not allow them to change from virginity to non-virginity. For instance, Participant 002 spoke about her experience of being in a long distance relationship and how this type of relationship, in addition to a busy lifestyle, led to less opportunity to engage in sexual behaviour that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity:

...also in part just circumstance like too like if you're not in a position where you're not seeing the person you're with or you're not someone who date like for me I wouldn't have sex with someone I'm not dating although some people might but like I haven't dated a whole lot in my life. I've been really busy with school and things like that so it's partly just circumstance [laughter] yeah. (Extract 22)

This participant discussed her current partner as being the “right person” but discussed the situational factors and a lack of opportunity as the reason for not changing from virginity to non-virginity. Two other participants spoke about the lack of having a partner as a circumstance explaining their continued virgin status. For example, Participant 003 stated:

...another reason I stayed a virgin was just I didn't have the option to because I never had a boyfriend and I never like for example I didn't have my first kiss until like four months ago um so just that whole thing was just like completely out of the picture for me so that was another reason that I did stay a virgin.... (Extract 23)

These participants accounted for their virginity based on circumstance and not having the opportunity to change from virginity to non-virginity.

Conclusion. To conclude, participants accounted for their virginity in two distinct but related ways in that their remaining virgins was either an agentic resistance to a change in status or due to situational factors. Most participants gave complex accounts of their virginity status, referring to partner and relationship characteristics and types they were "waiting for" in order to engage in behaviours that would bring about a change in their virginity status. It is noteworthy that all of the participants who discussed their status as virgins as circumstantial also indicated there were specific criteria to be met (support for active resistance) before they would consider a change in virginity to non-virginity. For instance, Participant 003 discussed actively resisting a change in virginity status since they wanted to have special feelings towards a partner but also spoke about not changing from virginity to non-virginity since they had never had the opportunity to be in a relationship. Furthermore, this theme is linked to (Un)Importance as a majority (6/7) of those participants who stated that their virginity was important to them also discussed actively resisting a change in virginity status. For example, Participant 016 spoke about her virginity as something that was important to her and also discussed actively resisting a change in virginity status: she wanted to be in an intimate, connected, and committed relationship with the right person, with whom she feels comfortable, before engaging in the sexual activity that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity.

Socio-Cultural Context

Participants spoke about a myriad of social and cultural factors related to their virginity. The third main theme, Socio-Cultural Context, summarizes the factors related to different aspects of participants' social and cultural experiences that participants described in relation to their experience of virginity. These different factors all related to the social self in relation to society and/or culture.

Social psychological factors. About one-half of participants (10) described two social psychological factors as related to their experience of virginity: isolation and insecurities.

Isolation. Almost one-third (6) of participants spoke about feelings of isolation, largely because they felt they did not share the same experience that others did. Notably, these participants did not describe being or feeling ostracized, nor did they describe being severely distressed about their exclusion from “normal” society. For example, Participant 011 stated:

[laughs] Um. It-it's interesting for me it kind of I feel like it kind of on some level gives me a third person perspective to certain societal things. Um [long pause] yeah I-I don't because I don't I'm not really a part of the like go out get drunk hook up you know culture. Some of my friends do do that [laughs]. Some don't. It um it yeah it does, like it does kind of on some level um not necessarily in a bad way but kind of put you on the outside of some things. (Extract 24)

This is similar to the experience of Participant 013 who spoke of the isolating factors when asked to expand on her mention of stigma, specifically, where she believed this stigma to be coming from:

Yeah I think there's some in sort of the media and then just around in university I think there's a hu- pretty big hook up culture and I think when people talk about sex they sort of talk about it assuming that everyone has like very similar experiences with it so sometimes you know you can just talking about it you feel sort of left out in a way like you're sort of nodding along with what people are saying. At the same time you don't really have those same experiences as other people. So I think some of it is generated by sort of yeah just the culture of university especially and some of it is also like myself just listening to other people's conversations and how I can contribute to those conversations [laughs].

(Extract 25)

Feelings of isolation were connected to the idea that their status as virgins set them apart from their peers and others in their social circles, who participants often reported as no longer identifying as virgins themselves.

Insecurities. Participants also spoke about insecurities they experienced related to their virginity status. They spoke about insecurities in two distinct ways: as a cause and as a consequence of their virginity status. In the former, two of the participants described feeling that something was lacking in them, which was partly responsible for their current virginity status. This connects to the first major theme, Accounting for Virginity, in which participants described different factors that led them to actively resist a change in virginity status. For some this was in addition to feelings of insecurity and isolation. In the latter group, three participants described feeling insecure about their virginity status itself. Specifically, participants discussed feeling insecure about how their virginity might be received by a potential partner and how them being virgins would influence a sexual

encounter. The experiences of insecurity seemed to carry more negative emotional valence than the feelings of isolation.

Two participants spoke about their insecurities being a potential cause or contributor to their virginity. For instance, participant 012 stated in her interview:

It's just like being ready I guess would be when I'm comfortable with myself and I'm comfortable with the person that is a-across from me so to speak to be able to like change my virginity status because I've heard many times too it's just like and I feel like that's something that does make sense is that you have to be comfortable with yourself like the-the way you before you can be comfortable with someone else like share some-share some a more intimate with them because it is your body that you're sharing with somebody else and I feel like you have to be comfortable with how you are first before you can do that and I know personally I'm not comfortable with myself so I wouldn't be able to do that. (Extract 26)

Similarly, Participant 003 attributed staying a virgin “for a long time” to her feelings of low self-worth:

Umm [very long pause] it's [long pause] sorry it's just a lot to go over in my head [laughter] um, I just for a long time didn't think that I was capable of making someone happy or being attractive to someone 'cause [sic] I didn't see myself as attractive or didn't see myself as-as someone to value so the idea of being that to someone else seemed like absurd to me so that was a big part of why I stayed a virgin or why I never had a boyfriend or didn't like engage in any sort of activity with anyone 'cause [sic] I just didn't think I was capable of providing that I guess to anyone I guess um because of how I saw myself. (Extract 27)

Participants 003 and 012 described needing to feel comfortable with themselves first and being able to see oneself as able to make “someone happy” or be considered to be attractive to someone and as factors that led to them refraining from engaging in sexual activity with a partner.

A few (3) participants discussed feelings of insecurity related to not knowing how potential partners would react to their virginity or described being worried about “having sex” (however they defined it). An example of this can be seen in the following quotation from my interview with Participant 008:

008: ...I'm concerned about how I feel he'll feel about it and it's the same with my friends. Mhm mostly about that.

M: And then so you mention insecurities. Can you talk about what you mean by that?

008: I guess mm I am insecure about how, guys will feel about dating someone who is a virgin. (Extract 28)

Similarly, participant 016 described being potentially intimidated at the possibility of “having sex” with a partner who had more sexual experience. Lastly, Participant 003 spoke about being nervous about engaging in sexual behaviour.

Conclusion. To conclude, these two social psychological factors, isolation and insecurity, characterized the ways that participants experienced their virginity. Some of these factors seemed linked to participants' conceptualizations of themselves and their behaviours, in particular, for the participants who described insecurities. This led them to be reluctant to pursue sexual relationships. However, for the most part, negative affective experiences were not strongly emotionally valenced for participants. Instead, participants

largely described feeling set apart from their peers. Moreover, these social psychological factors are related to Active Resistance as the majority of participants (8/10) who spoke about feelings of isolation and insecurity also spoke about actively resisting a change in virginity status. For example, as mentioned above, Participant 003 discussed the influence of feelings of low self-worth on her remaining a virgin but also spoke about actively resisting a change in virginity status until being in a committed relationship with a partner for whom she had special feelings.

Social/Societal pressure. Participants were asked what pressures, if any, they felt with regards to their virginity experience.

No/Not much pressure. About half (10) of participants spoke about experiencing either little or no pressure related to their virginity. An example of this can be seen in Participant 013's interview:

I don't really feel any honestly. I mean again I've mentioned this sort of you know societal stigma about virginity and like I don't-I don't really feel that sort of pressure on myself because I don't know I feel like okay it doesn't really matter how other people think and if I'm happy with who I am and how I am that's really all that's important. And I mean yeah there are times when I think like "Wow. Should I have sexual activity at this point?" And then I just think I'm happy with who I am so it really shouldn't matter and it creeps up every once in a while but then I just sort of toss it aside and am like "No. This is who you are. This is how you are. And it's-it will happen when it happens" and it's not a big deal or a priority for me right now. (Extract 29)

Unlike the contribution provided by Participant 013 above, other participant responses within this theme that denied experiencing pressure were short and to the point. In their brief and unequivocal responses, participants made it clear that they did not feel pressures regarding their virginity, resisting the notion that they should.

Pressure. In contrast, nine participants described experiencing some form of pressure related to their virginity experience. Of these, six described feeling pressure to change their virginity status. Pressure was variously referred to as general, because others were engaging in behaviours (2); as pressure from past partners (2); or as pressure to be in a relationship (2). Only three described experiencing pressure to remain a virgin.

Related to pressure experienced from a past female partner in a “friends with benefits relationship,” Participant 011 indicated:

... she was very, not supportive [laughs] [of me] still being a virgin and sl-slightly judgmental um of that um and [long pause] yeah I just in that case I see the self interest of that they want to have sex so that's and I just kind of try to take it as it is not you know react negatively or anything like that.... (Extract 30)

Similarly, Participant 020 spoke about his experience with a high school girlfriend:

...I think at first I think she was relieved that I felt that way. She was relieved that I wasn't pushing sex onto her and when we were both fourteen it was really great. But after three [years] she kind of wanted that part of me and it actually kind of was sort of uh kind of an arbiter to why that relationship didn't work kind of thing. We just didn't understand uh each other's where we couldn't reconcile each other's stance on the subject and that kind of came with a lot of mismatch in the way we understood each other. (Extract 31)

It is noteworthy that the two participants who discussed feeling pressures surrounding their virginity from past partners were both male. This is in contrast to the dominant discourse that only females are pressured regarding their virginity. Alternatively, it is not surprising that these men described feeling pressure to “have sex” given sexual scripts for men suggesting men should always be ready for sex and highly sexually active (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & the Undergraduate Research Group in Sexuality, 2013).

Two other participants discussed feeling pressures not directly related to their virginity but pressures to be in a relationship. For example, Participant 022 discussed these pressures in the following excerpt:

...Um [long pause] I guess like, um like society in like ‘cause [sic] I’m-I’m like also like not in a relationship at all so I’m like if I feel like when I’m around like just like the general public that um there’s a big emphasis on being in a relationship like even when I’m like around my family one of the big questions is like “Oh like are you-have you met a guy?” or stuff like that right? And um yeah it’s just like a-assumed thing that you should be in a relationship and that should be like your goal right now in your life and so there’s that pressure to be in a relationship.... (Extract 32)

Similarly, Participant 012 stated:

...I feel like there’s been more of a pressure in terms of actually having a relationship than to do with anything with my virginity per se... towards me personally it’s more been more of a question of “Oh. How come you’re single?” and less of “Why are you still a virgin? (Extract 33)

These pressures are illustrative of the notion that for some participants there was less of a focus on changing one's virginity status and more on being in a relationship in which this change can occur. For these participants, the pressure to be in a relationship outweighed the pressure to no longer be a virgin. The societal norms about being in a relationship were perceived as more influential than those surrounding sexual behaviour. This might also be the case as singlehood is more readily identifiable by others than virginity status.

Lastly, three participants discussed being pressured to remain a virgin. In these cases, the pressure experienced was tied to religion. For example, Participant 006 spoke about standards that others in her religious community held for her regarding her virginity:

Um well I think that they would love to see me remain a virgin until I got married and for that marriage to be that-that pure love that I described um, I do like I said if I were to do if I were to do if I were to engage in that sexual relationship before [laughs] the ceremony um I what was I saying it would disagree with-with that standard that's what I mean. Their standard for me would be wait until you're married which I don't-I don't think is the point. (Extract 34)

Therefore, for these participants, the pressure to remain a virgin was related to messages that they had received regarding religion.

Although there was not enough data to substantiate a subtheme, it is worth noting that one participant (Participant 024) spoke about pressures that were self-imposed. Whereas the other participants described pressure from external sources, this participant described feeling internal pressure to change her virginity status. For this participant, this

pressure was related to the fact that she was at an age that she considered “strange” to be a virgin.

Consistent with other themes, some participants expressed varying views about their experience of feeling pressure. Specifically, two participants, Participants 022 and 020, spoke about feeling no/not much pressure and also some pressure with regards to their virginity, depending on the circumstance.

Conclusion. Overall, participants in this study experienced varying levels and types of pressures related to their virginity. These different pressures were directly related to participants’ social and cultural context as participants’ different experiences of pressures were directly linked to their social selves. However, none of the participants described the pressure that they experienced to be severely distressing. Instead, they spoke about recognizing that these pressures exist and feeling some amount of pressures at certain times in certain situations.

Others’ perceptions of virginity (as non-normative/problematic). Participants discussed assumptions that they perceived others to make regarding their virginity, assumptions that influenced their own experiences of their virgin status. These perceived external value judgements were related to the notion that virginity is problematic/non-normative. For instance, Participant 009 shared that she felt as though others made the assumption that their virginity was a problem and stated that others were motivated to help and had attempted to provide them with the opportunity to change their virginity status:

...when people hear people um people try to not to change it but people try to give me the opportunity to change it. So like I’ve told friends and then they try to set

me up with people or whatever. So I think that would be part of it because they see it as being something that maybe they wouldn't want for themselves so they don't want for me and so they-they try to help I guess um so that would be the only like concrete thing that I could give you. (Extract 35)

Similarly, Participant 010 described feeling like her virginity was a “problem”:

Well one it kind of it what's the word it they're-they're kind of assuming that one like it kind of feels to me they're assuming I don't know these basic things that I'm- that I need help. That this is some sort of problem that I need to be educated on. (Extract 36)

These participants were told, explicitly or indirectly, that their virginity was problematic, which influenced their experience about their virginity by contributing to their feelings that they were not “normal” or in step with the behaviours of their peers.

In addition, a few (4) participants described feeling as though others perceived them to be undesirable. This could be either a cause or a consequence of their virginity, depending on the participant). For example, Participant 003 indicated:

...being a virgin in gen- like part- like in particular like that wasn't the issue. For me-for me it was more of uh being undateable [sic] I guess um, because I hadn't had a boyfriend like ever or like no one's ever even shown interest I thought that it was an issue with me so that was some-that was something I identified with largely and that is something I talked about with my friends and that was something that really hurt for a lo- for a long time so it wasn't talking about being a virgin in particular it was just a small part of why um some things bothered me or some things hurt I guess. (Extract 37)

Where Participant 003 described feeling “undateable” and experiencing this as a factor in her virginity, Participant 008 described feeling undesirable because of her virginity status.

Specifically:

Yeah. I think it's just society's viewpoints that people are you know we are sexual beings and people want to be engaged in that and uh I-I can certainly understand that and agree with it and um I think it's-it's seen or at least at times for myself as I've viewed it as you're not desirable or you're not uh I guess wanted or whatever um and that's why you are a virgin um or that people make the personal choice too. Either or. Um but I uh yeah I guess that's been my perception at least from a societal standpoint as to how people obviously not everyone agrees with that but how people are perceived. At least that's been my experience sometimes so. (Extract 38)

Therefore, some participants seemed to be influenced by the idea that to be a virgin, especially after a certain age, implies that one is undesirable. The implication is that, if they were desired, they would have already had the opportunity to change from virginity to non-virginity.

Two participants elaborated on the idea that virgins might be less desirable relationship partners than experienced partners. They indicated that potential partners might consider it to be a big responsibility to be intimate with a virgin. For instance, Participant 011 talked about a previous partner with whom he had a "friends with benefits" relationship:

...she wanted me-she wanted to have sex with me but she didn't want to take my virginity. She wanted me to go out and have sex with a stranger and then come

back to her so she wasn't the one [laughs] who took my virginity. Um she was not comfortable with that um partly since she knew that I had been waiting to be in a relationship so she felt like um that sh-that I would she felt that I would feel that uhh something special had been taken or something like that.... (Extract 39)

Similarly, Participant 024 stated that:

...sometimes I-I feel nervous about like telling a guy that I'm a virgin because I don't want to think that if we have sex I'm going to expect him to marry me because that's not the case but I feel like there's a lot of um like a lot of commitment kind of seen to the other person in taking somebody's virginity. The older you get it's seen as a bigger deal. (Extract 40)

These participants considered that their virgin status was problematic because potential partners might see it as a big deal because there is either the underlying assumption or explicit recognition that these potential partners are non-virgins themselves.

One-third (7) of participants described being a virgin past a certain age as not normative. This is evident in the following excerpt from Participant 024's interview below:

Um so for example if you're like 17 and you're a virgin it's I feel less of a big deal because that's the age when people are losing it well not necessarily 17 I'm just using that as an example. In your teenage years I feel it I feel it's considered more normal to lose it at varying stages but once you are in your twenties a lot of the times like it's expected that it's already happened and if it hasn't already happened the further I feel um that I get into my twenties I feel like there's less

and less people that haven't had sex so therefore it sticks out more and there's kind of more like a stigma.... (Extract 41)

Participant 021 also spoke about this assumption based on age, “...yeah people who would be surprised that you know someone my age I'm only 21 but just that um you know I would s-not um have had sex before....” (Extract 42)

Two participants discussed the idea that others, who are seemingly non-virgins, assume that others are as well, in keeping with the idea that virgin status is not normative. For example, Participant 010 spoke about her experience with a new group of roommates:

...I lived with my roommates for four years and they were great. They never really- it never really came up. It wasn't a big deal and then I moved in with a set of roommates because they all graduated and I hadn't yet and um they-they were considerably younger than I am and then this kind of came up and they found out about it and it was very kind of a judgmental vibe. 'Why haven't you and we have? Why haven't you?' kind of thing and it kind of became the topic of discussion a number of times where I didn't need it to be or want it to be so it became kind of an uncomfortable topic. (Extract 43)

This participant's roommates struggled to understand that this participant was a virgin since they were presumably no longer virgins themselves. For them, it was hard to conceive that someone could be in their early twenties and not have engaged in a change in virginity status.

Some participants described their virginity as not normative, and also as problematic. This is evident in the following quotation from Participant 009's interview:

...I feel like it's against the norm to be as old as I am and to have not engaged in it and um, so and that I think it is at times looked down upon by other people um just that again I think that view that like maybe no one wants them maybe you know what's wrong with them for not having engaged in that yet. That sort of idea.... (Extract 44)

Of note, most participants did not make a distinction about others' perceptions of virgins for men vs. women. Only one participant mentioned the idea that assumptions are based on gender. Participant 005 stated that:

...I think it's not as bad because I'm a girl who's still in her twenties and um the real problems I think will be if I was a guy for example. There's a greater pressure and if I- once I get older and I'm still a virgin I think there will be greater pressure as well because "What did a girl possibly do to not get laid?" [laughter] Basically. It's seen-it's seen as being easy for a girl to get anything that there must be something really wrong with you if you are a virgin at a certain point. (Extract 45)

This participant stands apart from the others as she explicitly mentioned that her experience of virginity is influenced by her gender. Other participants did not mention their gender in discussing their virginity. Lastly, this subtheme is linked to the main theme (Un)Importance: although the majority of participants spoke about their virginity as not being very important to them, they did discuss the fact that others perceive it to be a "big deal." This is noteworthy as participants in this study were actively resisting the idea that their virginity should be seen as something that is significant.

Conclusion. Participants described their perception that others consider their virginity to be problematic. A minority of participants discussed their perception that they were undesirable, generally and as potential relationship partners. Participants also noted others' perceptions of their virginity as non-normative, especially after a certain age. This theme is connected to (Un)Importance as participants believed that others perceived their virginity to be of importance.

Cultural influences. Participants described a number of cultural influences that they considered to influence their experience of virginity. Participants spoke about culture in a myriad of ways and interpreted culture broadly.

Religion. Two participants spoke about religion as having had a strong influence in the past, but not having an impact currently on their virginity. For instance, Participant 009 spoke of this influence below:

...I remember thinking back like in high school that um I thought I was interested in waiting until marriage in terms of um having sex with someone but, that was really only important to me in high school. I think since I've come to university and just my mind has broadened and religion hasn't played as much of a role in my life. Not for any particular reason I don't think. Just-it just hasn't. That um it's that's not something that really matters to me. I don't think there's anything wrong with people who choose to-choose to believe their religious ideas I think a lot of them do say like different religions say you should wait until marriage or whatever. That personally doesn't impact me anymore. That teaching that even though I still identify with being a Catholic I don't see that as impacting my choice. (Extract 46)

For this participant, Catholicism had played a role in her experiences and understanding of virginity in the past but this was not currently the case since she had moved away from these influences and had undergone a distinct shift in thinking. About one-quarter (5) of participants stated that religion continued to have an influence on their experience of virginity. For example, Participant 025 indicated that:

...I am a Christian so that kind of uh shapes a lot of what I believe uh and abstinence is a big thing um in Christianity I mean maybe it's a little less now a days but I'm still one of the old school guys that thinks that way and uh so I've made a choice that I think it's uh honouring to God and I think that it's honouring to others around me if I wait until I get married and that's what I plan to do.

(Extract 47)

This is comparable to Participant 010's experience:

...I'm Christian and just part of my beliefs is to wait until marriage to have sex so and so then again my definition of sex I mentioned that and um yeah so I really care about that commitment that I've made and holding true to that and yeah I guess I would care more about that specific commitment then I guess the title if that makes sense. (Extract 48)

For these participants, religion continued to play a role in the ways in which they experience, and also frame, their virginity.

About the same number (6) of participants discussed religion as having not much of an impact on their experience. For example, Participant 013 stated:

...I-I do consider myself like a Christian but not I mean I cons- I was baptized and raised somewhat in a like a Catholic um- like Catholic religion more so because

it's important for my maternal grandmother um but I mean my parents always encouraged me to sort of make my own choices about religion so I sort of come with that like where I believe a lot of sort of like the main ten- like the main tenants of Christianity that are important to me but I mean I have nothing against premarital sex for either myself or others. Again for me it really is that sort of you know um-um good relationship but it doesn't have to be marriage to me. So no it hasn't really affected my virginity status at all (Extract 49).

The experience of this participant echoes that of Participant 008:

...when I was growing up uh I lived in like a Catholic family and for a while it was "You're never- you shouldn't have sex before you get married." But then that kind of just- people stopped talking about it. Like my parents didn't- it wasn't a big thing and they never, I guess when we were really little they would say it a lot but as we got older it didn't become a thing and they stopped saying it. (Extract 50)

In sum, these participants did not feel as though their virginity experience had been directly influenced by their religion, although, in large part, they were aware of these messages.

For two participants, culture (in the sense of cultural background) was directly tied to religion and it was impossible to separate the two. For instance, Participant 003 discussed the relationship between religion and her Filipino culture and Christian religion below when asked about other aspects of her culture, besides religion, had an impact on her experience of virginity:

...my culture is very very religious in general so the two are very very closely interlinked. I live with my grandparents and they are the most conservative people ever. So it was considered like, a complete wrong even if I just went over to a boy's house for example and that was not something I should do or something like and that was shaming to the household to them um, so th- it was only because of the religious aspect as well. Um, it was never really a Filipino thing just that it was a Filipino thing because the rest of my church group were Filipino so the two to me were like almost pretty much the same. Um because every other Filipino well almost every other Filipino I knew was going through the same thing almost or knew what I was talking about when I talked about like super religious parents or anything like that but it was never a Filipino thing in general it was just a cultural sorry a religious thing that just happened to be from coming from a lot of Filipinos [laughs]. (Extract 51)

Moreover, Participant 027 spoke about her Pakistani culture and Islam:

...I am Muslim so um just being yeah so um just being Muslim uh we often get talked about how like it's really really special and it's really important that we always stay remain a virgin until marriage and um that's a big part of our religion and also our culture I'm I am south Asian. I'm from Pakistan so just being there it's commonly accepted it's considered really important that a girl maintain her virginity until she is married and um culturally it's a-it's often considered a huge stigma if-if a girl is not a virgin until uh um um she gets married. (Extract 52)

These participants said that they were not able to distinguish the cultural influences from the religious ones since they were so closely linked.

Local/Community culture. A few (3) participants discussed the impact of local/community culture on their feelings about their virginity status. This is best illustrated by the following excerpt from Participant 010's interview:

...I grew up in a very small town that was religious. Like if you can picture the town from Footloose. That would be my hometown. So I guess that kind of culture where everyone knows each other and knows each other's reputations I guess that would-that would have definitely impacted the way I kind of viewed my sexuality or virginity um but then also I guess moving into university how people are more kind of open with their sexuality. I think it, um at first it was more like 'Oh that's cool. Whatever.' [laughter] But then as I've gotten older it's- I think there's more judgement attached to it but you know it's the way of the road. (Extract 53)

Of note is the fact that this participant discussed the influence of two, conflicting local community cultures: that of her small town and that of university.

Family. More than one-quarter (6) of participants mentioned the influence of family on their experiences of virginity. For example, Participant 025 discussed the influence of his father in the quotation below from his interview:

...my dad set the standard for [virginity] and how uh pretty much it would be how my dad has set the standard for it just looking at it if we're talking about culture in general any mainstream it hasn't any media would not helpful in this at all.

(Extract 54)

This is similar to the experience of Participant 027 who indicated:

...growing up my parents always instilled in me the importance of uh a girl uh the importance of virginity and how important that is to our culture and our religion and um how important it is to basically respect I guess yourself and um others and um yeah so the idea is yeah just from a religious point of view it's really it's important to maintain um your virginity until you're married-until your marriage and my parents always instilled that in me and other family members as well....

(Extract 55)

For these participants, family members had an impact on their conceptualizations of virginity, as well as their behaviour, in influencing their motivation to maintain their virginity status. In both of these cases, these participants' parents explicitly shared messages surrounding virginity.

Media. A minority (4) of participants spoke about the media. Two participants discussed not being able identify with media portrayals of sexuality. An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Participant 005's interview:

...It has some isolating features to it especially if you are fond of the media. The general media. Popular media maybe um because most media usually culminates in sex or sexuality or romance as being the primary reward of any major venture and [laughter] of course it's difficult to feel an investment in that type of story if you're not particularly interested in the sexual aspect.... (Extract 56)

Another participant described media representations of sex as something that is often depicted as happening early on in a relationship, shortly after the initial meeting of a potential partner. Therefore, these participants were influenced by the messages in the

media that one should make attempts to change their status as virgins and this is something that happens in a short period of time.

Two other participants spoke about virginity being seen as a big deal in the media, which contributed to their feeling that their virginity was abnormal or problematic. For instance, Participant 013 discussed the media using the dating reality show the Bachelor as an example:

M: Okay. And then is there anything else related to virginity that we haven't talked about that you would like to share?

013: ... I know in a lot of shows like you know I see ads for like the Bachelor and one of the contestants finds out like people find out that she's a virgin it's like this whole thing. It's like always shown on the previews for the episodes like it's a huge deal so I've just been able to sort of move away from that weird pop culture view of it.... (Extract 57)

The other participant discussed how it is often depicted as “not normal” to be a virgin past a certain age in movies and on television. Thus, these depictions of being against the norm were clearly influencing their experience of their own virginity.

Societal influences in a broader sense. Moreover, a minority of participants (6) spoke about culture in a broader sense, referring to society at large. For instance, Participant 020 talked about the influence of societal messages:

...Um like culturally uh there's always been a conflict I guess. 'Cause [sic] culturally I've been raised in a culture where sexual intercourse is kind of has been liberated from any kind of religious stance on it. And it's been sort of I guess secularized so the way I guess the way my culture's influenced it has been I guess

is combatively would be the way I'd put it so I guess like my experience has been counterculture if that makes sense.... (Extract 58)

Participant 022 also spoke about society in the broader sense:

...I think just like because our society makes sex such a normal thing that like it's kind of like 'Oh yeah like people have sex all the time.' Kind of thing would kind of make it like seem like oh like of if sex is supposed to be such a normal thing and that everyone is supposed to engage in sex and me being someone who hasn't kind of like 'Am I not, doing something right?' or like kind of thing and like people being like 'Oh well you haven't had sex yet.' Yeah. (Extract 59)

Conclusion. Participants were easily able to describe messages they received about virginity, their own virginity and virginity in general, from a variety of sources considered to be aspects of culture (broadly defined). Participants described being influenced by these messages to varying degrees, and in positive (specifically with regard to religion), negative (with regard to the media) and neutral (for example, regarding local community culture) ways. Furthermore, this subtheme is linked to one of the main themes, Active Resistance, as some participants spoke about different cultural influences as linked to their decision to not change from virginity to non-virginity. For example, as mentioned previously, Participant 006 discussed in her interview that she was actively resisting a change in virginity status until she was in a marital relationship and that this decision was directly linked to religious influences (Extract 34).

Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status

When discussing what the term virginity meant to them, the majority of participants focused on the circumstances under which an individual would be considered

to have experienced a change in virginity status. The fourth and last major theme is Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status.

Penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI). When first discussing what the term virginity meant to them, the majority (13) of participants first mentioned penile vaginal intercourse (PVI). Often they used terms like “sexual intercourse” or “sex” to refer to PVI. For instance, when asked what the term virginity meant to them, Participant 020 stated that:

020: Uh someone who has not engaged in sexual intercourse.

M: And what do you mean by sexual intercourse?

020: Um I guess very literally penis in vagina. Yeah. (Extract 60)

Similarly, when answering the same question, Participant 001 stated:

...my uhhh definition of virginity would be someone who hasn't had umm penis to vaginal contact...no actual like penetration from a peen [penis]. Penis sorry [laughs].... (Extract 61)

For these participants, the act of penile vaginal intercourse was the necessary act that one *must* engage in in order to change from virginity to non-virginity. Thus, an individual can engage in other kinds of sexual behaviours but could continue to be able to identify as virgins. Viewing a change in virginity status as PVI is evidence of the heteronormative notion that both a penis and vagina are necessary for a sexual encounter to “count.” By conceptualizing a change in virginity as PVI, these participants privileged this sex act over all others. In all of my interviews apart from the first two, I followed up by asking participants to think about other sexual acts including anal sex, challenging this heteronormative conceptualization.

Six of these participants initially mentioned PVI as the act that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity but after my prompting or reflecting on it during the course of their interview, included anal sex as an act that would they would consider to constitute a change in virginity status. For instance, when asked what the term virginity means to them, Participant 010 stated:

010: Huh okay. Well I've taken a couple like human development courses where they pose this questions I guess and my thought would be that it isn't doesn't or it's someone who doesn't have or hasn't had uh like vaginal intercourse I guess and some of my other friends would argue it is or it does include oral as well so if you've had oral you then may not be a virgin but I don't see it that way so I would say strictly vaginal I guess.

M: Okay. So what I'm hearing is for you you know that other people might have varying opinions on what is considered I guess a change from virginity to non-virginity.

010: Mhm.

M: But for you it's vaginal penile sex-

010: Yeah.

M: -that's the act.

010: Yeah.

M: And then so what about anal sex?

010: Uhh that's a tough one. I-I guess that would be included yeah it's not really something I've I'm interested in so I don't even really think about it so this is all my own perception and what applies to my life I guess and my thoughts around

that so I never really thought about it but I guess if I you know were to have anal sex then I wouldn't consider anymore. (Extract 62)

Participant 011 also mentioned penile-vaginal intercourse at first before concluding that he would also constitute engaging in penile-anal sex as a change from virginity to non-virginity:

M: Okay and then so you're talking about not having had sex. And then you use the word intercourse. So then can you just expand on whether or not because what I'm hearing is that for you intercourse equals sex. Is that-

011: Yeah. Yeah. And-and I know like there's a myriad definitions of virginity and it's as soon as you get into you know lesbian couples it's [laughs] the whole idea of that being virginity breaks down but yeah for me that's-that's kind of the line is-is intercourse is sex. I mean it's I would say everything else is you could still call it sex um sexual intimacy um but for me I just sex is intercourse I guess yeah. Um. Yeah.

M: And is that penile vaginal only?

011: Mhm. Yeah. ... yes vaginal [laughs] would be.

M: But if you were to have engaged in vaginal sorry anal penile anal sex?

011: I would consider that sex. Yeah.

M: Okay. So you would no longer identify as a virgin.

011: Yeah yeah. I would no longer or yeah I never even thought of that distinction but yeah that's to me it's-it's just a form of sex that I wouldn't have [laughs] but yeah I would no longer identify as a virgin. (Extract 63)

The remaining three participants, who originally mentioned PVI, again after my prompting and their own self-reflection, also included both anal intercourse and oral sex as sexual activity that would change one's virginity status. For instance, in response to the question "What does the term virginity mean to you?" Participant 019 said that:

019: Uhh I guess like definitionally [sic] like you haven't had sex.

M: And what do you mean by sex?

019: Um okay uhh I guess intercourse. Yeah.

M: And would that be vaginal penile intercourse?

019: Yes.

M: And then what about um sorry I can't think of the word penile anal intercourse.

019: Uh I guess it would include that too.

M: So then for you if someone was to engage in penile anal intercourse would they be no longer a virgin?

019: Umm yeah I guess.

M: Yeah they would not be?

019: They would not be a virgin.

M: Um and then what about with regards to oral sex?

019: I think if someone engaged in oral sex they wouldn't be a virgin anymore either. (Extract 64)

Therefore, although the majority of participants included PVI initially in their responses about what virginity meant to them, their responses were subsequently enlarged to

include other sorts of sexual activity as a function of my prompts and their own self-reflecting.

PVI, anal intercourse, or oral sex. Some participants included the acts of oral sex, anal sex, and penile-vaginal intercourse in their conceptualization of a change in virginity status without prompting. For example, Participant 005 stated that:

I think if you do oral like I think it has to involve the genitalia in some way so like if you go down on a guy or a guy goes down on you or whatever I think I don't really consider you to be a virgin at that point anymore... I don't see virginity or like losing one's virginity as being strictly as a penetrative thing.... (Extract 65)

Similarly, Participant 013 said that:

...So for me um I mean I do self-identify as heterosexual so I've never had sort of that penile vaginal intercourse experience but nor have I had sort of like um like oral sex experience or anal sex experience or anything like that so I know that there is this sort of big emphasis on the penile vaginal intercourse um as being like the marker of virginity loss although at the same time I do feel like any sort of any of those I think even with oral sex or anal sex I would still probably consider that a virginity loss for myself is how I feel. (Extract 66)

Thus, for these participants the acts of PVI, anal sex, and oral sex would all constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity.

Anything intimate. For some, the change from virginity to non-virginity was defined in broader parameters, constituted by engaging in any “intimate” activity. This is most evident in the following excerpt from my interview with Participant 012:

012: ...in my eyes virginity I feel like what it is-is in a sexual connotation is like you're new to like sexual acts period so as soon as you even manual stimulation just like it's a sexual act so I think therefore you wouldn't be a virgin.

M: Okay. And then so then what about kissing?

012: Kissing I don't know. I think it's an ambiguous zone because to me personally kissing isn't very sexual. It's just like I feel like if it was kissing accompanied by other acts then I'd say that it's part of like a losing of virginity but if it's just a simple kiss then I don't really consider it a part of changing your virginity status. (Extract 67)

Similarly, again when asked what the term virginity meant to them, Participant 025 stated that:

025: Um haven't been with a woman I guess you would say. That would be the way I look it.

M: Um can you just clarify a little bit more what you mean by that? With regards to that is there a specific act or is it any type of act that you would I guess you would do with a woman?

025: Anything I guess anything regarded as intimate.

M: So then what about something such as kissing?

025: I wouldn't-I wouldn't put that in that category. That would be a little different I think. (Extract 68)

These participants included a variety of different sexual and intimate acts in their conceptualization of a change from virginity to non-virginity but for both of these participants kissing was not an intimate enough act. For these two participants, as well as one other, the distinction between engaging in sexual activity and not engaging in sexual

activity was more important than technical considerations of a change in virginity status. Being sexual was the determining factor, not a specific act; being sexual in any capacity would constitute a change in status and this was not something these participants were willing to engage in. These participants were largely also those who gave religious reasons for maintaining their virginity status.

Participant resistance to virginity/non-virginity dichotomy. A minority of participants (5) of participants were resistant to the virgin/non-virgin dichotomy. Some participants, such as Participant 006, discussed the idea that virginity is a spectrum/continuum:

Hmm maybe it's not so- maybe it's not so black and white. Do you know what I mean? Maybe virginity is more so in a sexual context maybe virginity is just more of a spectrum of inexperienced to experienced. That-that makes sense to me actually. So you have someone who has never-never been with someone in a way that's arousing. Total complete virgin. Then you have all these shades along the spectrum where okay someone has held hands. Someone has kissed. Someone has um I don't know like fondled each other [laughs] do you know what I mean? Maybe it's more like that and the more sexual experiences that you gain the less- the less of a virgin you are. Do you know what I mean? I think that makes more sense than this virgin not virgin unless you're defining it in the context of have you had penile vaginal sex then of course that becomes much more black and white. (Extract 69)

Participant 013 also resisted the idea that there is a virginity/non-virginity dichotomy and spoke about the potential of there being a variety of different types of virginity.

...I don't know maybe there are different types of virginity too. I mean I really haven't thought about it too much but yeah maybe you can even say "Okay. One kind of virginity status but I still feel the same status for other activities. "I mean maybe it is activity dependent. Maybe it's not this hol- this holistic concept of virginity. I think that's something worth-worth looking at. (Extract 70)

Similar to those participants who considered any intimate act as constituting a change in virginity status, these participants did not consider a sole act as constituting a change from virginity to non-virginity.

Of note is that Participant 007 was the only participant to discuss the importance of sexual pleasure:

M: But if you were to have engaged in penile vaginal sex do you still think that you would be able to choose whether or not you would identify as a virgin?

007: Um it depends on how it went really. Like if it was enjoyable and I decided afterwards I liked that and I think I'm going to decide I'm going to not be a virgin anymore then yes but if I was not enjoyable like "It's like no that wasn't my first time. That sucked. Let's try this again." (Extract 71)

According to this participant, it is up to the individual to decide whether or not to continue to identify as a virgin (or not) and this decision should be influenced by whether or not the sexual act was deemed to be enjoyable. This lack of focus on pleasure in the responses of all other participants highlights the fact that the emphasis is usually placed on certain sexual behaviours but not on how pleasurable it is to engage in these sexual activities.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Summary of Findings

In order to examine how individuals who identify as virgins experience their virginity and conceptualize virginity, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 self-identified virgins between the ages of 20 and 26 years of age living in Canada. Participants were asked a variety of questions including what the term virginity meant to them and what pressures, if any, they felt with regards to their virginity. A thematic analysis was conducted of the transcribed audio interviews according to Braun and Clarke (2006)'s guidelines.

In summary, the four main themes generated from the data were: (Un)Importance, Accounting for Virginity, Socio-Cultural Context, and Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status. Participants varied in the amount of importance that they attributed to their virginity, but most spoke about their virginity as something that was not important to them, for example, as “just a fact” about them. Participants generally accounted for their virginity in one of two ways: actively resisting a change from virginity to non-virginity because relationship or relationship conditions had not yet been met or because of situational factors. For many, this accounting for virginity was related to (Un)Importance as most who discussed their virginity as important also spoke about actively resisting a change in virginity status. Participants also discussed a variety of socio-cultural factors that influenced their experience of virginity. Specifically, these were: social-psychological factors, cultural influences, social/societal pressures, and others' perceptions of virginity. Participants spoke about two social-psychological factors: insecurities and isolation that were related to social interactions with others, for

instance, feeling left out of conversations due to their virginity. Moreover, participants discussed varying cultural influences, such as family and the media. Participants also spoke about perceptions that others have regarding virginity and virgins. These socio-cultural influences played a role in how participants viewed their virginity and their decisions to remain virgins. Social-psychological factors and cultural influences were both related to Accounting for Virginity in that both had an influence on participants' decision to actively resist changing their virginity status. Others' perceptions of virginity were linked to (Un)Importance as participants often discussed how they perceived others to view their virginity as something that was important, in contrast to their own feelings. Participants also discussed varying levels of pressure that they felt regarding their virginity.

Participants were asked what the term virginity meant to them, but in their responses largely focused on Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status. Most participants stated that this change could only occur after an individual engages in PVI, while others included the acts of PVI, PAI, and oral sex as constituting a change from virginity to non-virginity. In addition, some participants considered any intimate behaviour as allowing for a change in status, while still others resisted the virgin/non-virgin dichotomy. Results indicate that participants had varying experiences and conceptualizations of virginity that reportedly had differing degrees of an effect on their lives.

Connections with Prior Research

(Un)Importance. My participants largely spoke about their virginity as something that was not of great importance to them. This counters previous findings that

indicated that participants largely felt either proud or anxious (Sprecher & Regan, 1996) or proud and happy (Sprecher & Treger, 2015) with regards to their virginity. Participants in the present study, for the most part, did not discuss having high levels of pride, anxiety, or happiness in relation to their virginity. Though using a sample similar to the one in the present study, the methods in the study conducted by Sprecher and Regan (1996) differed from the present study since participants were provided with five emotions, none of which were neutral, whereas participants in the present study were provided the opportunity to generate their own responses. This methodological difference may account for the difference in results.

Almost half (49%) of Carpenter's (2001, 2002, 2005) sample was categorized as being gift-oriented, having placed a high level of importance on their virginity. Participants in the present study were more akin to process-oriented individuals in Carpenter's (2001, 2002, 2005) research who were more likely to discuss their virginity in more neutral terms. The findings of the present study counter a finding in another study that the majority of a sample of African-American teens between the ages of 12 and 14 years of age stated that their virginity was highly valuable (Childs et al., 2012). It is possible that there is an effect of age on these results; perhaps virginity is considered to be of more importance at younger ages (Childs, et al., 2012). However, although participants in the present study did vary in the level of importance placed on their virginity, the majority suggested that their virginity was not very important to them. They used language like, "*it's just more of a fact I guess*" and "*it's not a big deal.*" This finding is similar to that of Sim and Ho (2014)'s qualitative study, using focus group

methodology, in which some participants reported that their virginity was not important while others considered it to be something that was both important and sacred.

Although the questions explicitly asking participants in the present study about Carpenter (2001, 2005)'s virginity frameworks were dropped from analysis, these three ideas (of gift, process, and stigma) did not substantiate themes, or even subthemes, in the analysis of the remainder of the interview data. Therefore, it is evident that participants in this study largely did not conceptualize their virginity in these three ways. Although, as described previously, participants overall discussed their virginity in neutral terms. This is similar to process-oriented participants' in Carpenter's (2001, 2005) work. However, participants did not discuss their virginity as though it was a process in becoming an adult. In contrast, participants largely conceptualized it more as something that is simply just a fact. It is possible that this difference in findings is, at least partly, due to the fact that participants in this study identified as virgins at the time that they were interviewed while the same was not true for the majority of Carpenter's participants.

Accounting for virginity. The finding that participants in the present study were resisting a change in virginity status due to factors related to the right partner and relationships echoes the finding of Sprecher and Regan (1996). In their study, participants were most likely to rate the item "I have not been in a relationship long enough or been in love long enough" as being the most important reason for remaining a virgin (p. 8). In addition, participants in Sprecher and Regan's (1996) sample also rated "Fear of Pregnancy" as a main motivation for not changing their virginity status (Sprecher & Regan, p. 8). This was not the case in my sample as none of my participants discussed fears of becoming pregnant or impregnating a partner. This can potentially be explained

by fact that contraception has become more readily available in the twenty years since the Sprecher and Regan (1996) study was published. In addition, that many participants resisted a change in virginity status for reasons relating to the right relationship partner or circumstances supports Garcia's (2009) finding that the majority of their participants discussed a change in virginity as "something special" and representing the "next step/level in a relationship" (p. 605). Garcia (2009) also found that participants in her study spoke about it being acceptable to "lose one's virginity" (p. 608) as long as it takes place in a relationship that is either caring or loving. In addition, in a recent study on Thai women's decisions and knowledge about abstaining from sex, participants (N=19) also discussed waiting for the right time and actively resisting a change in virginity to non-virginity (Supametaporn, Stern, Rodcumdee, & Chaiyawat, 2010). However, that some participants in the present study reported circumstantial reasons, such as a lack of opportunity, as an account for their maintaining their virgin status, is a novel finding. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that all participants in my study who spoke about a lack of opportunity also spoke about actively resisting a change in virginity status. Therefore, for these participants, it is arguable that even if provided with the opportunity to change from virginity to non-virginity, certain additional conditions would also have to be met.

Socio-cultural context. Participants in the present study reported the social-psychological factors of isolation and insecurity related to their virginity. The finding that some participants spoke about insecurities surrounding their virginity relates to the finding from research by Vasilenko, Maas, and Lefkowitz (2015). These authors utilized open-ended data from a longitudinal study of college students (N= 346) in order to examine participants' first sexual experiences. They found that being very nervous and

scared was ranked as being the second most likely response (Vasilenko et al., 2015). This idea of insecurities also relates to Carpenter's (2001, 2005) research. That a minority of participants reported insecurities surrounding their virginity connects to Carpenter's (2001, 2005) finding that stigma oriented individuals were least likely, when compared to gift or process oriented individuals, to disclose their virginity status to sexual partners.

Participants in my study largely did not report feeling pressure with regard to their virginity status. Other research has also documented a lack of pressure related to virginity. In Sprecher and Treger (2015), participants reported minimal amounts of pressure to both engage in sexual intercourse and to remain virgins. However, in Sprecher and Treger, participants reported feeling more pressure to engage in sexual intercourse than to remain virgins. The same was not found to be true in the present study. A difference in methodology may account for at least part of the difference in findings.

Participants in my study did speak about others' perceptions about there being an age that was considered to be normal to change one's virginity status. Similarly, participants in Gesselman and colleagues' (2016) study of individuals who were considered to be developmentally late in regards to engaging in PVI reported that the average "normal" age to engage in PVI was 17. This is the same age that some of my participants also reported as the norm to change from virginity to non-virginity. For this reason, participants in my study did describe feeling outside the norm. Though their virginity status was not "normative" they did not report feeling "abnormal." Sennott and Mollborn (2011) surveyed 47 college-bound Americans about the influence of perceived norms on participants' decisions about whether or not to engage in sexual activity. Their sample of virgins and non-virgins spoke about competing norms from different sources

and their influence on participants' experience. This is consistent with findings from the present study – a minority of participants referred to feeling support from their religious communities related to maintaining their virginity status, yet small but notable pressure from some peers to change their status. In contrast to Gesselman and colleagues' (2016) findings that sexually inexperienced participants reported high levels of stigma, my participants did not largely speak about feelings of stigmatization. This difference in findings may be related to differences in sample. For instance, Gesselman et al. (2016) restricted their sample to heterosexual individuals. In addition, their sample included sexually inexperienced participants between the ages of 18 and 51 years of age. Therefore, there may be an effect of both sexual orientation and age on experiences of stigmatization. Furthermore, Gesselman and colleagues (2016) utilized quantitative methods, asking participants to endorse first-person statements in a perceived stigma questionnaire, and this difference in methodology may account for part of the difference in findings.

Participants in my study were asked about the influence of culture on their experiences of virginity. Participants considered culture broadly, and spoke about religion, the media, societal and community culture, and family as having an influence on their attitudes and feelings towards their virginity. Carpenter's (2005) participants also spoke about culture. My participants differed greatly across the sample in not only how they interpreted culture but also in how they felt that culture played a role in their experiences. Although participants spoke about their virginity in relation to culture, none of them directly related their virginity with their ethnic heritage. This is likely the case because the majority of my sample identified as White/Caucasian. However, as in the

Abboud et al. (2015) study, participants in my study also spoke about the influence of family on their conceptualizations and experiences of virginity. For instance, participants spoke about messages they received from their family about virginity. For example, as seen in Extract 54, Participant 025 spoke about how his father set the standard that he should remain a virgin. Furthermore, as seen in Extract 55, Participant 27 discussed how her parents instilled in her that, for girls, it is important to remain a virgin until marriage. This is also similar to the finding in Garcia's (2009) study that many participants also discussed that family members often emphasized that one should not change one's virginity status until marriage and that it is important to remain a virgin.

Only a few participants spoke directly about gender and assumptions related to gender and sexuality. In contrast, Caron and Himan (2013) found, based on an analysis of stories submitted by undergraduate students (N = 237) about male virginity loss experiences, that different gender norms exist related to virginity. For instance, participants in Caron and Himan (2013) indicated that the male in a male-female partnership is often expected to have more experience than his female counterpart. The findings in my study also contrast with the work on young adults' stories of first sex by Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thomson (2010). Participants in their study often spoke about gendered assumptions related to virginity. For instance, participants discussed how a "man gains manhood through a woman's loss of virginity" (Holland et al., 2010, p. 353). It is possible that participants in the present study did not discuss gender due to changing gender norms surrounding sexuality. Support for this includes work on heterosexual sexual scripts using three focus groups (N=39) to investigate current, dominant sexual scripts by Sakaluk et al. (2013). These authors discovered a

newfound expectation that women are to be sexually skilled. This is similar to the long-standing notion that the same be true for men (Sakaluk et al., 2013).

Only one person, Participant 007, mentioned the idea of pleasure and the impact of one's experience of pleasure on the decision to identify (or not) as a virgin. This is noteworthy as I believe that there is often too much of a focus on engaging (or not) in a certain sexual behaviour; there is very little, if any, importance placed on pleasure and whether or not something feels good. It is my hope that those moving forward with this type of work will place more of a focus on pleasure, as this is not currently the focus of sexual education. For instance, if pleasure is regarded as the most important factor, then it is possible that youth will be less concerned with whether or not they are virgins and more likely to engage in less risky sexual behaviours, such as mutual masturbation.

Lastly, only one participant, Participant 011, spoke about the idea of technical virginity. He mentioned in his interview how others have perceived him as engaging in other sexual behaviours, but not PVI, in order to retain his virgin label. However, he stated that this was not his intention but that he was engaging in other sexual behaviours that he saw as leading up to PVI. This is consistent with the findings from Uecker et al.'s (2007) research on technical virginity.

Sexual behaviours that constitute a change in virginity status. Blank (2007) stated the following about the definition of virginity: "In practical terms, virginity is usually defined through a complicated kaleidoscope of partial definitions, and almost always backward and by exclusion: we define virginity by what it is not" (p. 9). Indeed, participants in my study focused on the sexual behaviour that would constitute a change in virginity status and not on their definition or conceptualization of virginity itself. It is

not surprising that participants focused on the sexual behaviour that would render an individual no longer a virgin rather than focusing on virginity itself as a concept; virginity as a concept is complicated and difficult to define. In addition, according to Blank (2007), virginity has not had a concrete definition in recent history.

Overall, participants were most likely to consider PVI as the sexual activity that would constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity. This is consistent with prior research on what “counts” as sex (Bogart et al., 2000; Gute et al., 2008; Mehta, et al., 2011; Hans et al., 2010; Hans & Kimberly, 2011; Pitts & Rahman, 2001; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010) and what behaviours would “count” as bringing about virginity loss (Bersamin et al., 2007; Carpenter, 2001, 2005; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). For instance, Trotter and Alderson (2007) found that 74 to 99% of their participants reported that a fictional character that engaged in PVI would have gone through “virginity loss.” In addition, 92.9% to 99.5% of other samples constituted PVI as constituting “having sex” (e.g. Sanders & Reinisch, 1996; Sanders et al., 2010; Randall and Byers, 2003; Bogart et al., 2000). However, although Sanders et al.’s (2010) sample was statistically significantly more likely to report that PVI that included male ejaculation should be considered “having sex” as compared with PVI without male ejaculation, only one participant in my sample mentioned that a change in virginity status occurs when ejaculation occurs. Again, this difference may be attributed to methodological differences. Specifically, participants in Sanders et al.’s study were explicitly asked about the influence of ejaculation on whether or not a sexual behaviour constitutes sex. In addition, it is possible that my participants did not feel as comfortable discussing ejaculation in a one-on-one interview as they would have been answering a

telephone surveys, as was the case in the study conducted by Sanders et al. (2010). In addition, some participants' conceptualizations of a change from virginity to non-virginity fell into line with interpersonal sexual scripts in that they discussed incorporating what they learned on a cultural level into their own conceptualizations and experiences (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For instance, Participant 011 in Extract 63 discussed how other sexual activities would be considered sexual intimacy. Later on in his interview he spoke about how he is comfortable engaging in other sexual behaviours and "fooling around" but not PVI. For him, PVI represented the sole sexual activity that would constitute a change in virginity status and other sexual acts lead up to it.

The finding that participants largely spoke about a change in virginity to non-virginity as occurring when an individual engages in PVI is likely reflective of the fact that the majority of my participants (16 of 21) identified as heterosexual. Although some change did occur for some participants after being asked to consider individuals of other sexual orientations, it is probable that these participants largely considered virginity in a way that coincided with their own heterosexuality. Moreover, a change from virginity to non-virginity is often talked about in the media as occurring only if PVI has taken place. For instance, Medley-Rath (2007) found that columns from the teen magazine *Seventeen* from 1982 to 2001 often discussed this change in a way that reinforces a heteronormative conceptualization. Therefore, it is possible that these participants in my study internalized these messages. In addition, some participants in the present study resisted the virgin/non-virgin dichotomy, although only one mentioned doing so due to the heteronormative nature of virginity. This supports Averett et al.'s (2014)'s finding that

queer participants in their study did not feel as though the concept of virginity was relevant to them as it a heterosexual construct.

Additionally, this study provides a novel perspective as participants in this study exhibited multiple examples of resistance. For instance, participants largely spoke about actively resisting a change in virginity status until certain circumstances were met, such as being in a committed relationship and trusting a potential partner. For example, Participant 001 in Extract 11 spoke about resisting a change in virginity status since she had not yet met the right person. In addition, some participants resisted the idea that there is a virgin/non-virgin dichotomy. For example, as seen in Extract 70 from my interview with Participant 013, this participant spoke about the possibility of there not being solely a virgin/non-virgin dichotomy, but rather a continuum from completely sexually inexperienced to very sexually experienced. Lastly, participants also spoke about resisting both social and societal pressures. An example of this can be seen in Extract 30 from Participant 011's interview where he discussed pressures from a past partner but not letting these pressures have a negative impact. Therefore, the present study provides support that my participants were aware of certain norms and expectations yet actively resisted them.

Social constructionist perspectives on virginity. Within a social constructionist framework, our observations of the world around us are not objective evaluations (Burr, 2006). Findings from the present study are consistent with a social constructionist framework. This is most evident with respect to the fourth main theme, Sexual Behaviours that Constitute a Change in Virginity Status, in that although participants overall agreed with one another that PVI would constitute a change from virginity to non-

virginity, there was some variation. In other words, not all participants agreed with what sexual behaviours would constitute a change. In addition, after probing and self-reflection, many participants changed their responses about what behaviours would constitute a change. The changes that participants made with regard to their conceptualizations provide further support for the socially constructed nature of virginity, because their definitions were not impervious to revision. Social constructionism places a focus on how meaning is made (Burr, 2006) and how consensus is generated but also creates space for ways that these ideas can be challenged (Herek, 2000). An example of this can be seen when Participant 010 in extract 62 decided to include PAI in her definition of sex, although this was not something that she had previously thought about. Lastly, according to this theoretical stance, one's history and culture greatly affect the ways in which we come about understanding our experiences (Burr, 2006). This is clear throughout the results in this study; however, it is likely most evident in the Socio-Cultural Factors section in which I discussed a variety of different social and cultural factors that played a role in how my participants conceptualized and experienced their virginity. Indeed, for example, individuals who had a strong religious affiliation conceptualized virginity, and their accounts for maintaining their virginity, differently than those who did not have religious ties.

My Stake in the Research

As mentioned above, in the section on positionality, like my participants, I identify as a virgin (although after undergoing this research process, I am starting to question the necessity of doing so). Therefore, it is impossible to know how my own virgin identity influenced the project as a whole. For instance, it is possible that, to an

extent, the questions that I chose to ask were influenced by my own experiences and my own curiosities about others within this group. It is also undeniable that my own experiences coloured the ways in which I conducted the analysis of my data. As mentioned above in my Methods section, according to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), being an “insider” of the population of interest can have benefits since it could be useful to have shared group membership and shared experiences with participants. However, being an “insider” can also have drawbacks as assumptions can be made with regards to shared experiences. There is no way to be able to truly ascertain the effect that this had on this research project. However, having both my thesis advisor and committee member review my coding of the data at each step of the process arguably limits these possible biases, as they do not identify as members of this group. Additionally, it is very common in all types of qualitative research for the interviewer to have a stake in the research that they conduct; therefore, it this should not necessarily be seen as having a negative influence (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

Strengths and Limitations

This study will add to the research literature in that it provides a novel perspective on individuals’ experiences of virginity. It also provides support for previous research on definitions of sex and virginity (e.g. Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). One of the strengths of this study was that participants were allowed to identify themselves as virgins and I did not categorize participants as virgins or non-virgins. In addition, my sample was not limited to heterosexual individuals, which allowed for more diverse perspectives. Furthermore, by using qualitative, semi-structured

interviews, I was able to collect more in-depth data than I would have using quantitative, close-ended questions.

Nonetheless, the present study was limited in several key ways, largely related to sampling and the construction of the interview guide. One of the limitations of this study was that, although attempts were made to be inclusive of all individuals identifying as virgins, the majority of my sample was either white/Caucasian or female, or both. Specifically, the study sample included only three participants who identified as either being male or men. This raises the question of whether or not my results would differ, and if so, how, if more voices of male participants were included. It also raises the question of whether there are simply fewer individuals who identify as either male or as men who are 20-years-old or older who live in Canada who also identify as virgins or whether these individuals were simply less likely to participate in a study in which it was necessary to discuss their experiences and views on virginity with a stranger. Humphreys' (2013) finding that men were more likely to report being stigmatized by their virginity provides support for the latter. I am also curious about whether the name on the recruitment material had been perceived to be a man's name would have led to more male participants. I would speculate that this could have a positive or negative influence. According to Bancroft (1997), when participants were randomly assigned either a same or different gender interviewer, they were more likely to be open about sexual activity when paired with an interviewer of the same gender than with one of a different gender. Therefore, it is possible that men would have potentially felt more comfortable speaking with another man. However, it is also possible that men would have felt less comfortable being interviewed by a man since men are often stigmatized by for their virginity as it

goes against the dominant discourse of masculinity and manliness (Caron & Hinman, 2013).

In addition, attempts to be inclusive in one case did not work as planned. Specifically, instead of asking participants what their sexual orientation was, I asked, “In what ways do you identify with a sexual orientation?” in order not to exclude participants who did not identify with a sexual orientation. This led to participant confusion and the need for me to use follow up questions. It was not until all of the interviews had been conducted that I realized that this question often confused participants. However, fortunately, I was still luckily able to gather data pertaining to participants’ sexual orientation.

Furthermore, I had originally intended to ask participants about their past sexual history using the probing question “Tell me about any sexual, romantic or sensual experiences you have had.” However, before my first interview, I decided that it might have been problematic to ask this question, especially in cases in which instances of non-consent took place. I was also concerned that it would have taken away from the interview in that participants may have felt that it was potentially too invasive a question and perhaps impossible to answer in a meaningful or thorough way. Upon reflection, it is clear that I could have framed this question differently in order to get at this information as it would have been useful to examine whether or not participants’ own sexual experiences had an influence on their conceptualizations of virginity. It is also possible that participants who had decided to abstain from all sexual behaviour before marriage placed more of a focus on abstaining from sexual activity than on conceptualizations of virginity.

Moreover, it is impossible to know the impact that the prompting and follow-up questions I asked participants may have had on participant responses. However, in semi-structured interviews of this nature, there is often a trade-off between being potentially imposing and being able to capture what would be impossible using survey methods.

In addition, as mentioned previously, it was my intention to ask participants specifically about the three virginity frameworks found in Carpenter's (2001, 2005) work and then analyze these responses separately in order to examine whether or not participants in my study also fit into these categories. However, during data analysis, and upon further reflection, these questions did not fully capture the scope of these frameworks. Therefore, these questions were dropped from data analysis. Luckily, these questions were the final questions of the interview. This was done purposefully as I did not want these questions to influence participant responses to other questions. For instance, if I had asked participants about virginity as stigma and they had not previously thought about their virginity in that way, it is possible that they would have felt that they should think about it as such. I also did not want to place too much of a focus on these virginity frameworks in fear that it would take away from the focus of my study. Furthermore, differences in findings between Carpenter's (2001, 2005) work and the results of the present study may partially be attributable to the fact that her participants largely did not identify as current virgins. Carpenter's (2001, 2005)'s frameworks were generated by participants reflecting retrospectively on their virginity experience. Therefore, it is possible that these frameworks were not meaningful to my participants who currently identified as virgins. For instance, my participants may not have conceptualized their virginity as a gift since they had not yet gone through a change in

virginity status, which they would potentially view as the giving of a gift to their partner. Moreover, it is possible that my participants may not have understood their virginity to be a process as they had not yet experienced a change from virginity to non-virginity, and therefore, were not able to conceptualize their virginity in this way.

Lastly, I regret not asking participants about their perceptions of me as a researcher studying this topic. I believe that it would have been interesting to have information on participants' assumptions about me as a researcher studying virginity in order to examine their own assumption of others' virginity. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers conducting future work on this topic incorporate a question of this nature in order to examine these biases.

Areas for Future Research

The present research brings to mind several recommendations for researchers working in the field of virginity. Since individuals hold a variety of opinions about what might constitute a change from virginity to non-virginity, researchers on this topic should not focus on a single sexual behaviour and categorize participants accordingly. Future research should allow participants to identify themselves as virgins based on their own conceptualizations and understanding of the term. Furthermore, further qualitative research on the topic of virginity should be conducted using a more diverse sample. As mentioned above, although attempts were made to be inclusive, the sample in this study was quite homogenous with regard to characteristics such as gender and ethnicity.

Moreover, I would also suggest that future research asks participants about Carpenter (2005)'s virginity frameworks using more illustrative descriptions of each of these frameworks. For instance, future researchers could consider utilizing the detailed

descriptions of each of the three frameworks from Humphreys' (2013) paper on virginity frameworks. This may allow for researchers to investigate the prevalence of these frameworks among current virgins. However, framing of these frameworks might need to be adjusted slightly in order to account for differences in experiences of virgins when compared to non-virgins. Additionally, the research being conducted should avoid heteronormative definitions of sex, as it is clear that agreement with this conceptualization is not unanimous.

Applications of Research

At a broader level, the results of this study also suggest that there should be less of a focus on virginity and more of an emphasis on consent and healthy sexuality in the sexual education of youth and in the media. If less emphasis is placed on virginity, youth will potentially place less of a focus on this label and more of a focus on leading healthy, empowering sex lives. As well, medical professionals should be clearer with regards to what is meant by having sex when asking patients about health risks such as STIs. It is possible that participants who do not consider some sexual activity as sex may report that they are not sexually active. Therefore, they may be put at risk if health care providers do not feel the need to provide these patients with the same medical advice and resources as those patients who report having had sex.

As mentioned above, the majority of my participants viewed their virginity as something that was not important to them. However, virginity is often framed as something that is a big deal, for instance, in the media (Esselstein & Shechter, 2013). For example, some contestants on the reality show *The Bachelor* have identified as virgins and this title sometimes accompanies the contestants' names (Gerdes, 2016). The findings

from the present study would suggest, as Gerdes (2016) argues, that this obsession with an individual's virginity status should not continue. I would also hope that this study will provide support for lessening the stigma surrounding virginity.

In addition, as mentioned above, I made attempts throughout my interviews to avoid language such as "virginity loss" as loss is often associated with negative outcomes. It is my hope that this study is just the first step in shifting the language that we use to speak about virginity. Although only one participant mentioned being thankful for my purposeful avoidance of using loss-based language, it is possible that others in my study felt the same way but did not voice their feelings.

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Appendices

Appendix A- REB Certificate



RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS

*Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research
Involving Human Participants*

APPROVAL PERIOD: January 22, 2015
EXPIRY DATE: January 22, 2016
REB: G
REB NUMBER: 14NV005
TYPE OF REVIEW: Full Board
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Milhausen, Robin (milhaus@uoguelph.ca)
DEPARTMENT: Family Relations & Applied Nutrition
SPONSOR(S): SSHRC Scholarships
TITLE OF PROJECT: The Virginity Experience

CHANGES:

Date	Document Name	Version	Change Summary
3-Feb-15	Social Recruitment Post	2	Age requirement Included
	Recruitment Poster	2	Age requirement Included
	Recruitment E-mail	2	Incentive information Included

The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:

- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any modifications before they can be implemented.
- Report any change in the source of funding.
- Report unexpected events or incidental findings to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:

- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit a Status Report to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the EXPIRY DATE, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature:

Date: February 3, 2015

L. Kuczynski
Chair, Research Ethics Board - General

Appendix B- Recruitment Materials

Post for Facebook and Forums:

Do you know somebody who identifies as a virgin? I am looking for individuals living in Canada who self-identify as virgins to partake in an interview in order to learn more about their thoughts on their virginity.

Participants will be asked to complete a confidential face-to-face or Skype or Google Hangout interview that will take approximately one hour.

Participants will receive a \$10 movie gift card. For more information, please pass on my e-mail (mtetro@uoguelph.ca) to those who might be interested in participating.

Please share this call for interviewees!

Twitter post:

Do you know a self-identified virgin living in Canada who wants to be interviewed? Will receive \$10 movie GC E-mail mtetro@uoguelph.ca PLSRT

Verbal script:

Hey! I am looking to interview individuals who self-identify as virgins for my master's thesis project. Do you happen to know anybody who self-identifies as a virgin, who lives in Canada and is 20 years old or older?



COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition

Hello, my name is Maria Tetro and I am a graduate student in the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Robin Milhausen for the purpose of my Master's thesis. I am interested in speaking with individuals who identify as virgins who live in Canada.

Your participation would involve taking part in a semi-structured interview. Before the interview, you read and accept a consent form online and complete a brief demographic questionnaire. Interviews will take place face-to-face or online via Skype or Google Hangout. If you choose to take part in a face-to-face interview, you will be asked to meet the student researcher at the University of Guelph campus library or at a community library, based on your preference. The interview itself will take approximately one hour. During the interview, I will ask about your experience as a virgin. Your involvement is entirely voluntary. You can decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time, no questions asked. If an interview has been completed however, withdrawal is only possible up until immediately after having participated in the study.

If you would like additional information or would like to participate in this study, feel free to contact me at mtetro@uoguelph.ca or you can contact my academic supervisor Robin Milhausen, an Associate Professor in the Family Relations and Applied Nutrition Department at the University of Guelph. Dr. Milhausen can be contacted at rmilhaus@uoguelph.ca or 519-824-4120 ext. 54397

Thank you kindly for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Maria Tetro
mtetro@uoguelph.ca



COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND APPLIED HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Virginity Experience

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Maria Tetro*, a graduate student from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. The results from your participation will contribute to Maria Tetro's Master's thesis. The student researcher is working under the supervision of Robin Milhausen, an Associate Professor in the Family Relations and Applied Nutrition Department at the University of Guelph. Dr. Milhausen can be contacted at rmilhaus@uoguelph.ca or 519-824-4120 ext. 54397

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Maria Tetro at mtetro@uoguelph.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To gain a better understanding of how individuals who self-identify as virgins experience this identity.

PROCEDURES

Your participation would involve meeting with the student researcher for a semi-structured interview. Before the interview, you will complete a brief demographic questionnaire online. The interview itself will take approximately one hour. In order to participate in this study, you must be currently living in Canada and must also self-identify as a virgin. During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences as a virgin. I will take notes and the interview will be audio recorded on an encrypted recorder. After the completion of the interview, the audio data will be transferred onto a password protected, encrypted computer, typically within 24-48 hours after the interview has taken place, transcription of the interview will be completed by the student researcher. The recordings will then be deleted off of the audio recorder. Transcripts of the recorded interviews will be associated with a participant number only. All study materials will be retained for seven years in a locked office at the University of Guelph. Data obtained in this study may be used in future publications, presentations, and as secondary data analysis in the future. Your name and other personal identifiers will not be associated with the data.

After the completion of this study, the results will be written up for Maria Tetro's Master's thesis. After her graduation (expected in September, 2015), participants will be

able to access the results in the completed Master's thesis by contacting the faculty supervisor, Dr. Robin Milhausen at rmilhaus@uoguelph.ca

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There is some psychological risk involved in participating in this study. Some people may be embarrassed or feel uncomfortable discussing their sexual desire and sexuality in general. You can decline to answer any interview question or withdraw from the interview at any time. If there is something that upsets you during the course of your interview, you may call the Crisis line at either 519-821-0140 or 1-877-822-0140.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

You will receive a \$10 movie gift certificate.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA STORAGE:

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of the participants' identifying information to the extent allowed by law. Audio data will be recorded using an encrypted audio recorder, and will be transferred onto a password protected, encrypted computer typically within 24-48 hours after the interview has taken place. Transcription of the interview will be completed by the student researcher. The recordings will then be immediately deleted off of the audio recorder. Personal identifiers will be removed from transcripts and participant transcripts will be associated only with a participant number. E-mail communication with participants will be deleted after the interview has taken place. For the online Qualtrics consent form and demographic questionnaire, please note that Qualtrics servers are protected by high-end firewall systems, and vulnerability scans are performed regularly.

The data for Guelph accounts is being stored on one of Qualtrics' Data Centers in Ireland. Qualtrics complies with the U.S. and E.U. Safe Harbor Framework and the U.S. and Swiss Safe Harbor Framework as set forth by the U.S. Department of Commerce regarding the collection, use, and retention of personal information from European Union member countries and Switzerland. Qualtrics has certified that it adheres to Safe Harbor Privacy Principles of notice, choice, and onward transfer, security, data integrity, access, and enforcement. Your IP addresses will not be collected. Data will be downloaded and securely deleted from Qualtrics once data collection has been completed for the study. Since the data are secure on the Qualtrics server, the data will not be deleted there until the study is complete, all data is analyzed, and Maria Tetro's thesis has been defended.

Data will be stored for seven years at the University of Guelph. During the duration of her studies, Maria Tetro, graduate student investigator, will be charged with the stewardship of the data under the PI, Dr. Robin Milhausen. Data will be kept in a locked locker in a locked office in MACS 321 at the University of Guelph. Further, all transcripts of the interviews will also be locked in a file in a locked desk, only accessibly by the primary investigators. After the study is complete, paper data will be kept locked for seven years, at which time it will be shredded. Upon her graduation, data will be kept

in the locked office of Dr. Robin Milhausen in MINS 219, although the data will be made accessible to Maria Tetro in the event that there is a need to review data for the purposes of release/ publication of results or for the purpose of future secondary data analysis.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also exercise the option of removing your data from the study. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The student researcher may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY:

Participants will gain a better understanding of their own identity and this may allow for great acceptance of the self. This research will benefit the discipline and society as it will allow for a better understanding of the concept of virginity and may have an influence on future sexual health education programs on this topic.

QUESTIONS/ COMMENTS

Please let me know if there are any questions that you have before or during the interview process and I will be happy to answer them via e-mail at mtetro@uoguelph.ca

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

Director, Research Ethics
University of Guelph
437 University Centre
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1

Tel: (519) 824-4120, ext. 56606
E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca
Fax: (519) 821-5236

(online signature section)

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided for the study as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that by clicking the “agree” button below, I am consenting to participate in this study.

I do not agree to participate in this study.

Appendix D- Demographic Questionnaire

Birth Month:

Birth Year:

Gender: _____

Do you identify with a religion? Yes: ___ No: ___

If you answered Yes above, please state with which religion you identify:

How would you describe your ethnicity?

In what city or town do you live?

What is your relationship status?

If your relationship status is not single, how long have you been in this relationship?

Appendix E- Interview Guide

Interview questions:

Can you remind me how you heard about this study?

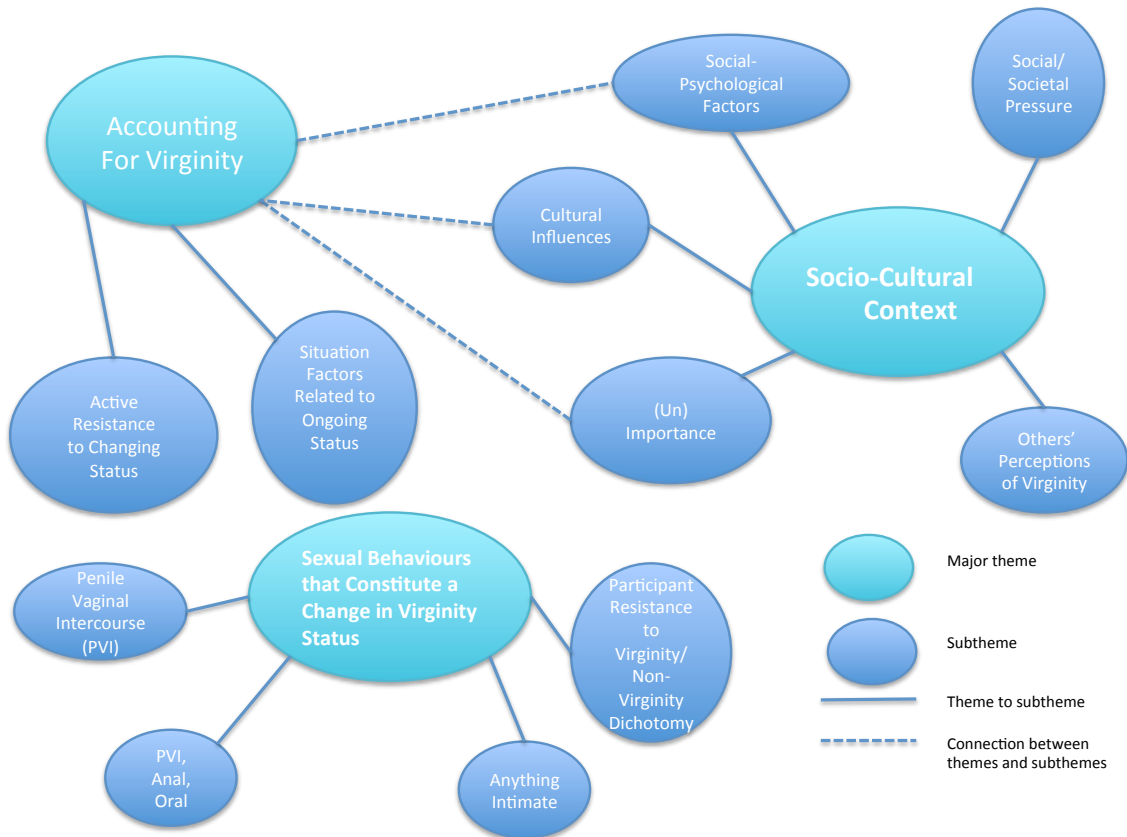
What drew you to participate in this study?

“Tell me what it’s like to be a virgin.”

Probing questions:

What does the term virgin mean to you?
Has this changed over time?
How do you think that others define virginity?
Tell me about any sexual, romantic or sensual experiences you have had.
If you have had other sexual, romantic, or sensual experience has this played a role in your life?
In what ways do you identify with a sexual orientation?
In what ways do you think that your sexual orientation plays a role in how you experience your virginity?
Do you believe that your culture has had an impact on how you experience your virginity?
How important, if at all, is your virginity to you?
What pressures, if any, do you feel with regard to your virginity?
Tell me where you have learned about virginity.
Have you talked to anybody about your virginity?
Describe a context in which you would be interested to change your virginity status. What do you think the pros/cons would be?
Describe a context in which you would be willing to change your virginity status. What do you think the pros/cons would be?
What would an ideal situation look like to you? What is the likelihood of this happening?
What do you think happens when most people lose their virginity?

Appendix F- Third Thematic Map



Appendix G- Final Thematic Map

