

Time Out from Sex or Romance: Sexually Experienced Adolescents' Decisions to Purposefully Avoid Sexual Activity or Romantic Relationships

E. Sandra Byers¹ · Lucia F. O'Sullivan¹ · Lori A. Brotto²

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Abstract Researchers have given significant attention to abstinence among adolescents, but far less is known about purposeful avoidance of sexual activity (and relationship involvement). Typically, it is assumed that, once adolescents have initiated sexual activity, they will thereafter engage in sexual activity if given the opportunity. However, it is unclear whether that is true as some research indicates that many adolescents engage in sexual activity intermittently. Sexually experienced adolescents may purposefully avoid engaging in sexual activity for a period of time and, if so, this has implications for understanding their sexual decision-making. We used a mixed methods approach to investigate sexually experienced adolescents' decisions to purposefully avoid further sexual activity and/or romantic relationships with a focus on how common these decisions are and factors influencing them. Participants were 411 (56 % female) adolescents (16–21 years old) who completed an on-line survey that assessed reasons for each type of avoidance, religiosity, sexual esteem, sexual distress, sexual coercion, and dysfunctional sexual beliefs. Overall, 27 % of participants had engaged in sexual avoidance and 47 % had engaged in romantic avoidance. Significantly more female than male adolescents reported sexual and romantic avoidance. Adolescents' reasons for sexual avoidance included: lack of sexual pleasure or enjoyment, relationship reasons, negative

emotions, values, fear of negative outcomes, negative physical experience, and other priorities. Reasons for romantic avoidance included: effects of previous relationship, not interested in commitment, wrong time, other priorities, negative emotions, no one was good enough, and sexual concerns. Logistical regressions were used to assess associations between age, religiosity, sexual esteem, sexual distress, experience of sexual coercion, and dysfunctional sexual beliefs and having engaged in romantic and/or sexual avoidance. The female adolescents who had avoided sexual activity were more likely to have experienced sexual coercion. The male adolescents who had avoided sexual activity were more religious and likely to have experienced sexual coercion. The male adolescents who had avoided romantic relationships were more sexually distressed and likely to have experienced sexual coercion. No associations were found for romantic avoidance among female adolescents. These results reflect considerable agency in the decision-making of adolescents in intimate contexts. They are discussed in terms of their challenge to current discourses about rampant adolescent sexuality as well as their implications for education and prevention interventions that incorporate personal choice and decision-making into their protocols.

Keywords Adolescents · Sexual avoidance · Romantic avoidance · Sexual coercion · Education · Prevention

✉ E. Sandra Byers
byers@unb.ca

¹ Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 4400, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3, Canada

² Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of British Columbia, 2775 Laurel Street, 6th Floor, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1M9, Canada

Introduction

Adolescence is the period of development when most individuals begin to participate in romantic relationships—that is, report having a boyfriend or girlfriend. For example, in a national sample of adolescents (grades 7–12) in

the U.S., 38 % reported having been in a romantic relationship with someone by age 12, 53 % by age 15, and 70 % by age 17 (Carver et al. 2003; see Price et al. 2000 for similar data involving Canadian adolescents). The typical pattern of romantic involvement for adolescents is serial monogamy, that is, short-term, exclusive romantic partnerships. Adolescence also is the developmental period in which sexual activity with a partner is typically initiated, usually in the context of a romantic relationship (Lefkowitz et al. 2011; Miller and Benson 1999). Most adolescents report having engaged in oral, penile-vaginal and/or anal sex by the end of adolescence. For example, in Canada, 52 % of 17 year olds have engaged in oral sex (Boyce et al. 2006). Approximately 30 % of 15–17 year olds and 68 % of 18–19 year olds have engaged in penile-vaginal sex (Rotermann 2012). Similarly, in the U.S., 34, 30, and 6 % of adolescents have engaged in oral, vaginal and/or anal sex by age 18, respectively; these numbers rise to 60, 62, and 9 % by age 20 (Herbenick et al. 2010).

Partly in response to concerns about adolescents' participation in sexual activity, there has been considerable research investigating the prevalence of virginity and sexual abstinence among adolescents (mostly focusing on experience of penile-vaginal intercourse) as well as on factors that predict delay of initiation of sexual intercourse (e.g., Aspy et al. 2010; Hull et al. 2011; Lammers et al. 2000). Implicit in this research is the assumption and concern that, once an adolescent has begun to engage in sexual activity (i.e., is sexually "activated"), they will continue to do so if they have the opportunity and especially if they are in a romantic relationship (Miller and Benson 1999).

However, adolescents are not without personal agency—that is, they are capable of making and enacting decisions about their lives (Zimmerman and Cleary 2006). Thus, it is likely that some sexually experienced adolescents choose to purposefully avoid engaging in sexual activity for a period of time (La Rocque and Cioe 2011). Adolescents often report long gaps or sporadic involvement in sexual activity (Aruda and Burke 2013; Loewenson et al. 2004), but researchers have not investigated the reasons for such gaps or whether they are purposeful. For example, in one survey, about a third of undergraduates reported no sexual partners (oral, vaginal or anal) in the previous 12 months (ACHA 2013). However, the researchers did not report how many of the adolescents were sexually experienced (that is, had engaged in these activities in the past) or whether this was a voluntary period of non-activity. Ott and colleagues tracked 354 adolescent girls over 4.5 years and documented over 9000 periods of abstinence (Ott et al. 2010). Although invaluable in terms of docu-

menting the intermittent nature of their sexual activity, they assessed the factors that ended these periods of abstinence rather than the factors that motivated them in the first place. The primary goal of this study was to explore sexually experienced adolescents' decisions to purposefully avoid sexual activity (termed sexual avoidance below), with a focus on how common these decisions are and factors influencing them.

Adolescents could choose to engage in sexual activity but avoid romantic involvement (or vice versa). Developing skills in emotional intimacy is a primary task of adolescence, reflected in the ever-higher rates of romantic involvement over the adolescent period (Furman and Buhrmester 1992; Roisman et al. 2004). Adolescents are preoccupied with romantic connection and the majority, but by no means all, report being in a romantic relationship (Carver et al. 2003; Thompson and O'Sullivan 2012). It is not known whether the remainder chose not to be in a relationship (i.e., engage in relationship avoidance) or just had not found a person with whom to be romantically involved. Therefore, we also investigated adolescents' decisions to avoid romantic relationships.

Prevalence of Sexual and Romantic Avoidance

A review of the literature revealed no studies that have investigated the prevalence of sexual or romantic avoidance among adolescents or how long such periods of avoidance last. Traditional gender roles value romantic over sexual relationships for girls and women (Byers 1996; Pollack 2000; Smiler 2013). In keeping with this view, Wilson et al. (2013) found that female adolescents associated more positive words and male adolescents associated more negative words with the term "abstinence." Furthermore, Sprecher and Treger (2015) found that undergraduate men are more reluctant virgins (defined as never having engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse) than are undergraduate women in that they associated more negative affect and less positive affect with their virginity status. In addition, within committed relationships, women are more likely to avoid sexual activity with their partner than are men (Brassard et al. 2007). Thus, we expected that, compared to male adolescents, female adolescents would be more likely to avoid sexual activity. Based on traditional gender roles that value sexual over romantic relationships for boys and men (Byers 1996; Pollack 2000; Smiler 2013) and research that has shown that female adolescents are more interested in romantic relationships than are male adolescents (Darling et al. 1999), we expected that male adolescents would be more likely than would female adolescents to avoid romantic relationships.

Factors Influencing Sexual and Romantic Avoidance

We could find no prior research on reasons why sexually experienced adolescents choose to avoid sexual and/or romantic involvement for a period of time. However, drawing from related literature on abstinence among youth and emerging adults, we expected that greater religiosity, lower sexual self-esteem, and greater distress about sexual functioning would be key factors associated with romantic and sexual avoidance. Greater dysfunctional beliefs about sex as well as a history of sexual coercion likely also are linked to periods of sexual and/or romantic avoidance. Each of these is explained in detail below.

Factors Associated with Sexual Avoidance

Researchers have demonstrated that greater religious conviction, more sexual problems, and lower sexual self-esteem are associated with low sexual frequency and/or lifetime sexual abstinence in adolescents and adults (Brotto 2010; Chou et al. 2014; Hull et al. 2011; Wiederman 2000). Similarly, greater religiosity is associated with postponement of the onset of sexual intercourse (Lammers et al. 2000; Minichiello et al. 1996; Thornton and Camburn 1989). Mercer et al. (2003) found in their British national probability sample that 33 % of the adult men and 62 % of the women who had sexual problems reported that they avoided sex as a result. Researchers have documented significant rates of sexual problems among adolescents (Landry and Bergeron 2011; Mussachio et al. 2006; O'Sullivan et al. 2014; O'Sullivan and Majerovich 2008). Thus, it is likely that some adolescents avoid sexual activity as a result of their sexual problems.

We expected that adolescents with a history of sexual coercion would be more likely to report having engaged in sexual avoidance. Researchers have found high rates of sexual coercive experiences among adolescents (O'Sullivan et al. 2015; O'Sullivan et al. 1998; Sears and Byers 2010). Furthermore, Lemieux and Byers (2008) found that, compared to women without a history of sexual coercion, women who had experienced adult sexual victimization were more likely to report having avoided sex. Finally, we examined whether negative sexual cognitions are associated with sexual avoidance. More negative and traditional sexual beliefs have been linked to sexual behavior and functioning in adults including lower levels of sexual arousability, less sexual experience, and less willingness to engage in casual sexual activity (Anderson and Cyranowski 1995; Rye et al. 2011; Woody et al. 2000). In addition, Anderson and Cyranowski (1995) found that women with more negative sexual self-views had a stronger tendency toward sexual avoidance. Thus, we expected that

adolescents with more dysfunctional sexual beliefs and lower sexual self-esteem would be more likely to report having engaged in sexual avoidance.

We also expected that older adolescents would be more likely to have engaged in sexual avoidance than would younger adolescents. The longer an adolescent has been engaging in sexual activity, the long the time period in which they could choose to avoid sex. Thus, on average older adolescents would have had more opportunity to decide to avoid sexual activity. Age clearly is implicated in decision to end periods of abstinence (Ott et al. 2010). In addition, if periods of avoidance were indicative of an aspect of intimacy skill development that accrued over time with maturity, we would expect to see differences by age.

Factors Associated with Romantic Avoidance

Because adolescent sexual activity with a partner most often occurs in the context of a romantic relationship (Lefkowitz et al. 2011; Miller and Benson 1999), we expected that the same factors that we proposed would be associated with sexual avoidance also would be associated with romantic avoidance. That is, one way of avoiding sexual activity is to avoid romantic relationships as a precaution toward greater intimacy. There is some research that supports these proposed relationships. For example, higher religiosity is linked to more restrictive family and peer norms regarding onset of dating (Braithwaite et al. 2015; Issac et al. 1995). A history of sexual coercion is associated with reluctance to become involved in intimate relationships (Collibee and Furman 2014), not just sexual relationships.

Reasons for Engaging in Sexual and Romantic Avoidance

We investigated adolescents' reasons for choosing to engage in sexual or romantic avoidance. We expected them to provide reasons that reflected the constructs hypothesized to be associated with sexual avoidance above (i.e., religious values, lack of sexual self-confidence (sexual self-esteem), negative sexual beliefs, concerns about their sexual functioning, and a history of sexual coercion). Yet, adolescents may have other motivations for avoiding sexual activity, such as a desire to focus on academics or other priorities, differentiate themselves from their peers, and avoid potential negative health consequences (Haglund 2006). In terms of reasons for romantic avoidance, we expected that some adolescents would give reasons related to sexuality but, as for sexual avoidance, we expected them to provide a range of reasons. Therefore, we used an open-ended format to explore adolescents' reasons for avoiding sexual activity and romantic relationships.

The Current Study

The goal of the current study was to take a mixed methods approach to understanding personal agency in sexually experienced adolescents' decisions to purposefully avoid sexual activity and romantic relationships. This work will be of use in education and prevention programs that require insights into the romantic and sexual norms among youth as well as the motivations and decisions guiding their behavior. Because there is little consensus among adolescents about what constitutes different sexual terms including sexual abstinence (Bersamin et al. 2007; Byers et al. 2009) as well as to make the study inclusive of both same-sex and mixed sex relationships, we specifically asked adolescents whether they had purposefully avoided oral, penile-vaginal, and/or anal sex. We sought to determine the percentage of sexually experienced adolescents who have purposely avoided sexual activity and/or romantic relationships as well as how long these periods of sexual and romantic avoidance last. Based on traditional gender roles, we expected that, compared to male adolescents, female adolescents would be more likely to report avoiding sexual activity and less likely to report avoiding romantic relationships. We also sought to determine the reasons that adolescents give for choosing to avoid sexual activity romantic relationships. Finally, based on our review of related bodies of literature above, we expected that adolescents who were older, more religious, had lower sexual self-esteem, higher sexual distress, had experienced sexual coercion, and held more negative sexual attitudes would be more likely to report sexual and/or romantic avoidance. We also examined whether there were gender differences in the reasons adolescents provide for sexual and romantic avoidance as well as the extent to which factors associated with avoidance were similar for male and female adolescents. However, because this is the first study in this area, we did not make predictions about possible gender differences in these associated factors.

Methods

Participants

A total of 182 male and 229 female adolescents were recruited to participate in an online survey of sexual experiences and relationships. Eligibility requirements included age (16–21 years) and Canadian residency. Six participants were excluded: five because of incomplete data and one because he reported being prepubertal (10 years old) at the time of his first sexual experience. Although participants did not need to be in a dating or sexual

relationship at the time of the study, only those who reported having previously experienced oral, vaginal and/or anal sex were included in the analyses, resulting in the exclusion of 34 male and 47 female participants. The final sample consisted of 145 male and 179 female sexually experienced adolescents. Characteristics of participants included and excluded from the study were compared in terms of sex, education/employment status, and whether they were currently in a romantic relationship (χ^2 analyses) as well as age and religiosity (analysis of variance). Compared to those retained, adolescents excluded from the analyses were significantly younger (18.1 vs. 19.2 years; $F(1, 404) = 49.23, p < .001$), more religious (2.9 vs. 2.1 on a 4-point scale; $F(1, 404) = 49.28, p < .001$), and less likely to report currently being in a relationship (24 vs. 61 %; $\chi^2(1) = 35.50, p < .001$).

Participants were on average 19.2 years of age ($SD = 1.3$) and predominantly White (91 %) and English-speaking (94 %). Almost all (94 %) were born in Canada. Most were in school full-time (69 %) or part-time (13 %). A minority were working part-time (32 %) or full-time (10 %). The majority (89 %) identified as heterosexual. A total of 61 % were in a committed romantic relationship at the time of the study, 25 % were not dating, and 15 % were dating but not committed to one person.

Measures

Background Questionnaire

An investigator-derived questionnaire was used to obtain demographic information including age, sex, race/ethnicity, place of birth, education and employment status, dating relationship status (i.e., single, dating, committed), and sexual identity (i.e., heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, unlabeled, questioning, asexual, don't know, other). Participants were also asked to indicate how important religion was to them on a 4-point scale ranging from *very unimportant* to *very important*.

Sexual Coercion

Experience of sexual coercion since age 14 was assessed using a gender-neutral version of the well-validated Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss and Gidycz 1985; Koss and Oros 1982; O' Sullivan et al. 1998). Participants indicate whether they have ever had each of 10 sexual victimization experiences (e.g., *Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because a person threatened or used some degree of physical force [twisting your arm or holding you down, etc.] to make you?*). Only the seven items that dealt with forced oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse were used. Participants who indicated that they had

experienced any of seven non-consensual events (yes/no) were scored as having experienced sexual coercion.

Voluntary Sexual and Relationship Avoidance

Participants were asked a series of questions relating to voluntary sexual avoidance, defined as a decision to avoid or abstain from (no longer engage in) sexual activities (including genital touch, oral sex, penile-vaginal intercourse, or anal sex) that you had engaged in before. Participants first indicated whether they had engaged in voluntary sexual avoidance (No Sexual Avoidance/Sexual Avoidance). Those who indicated that they had engaged in voluntary sexual avoidance indicated the length of the avoidance period (a few days, a few weeks, a few months, about a year, more than 1 year), and their main reasons (open-ended) for avoiding sexual activity. They also were asked about voluntary relationship avoidance; specifically they indicated whether they had ever intentionally avoided being in or getting into a romantic relationship for a period of time (No Relationship Avoidance/Relationship Avoidance). Participants also indicated the length of and main reasons for (open-ended) avoiding involvement in romantic relationships. Responses to the open-ended questions were used to ensure that all participants in the Sexual Avoidance and Relationship Avoidance groups had interpreted the questions as intended. Sixteen individuals were reassigned to the No Sexual Avoidance Group because their responses indicated that the abstinence was due to circumstances rather than to a decision to avoid sexual activity including: they were away from their partner ($n = 4$), they were not in a relationship and did not want to engage in casual sexual activity ($n = 10$), or the reason was temporary (e.g., menstruating) ($n = 2$). In addition, 18 individuals were reassigned to the No Relationship Avoidance group because they indicated that they had decided not to get into a relationship with a specific person, rather than to avoid relationships generally.

We conducted a directed content analysis that involved using mutually exclusive coding categories and operational definitions derived deductively from our theoretical framework (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Schilling 2006). These categories were modified as analysis progressed and new categories emerged to capture all dimensions of the data (Morgan 1993). Coding took place through careful reading of the responses for content indicative of a coding category. Inter-rater agreement was 79 % for reasons for sexual avoidance and 76 % for reasons for relationship avoidance. Disagreements mostly consisted of one rater identifying one code and the other rater identifying two codes. Discrepancies between the two raters were resolved by having a third rater code the response and through discussion.

Sexual Self-Esteem

We used the 10-item Self-Esteem Subscale of the Sexuality Scale (Snell and Papini 1989). This scale assesses the tendency to view oneself positively as a sexual partner (e.g., *I am confident about myself as a sexual partner*). Responses were on a 5-point scale from disagree (1) to agree (5) such that scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater sexual self-esteem. Snell and Papini (1989) report good internal consistency and adequate reliability. Internal consistency was high in the current study ($\alpha = .93$).

Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs

We assessed sexually dysfunctional beliefs (i.e., beliefs that increase vulnerability to sexual difficulties) using the male and female versions of the *Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire* (SDBQ; Nobre and Pinto-Gouveia 2011). The 40-item female version consists of six factors: sexual conservatism, sexual desire and pleasure as sin, age-related beliefs, body-image beliefs, denying affection primacy, and motherhood primacy (e.g., *Women who are not physically attractive can't be sexually satisfied; Pure girls don't engage in sexual activity*). The 40-item male version consists of six mostly different factors: sexual conservatism, female sexual power, "macho" beliefs, beliefs about women's sexual satisfaction, restricted attitude toward sexual activity, and sex as an abuse of men's power (e.g., *A real man has sexual intercourse very often; Penile erection is essential for a woman's sexual satisfaction*). Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5). Responses are summed such that higher scores indicate more dysfunctional/negative sexual beliefs. Nobre and Pinto-Gouveia (2011) provide evidence for the internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and validity of both the male and female versions of the SDBQ. Internal consistency was high in the current study ($\alpha = .85$ for the female version and .81 for the male version).

Sexual Distress

The *Female Sexual Distress Scale* (Derogatis et al. 2002) was originally developed to measure women's distress associated with sexual difficulties. Given the unisex nature of the items, the scale was extended here to assess sexual distress among both male and female respondents for the prior 4-week period. Respondents indicated the frequency with which they had had each of 12 experiences (e.g., *frustrated by your sexual problems, worried about sex*) on a 5-point scale ranging from never (0) to always (4). Scores range from 0 to 48 with higher scores indicating greater

subjective sexual distress related to sexual problems. This measure has strong psychometric properties (Derogatis et al. 2002) (in the current study $\alpha = .94$ and $.93$ for male and female adolescents, respectively).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through community print and online advertising and a database of participants from another unrelated study (Author citation, blinded for review). After giving informed consent, participants were directed to an online survey. They completed the background and sexual histories measures first, followed by the Sexual Esteem subscale, Female Sexual Distress Scale, Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire, and the Sexual Experiences Survey. They also completed some additional measures not relevant to the current study. Surveys took approximately 30 min to complete and each participant was sent a \$15 gift card following survey completion. All measures were pilot tested with a comparable sample. Parents of minors (i.e., those under 18) provided consent using a passive consent procedure whereby letters were sent home informing parents of the study and parents were given the chance to decline consent for their child—only two parents declined. The study was approved by the ethical review boards at our respective institutions.

Results

Characteristics of the sample on the predictor variables as well as the zero-order correlations among the predictor and criterion variables can be found in Table 1 for the male and female adolescents separately. A MANOVA was used to examine gender differences in the predictor variables (excluding dysfunctional sexual beliefs because the male and

female versions are not the same) and was significant, $F(5, 318) = 8.10, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .113$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that the female adolescents were significantly younger ($M_s = 19.0$ and 19.4), more religious ($M_s = 2.4$ vs. 2.1), had significantly lower sexual self-esteem ($M_s = 33.5$ vs. 35.6), and were more likely to report having experienced sexual coercion (39 vs. 21 %) than were the male adolescents; the male and female adolescents did not differ in their level of sexual distress. Examination of the zero-order correlations did not reveal any problems with multicollinearity.

Prevalence of Sexual and Relationship Avoidance

Of the total sample of 324 sexually experienced adolescents, 87 (27 %) reported that they had engaged in sexual avoidance and 152 (47 %) indicated that they had engaged in romantic avoidance. Only 48 adolescents (15 %) had engaged in both types of avoidance. However, 55 % of the adolescents who had engaged in sexual avoidance also had engaged in romantic avoidance and 32 % of those who engaged in romantic avoidance had also engaged in sexual avoidance. We conducted two separate Chi square analyses to determine whether there were gender differences in reports of avoidance. The analyses were significant for both sexual avoidance and romantic avoidance, $\chi^2(1) = 16.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .223$ and $\chi^2(1) = 7.80, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .156$, respectively. As predicted, the female adolescents (36 %) were significantly more likely than were the male adolescents (16 %) to report that they had engaged in sexual avoidance. Contrary to predictions, the female adolescents (54 %) also were significantly more likely than were the male adolescents (39 %) to report that they had engaged in romantic avoidance. Consistent with these findings, 21 % of the female adolescents but only 8 % of

Table 1 Means (standard deviations) and correlations of predictor variables

| Variables | <i>M (SD)</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|-------|-------|------|
| 1. Age | 19.2 (1.3) | | -.12 | -.01 | .01 | -.05 | -.07 | -.00 | -.08 |
| 2. Religiosity | 2.1 (1.0) | -.11 | | -.13 | .04 | -.03 | .23** | .24** | -.01 |
| 3. Sexual self-esteem | 35.7 (8.9) | .05 | -.04 | | -.42*** | .16 | -.21* | -.10 | -.02 |
| 4. Sexual distress | 9.5 (8.5) | .04 | -.09 | -.35*** | | -.03 | .15 | .08 | .19* |
| 5. Sexual coercion | 36 % | .03 | -.02 | -.01 | .12 | | -.08 | .14 | .20* |
| 6. Dysfunctional sexual beliefs | 97.5 (14.3) | -.40*** | .33*** | -.19* | .01 | .16* | | .07 | .13 |
| 7. Sexual avoidance | 27 % | -.02 | .15* | -.01 | .13 | .27*** | .21** | | .08 |
| 8. Romantic avoidance | 47 % | -.06 | .08 | -.04 | .06 | .08 | .06 | .07 | |

N = 145 male and 179 female adolescents. Sexual coercion, sexual avoidance, romantic avoidance: 0 = no experience; 1 = experience. Correlations for the male adolescents are above the diagonal, correlations for the female adolescents are below the diagonal

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

the male adolescents reported avoiding both sex and relationships.

Adolescents who had engaged in sexual avoidance reported that they did so for varied lengths of time: 6 % for a few days, 24 % a few weeks, 35 % a few months, 17 % about a year, and 19 % more than a year. Similarly, those who had engaged in romantic avoidance did so for varied amounts of time: 4 % a few days, 16 % a few weeks, 52 % a few months, 20 % about a year, and 9 % more than a year. The median and modal responses for both types of avoidance were a few months.

Reasons for Avoidance

Examples of each of our codes as well as the percentage of adolescents who gave responses reflecting each code are provided in Table 2. In addition, we used Chi square analyses to compare the likelihood of male and female adolescents providing each type of reason. There were gender differences for only one of the reasons for sexual avoidance and one of the reasons for romantic avoidance. The significant gender differences are reported below.

Sexual Avoidance

All but six of the 87 adolescents who indicated that they had avoided sexual activity provided an explanation of why

they had done so. Six codes emerged for reasons for sexual avoidance: lack of sexual pleasure or enjoyment, aspects of the romantic relationship, negative emotions, values, fear of negative outcomes, and other priorities (see Table 2 for examples of each code). Some adolescents gave responses that fit into two themes, yielding a total of 91 responses.

The most common reason for choosing to avoid sexual activity, given by nearly a third (32 %) of adolescents who had engaged in sexual avoidance, had to do with lack of pleasure or enjoyment from engaging in sexual activity. Some indicated that they did not enjoy sexual activity, found it unsatisfying, or did not find it pleasant. Others indicated that they found sex uncomfortable or painful. This reason was significantly more likely to be provided by the female (41 %) than by the male (9 %) adolescents, $\chi^2(1) = 7.90, p = .005$.

A similar number of adolescents (30 %) indicated that they had avoided sex because of aspects of the relationship they were in at the time. These youth referred to being in a negative relationship, not being comfortable with their partner, not wanting the relationship to progress too quickly, and having a partner who did not enjoy sexual activity. Some (15 %) had avoided sexual activity because of negative emotions associated with their sexual experiences including depression, guilt, and feeling used. Others (15 %) referred to their personal values or morals generally or religious values specifically. Still others (14 %)

Table 2 Reasons for avoiding sex and for avoiding relationships

| Code | Example | N | % |
|---|--|----|----|
| <i>Reasons for avoiding sex</i> | | | |
| Lack of sexual pleasure or enjoyment | e.g., It is painful, unsatisfying, and uncomfortable | 28 | 32 |
| Aspects of the romantic relationship | e.g., It was a very negative relationship and I no longer felt comfortable with that person but was afraid to actually leave them. | 26 | 30 |
| Negative emotions | e.g., Feeling used | 9 | 10 |
| Values | e.g., Wanted to be more Christian | 13 | 15 |
| Fear of negative outcomes | e.g., I was paranoid that I would get an STI | 12 | 14 |
| Other priorities | e.g., I wanted to focus on school etc. | 3 | 3 |
| <i>Reasons for avoiding relationships</i> | | | |
| Effects of a previous relationship | e.g., Just got out of a serious relationship with lots of problems | 57 | 37 |
| Not interested in commitment | e.g., At the time I didn't think I ever wanted to be married and, for me, that would be the point of being in a relationship. | 31 | 20 |
| Wrong time | e.g., Not a good time in my life. | 30 | 20 |
| Other priorities | e.g., I need [ed] to focus on school and family | 26 | 17 |
| Negative emotions | e.g., To avoid getting hurt | 17 | 11 |
| No one was good enough | e.g., ...my maturity is substantially above the majority of males that I encounter | 7 | 5 |
| Sexual concerns | e.g., I was dealing with ED | 7 | 5 |

N = 87 for sexual avoidance and 152 for relationship avoidance. Percentages add up to more than 100 % in each category because some participants provided more than one reason

indicated that they avoided sex because they were afraid of negative outcomes such as pregnancy or STIs. Finally, a few (3 %) indicated that they wanted to concentrate on other priorities in their life, such as school.

Romantic Avoidance

All but four of the 152 adolescents who reported engaging in romantic avoidance gave a reason for doing so. Seven codes emerged: effects of a previous relationship, not interested in commitment, wrong time, other priorities, negative emotions, no one was good enough, and sexual concerns (see Table 2 for examples of each code).

The most common reason, provided by more than a third (37 %) of the adolescents, was the impact of a previous relationship. This included having had a bad relationship experience, not yet being over the previous girlfriend/boyfriend, or needing time to learn more about themselves or what they wanted before getting into another relationship. A fifth (20 %) indicated that they avoided relationships simply because they were not interested in commitment. Most of these individuals indicated that they were avoiding the expectations that go with commitment. A similar number (20 %) indicated that their decision to avoid relationships was a result of their circumstances—that it was the wrong time for them. For example, some indicated that they felt that they were too young or not ready for a relationship. For others, their poor emotional state caused them to avoid romantic relationships. Some adolescents (17 %) indicated that they had had other priorities such as travel, hobbies, schools, or family. This reason was significantly more likely to be given by the male adolescents (27 %) than by the female adolescents (11 %), $\chi^2(1) = 6.01$, $p = .014$. Others (11 %) indicated that their decision was meant to avoid negative emotional experiences such as getting hurt, experiencing pressure, and dealing with the “drama,” or trust issues. A few individuals (5 %) indicated that they decided to avoid romantic relationships because they were not meeting anyone who they saw as a potential partner. A few others (5 %) indicated that they chose not to get into a relationship to avoid engaging in sexual activity as a result of a sexual dysfunction, religious convictions, having an STI, or poor body image.

Factors Associated with Avoidance

Because the Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire has different male and female versions, we used separate logistical regression analyses to identify factors (i.e., age,

religiosity, sexual self-esteem, sexual distress, history of sexual coercion, and sexually dysfunctional beliefs) associated with engaging in voluntary sexual and/or romantic avoidance.

Sexual Avoidance

The logistic regression analysis for sexual avoidance for the female adolescents was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 24.69$, $p < .001$ (see Table 3). The model explained 18 % of the variance in sexual avoidance and correctly classified 67 % of the cases. The female adolescents who had experienced sexual coercion had nearly three times the odds (OR 2.84) of having purposefully avoided sexual activity compared to those who had not experienced sexual coercion. Age, sexual esteem and sexual distress were unrelated to sexual avoidance; being more religious and having greater dysfunctional sexual beliefs were associated with sexual avoidance at the bivariate level only (see Table 1).

The logistic regression analysis for sexual avoidance for the male adolescents was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 13.45$, $p = .036$ (see Table 4). The model explained 15 % of the variance and 84 % of cases were correctly classified. Those who had experienced sexual coercion had nearly three times the odds (OR 2.88) of having purposefully avoided sexual activity compared to those who had not experienced sexual coercion. Level of religiosity was associated with a twofold increased likelihood of having engaging in sexual avoidance (OR 1.97). Age, sexual esteem, sexual distress, and dysfunctional sexual beliefs were unrelated to sexual avoidance.

Romantic Avoidance

The logistic regression for romantic avoidance for the female adolescents was not significant, $\chi^2(6) = 3.68$, $p = .720$ (see Table 5). The groups also did not differ significantly on any of the predictors at the univariate level (see Table 1). The logistic regression for romantic avoidance for the male adolescents was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 15.04$, $p = .020$ (see Table 6). The model explained 13 % of the variance and 66 % of cases were correctly classified. Those who had experienced sexual coercion had nearly three times the odds (OR 2.70) of having purposefully avoided romantic relationships compared to those who had not experienced sexual coercion. Increasing sexual distress was associated with a slightly increased likelihood of having engaging in sexual avoidance (OR 1.06). Age, religiosity, sexual esteem and sexual distress were unrelated to relationship avoidance.

Table 3 Factors associated with sexual avoidance by female adolescents

| Factor | B | SE | Wald | <i>p</i> | Exp(B) | 95 % CI |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Age | .077 | .136 | .316 | .574 | 1.080 | .827–1.409 |
| Religiosity | .306 | .198 | 2.392 | .122 | 1.358 | .921–2.003 |
| Sexual esteem | .022 | .022 | 1.037 | .309 | 1.023 | .980–1.067 |
| Sexual distress | .037 | .020 | 3.419 | .064 | 1.038 | .998–1.080 |
| Sexual coercion | 1.044 | .341 | 9.386 | .002 | 2.840 | 1.457–5.538 |
| Dysfunctional sexual beliefs | .030 | .016 | 3.546 | .060 | 1.030 | .999–1.062 |

N = 115 in the no sexual avoidance group and *N* = 64 in the sexual avoidance group. $\chi^2(6) = 24.69$, *p* < .001. Nagelkerke *R*² = .18. Factors significantly associated with sexual avoidance are in bold

Table 4 Factors associated with sexual avoidance by male adolescents

| Factor | B | SE | Wald | <i>p</i> | Exp(B) | 95 % CI |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Age | .096 | .207 | .214 | .643 | 1.100 | .734–1.651 |
| Religiosity | .677 | .247 | 7.516 | .006 | 1.967 | 1.213–3.191 |
| Sexual esteem | −.023 | .030 | .605 | .437 | .977 | .922–1.036 |
| Sexual distress | .023 | .035 | .436 | .509 | 1.023 | .956–1.095 |
| Sexual coercion | 1.056 | .524 | 4.056 | .044 | 2.875 | 1.029–8.035 |
| Dysfunctional sexual beliefs | .002 | .017 | .014 | .906 | 1.002 | .970–1.035 |

N = 122 in the no sexual avoidance group and *N* = 23 in the sexual avoidance group. $\chi^2(6) = 13.45$, *p* = .036. Nagelkerke *R*² = .15. Factors significantly associated with sexual avoidance are in bold

Table 5 Factors associated with romantic avoidance by female adolescents

| Factor | B | SE | Wald | <i>p</i> | Exp(B) | 95 % CI |
|------------------------------|-------|------|-------|----------|--------|------------|
| Age | −.082 | .120 | .472 | .492 | .921 | .729–1.164 |
| Religiosity | .192 | .181 | 1.118 | .290 | 1.211 | .849–1.728 |
| Sexual esteem | −.001 | .019 | .005 | .943 | .999 | .962–1.037 |
| Sexual distress | .015 | .019 | .612 | .434 | 1.015 | .978–1.053 |
| Sexual coercion | .317 | .316 | 1.005 | .316 | 1.373 | .739–2.551 |
| Dysfunctional sexual beliefs | −.001 | .013 | .005 | .945 | .999 | .973–1.026 |

N = 81 in the no romantic avoidance group and *N* = 96 in the romantic avoidance group. $\chi^2(6) = 3.68$, *p* = .720. Nagelkerke *R*² = .03

Table 6 Factors associated with romantic avoidance by male adolescents

| Factor | B | SE | Wald | <i>p</i> | Exp(B) | 95 % CI |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Age | −.132 | .152 | .755 | .385 | .876 | .651–1.180 |
| Religiosity | −.118 | .195 | .365 | .546 | .889 | .607–1.302 |
| Sexual esteem | .014 | .024 | .349 | .555 | 1.014 | .968–1.062 |
| Sexual distress | .061 | .028 | 4.855 | .028 | 1.063 | 1.007–1.122 |
| Sexual coercion | .992 | .412 | 5.792 | .016 | 2.697 | 1.202–6.049 |
| Dysfunctional sexual beliefs | .021 | .013 | 2.561 | .110 | 1.022 | .995–1.049 |

N = 89 in the no romantic avoidance group and *N* = 56 in the romantic avoidance group. $\chi^2(6) = 15.04$, *p* = .020. Nagelkerke *R*² = .13. Factors significantly associated with romantic avoidance are in bold

Discussion

The goal of this study was to enhance understanding of sexually experienced adolescents' decisions to purposely avoid further sexual activity and/or romantic relationships.

Most adolescents value having a boyfriend or girlfriend and have high interest in sexual activity (Bell et al. 2015; Fortenberry and Hansel 2011; O'Sullivan et al. 2014). Nonetheless, we found that sexually experienced adolescents demonstrate personal agency with respect to

continued sexual involvement in that more than a quarter of our participants had purposely avoided sexual activity and almost half had purposely avoided getting into a romantic relationship. These avoidance periods typically lasted for a few months, somewhat longer than those found by Ott et al. (2010), and about a third lasted for a year or more.

For many adolescents, the current and recent relationship context appears to be key to decision-making in these intimate contexts. More than a quarter of the adolescents referred to aspects of a prior romantic relationship as the reason for their sexual avoidance and more than a third attributed their romantic avoidance to experiences in a prior relationship. These findings are consistent with those of Joyner and Udry (2000) who found that the stress of romantic relationships for adolescents may increase depression, particularly for female adolescents. In contrast, even though many adolescents experience sexual problems and concerns (Landry and Bergeron 2011; Mussachio et al. 2006; O'Sullivan et al. 2014; O'Sullivan and Majerovich 2008), few of our participants indicated that they based their decision to avoid relationships on having a sexual problem.

Gender Differences in Sexual and Romantic Avoidance

In keeping with our prediction based on gender role expectation and research that has shown that more female than male adolescents postpone first sexual activity (Laffin et al. 2008; Sprecher and Treger 2015), the female adolescents were significantly more likely than were the male adolescents to report that they had purposely avoided sexual activity. This is also consistent with our finding that the female adolescents were more religious and more likely to have experienced sexual coercion—both of these characteristics were associated with sexual avoidance at the bivariate level. However, contrary to our prediction, we found that the female adolescents also were significantly more likely to have engaged in romantic avoidance. This may be because female adolescents experience greater distress following relationship break-ups than do male adolescents (Simon and Barrett 2010); break-up distress was a central reason participants gave for romantic avoidance. Thus, female adolescents may need time to recover from one relationship before entering another one. It may also be that female adolescents are more likely to avoid romantic relationships because relationships are more costly for them than they are for male adolescents (Joyner and Udry 2000). For example, female adolescents report experiencing more relationship strain (i.e., negative interactions with their partner) (Simon and Barrett 2010) and related depression (Joyner and Udry 2000) than do male adolescents.

Explaining Sexual and Romantic Avoidance

The results shed light on factors influencing adolescents' voluntary decisions to avoid sexual activity and romantic relationships. Based on research on factors associated with sexual abstinence (Brotto 2010; Chou et al. 2014; Lammers et al. 2000; Minichiello et al. 1996; Wiederman 2000), we predicted that adolescents who were more religious and had lower self-esteem, higher sexual distress, more negative sexual attitudes, and a history of sexual abuse would be more likely to engage in sexual and romantic avoidance. We also expected that older adolescents would be more likely to report having avoided sex and romantic relationships because of their longer dating and sexual history. Our analyses supported the role of some of these adolescent characteristics in avoidance decisions but not others. Importantly, adolescents' understanding of their reasons for engaging in sexual and romantic avoidance was not always consistent with the results of the quantitative analysis.

Age

Our participants ranged in age from 16 to 21 and it is likely that the older adolescents on average would have a more extensive romantic and sexual history and more relationships on which to draw than would the younger adolescents. As such, they would have had more opportunities to avoid further sexual and romantic involvement. However, the decision to avoid sex or romantic relationships was not related to the age of the adolescent. It might be that even our older adolescents were still developing their intimate communication skill. More directly, the results suggest that the decision to avoid sexual or relationship intimacy arises from the characteristics and experiences of the adolescents themselves, not from developmental factors common to all.

History of Sexual Coercion

Having experienced sexual coercion emerged as a key correlate of sexual avoidance for both the male and female adolescents and romantic avoidance for the male adolescents. This extends past research that has found that adult women who have experienced sexual coercion are more likely to have engaged in sexual avoidance (Lemieux and Byers 2008). However, none of our participants referred to their coercive experiences in providing their reasons for sexual (or romantic) avoidance. It may be that these adolescents did not identify these experiences as sexually coercive given the pervasiveness of sexual assault related myths (Byers 1996; Reyes and Foshee 2013). Alternately, they may not have linked their avoidance decision to their coercive experiences because the effects of experiencing

sexual coercion are so pervasive that they become imperceptible to the individual. Our finding that the male but not the female adolescents who had experienced sexual coercion were more likely to engage in romantic avoidance may reflect differences in the relationship context in which the sexual coercion occurred (which we did not assess). Research is needed that examines how the nature of sexual coercion (e.g., relationship to perpetrator, type of unwilling sexual activity, etc.) affects youths' subsequent sexual and relationship decision-making.

Religiosity

Both the male and female adolescents who were more religious were more likely to report having avoided sexual activity; however, religiosity only emerged as a unique predictor in the logistic regression analysis for the male adolescents. Similarly, some participants noted that they avoided sexual activity because it conflicted with their values. This extends previous research showing that greater religiosity is associated with delay of first intercourse (Hull et al. 2011; Lammers et al. 2000; Minichiello et al. 1996) and that religious youth perceive greater risk of negative outcomes (or fewer positive outcomes) from sexual activity (Hull et al. 2011). Adolescents who were more religious were not more likely to avoid romantic relationships, however, and they did not refer to their religious values as reasons for their romantic avoidance. Thus, more religious adolescents may be adhering to religious proscriptions against sexual activity outside of marriage by avoiding sexual activity within relationships rather than by avoiding relationships that might involve sexual expectations.

Sexual Functioning

We assessed three aspects of sexual functioning: sexual self-esteem, distress about sexual difficulties, and dysfunctional sexual beliefs. We found no evidence that sexual functioning was associated with sexual avoidance from our quantitative analyses. In contrast, both male and female adolescents provided reasons for avoiding sexual activity related to their sexual functioning in the open-ended component. For example, 30 % of adolescents, and significantly more female than male adolescents, indicated that they had avoided sex because they did not find it enjoyable, pleasant, satisfying or comfortable, and 16 % reported negative emotions associated with sexual activity, such as feeling used. Similarly, La Rocque and Cioe (2011) found that undergraduates with lower sexual self-esteem reported greater sexual avoidance due to fear and anxiety specifically; the authors did not assess sexual avoidance for

other reasons such as relationship reasons and having other priorities. Taken together, our results and those of La Rocque and Cioe suggest that sexual functioning is not associated with sexual avoidance generally but may be associated with sexual avoidance due to sexual fear and anxiety specifically. Research is needed that assesses the relationship between sexual avoidance and low sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction directly as well as mediators (e.g., sexual cognitions) of these relationships.

We found that the male adolescents who were experiencing, or were at risk to experience, sexual problems were more likely to avoid romantic relationships. Gender role expectations are that men (particularly young men) should have a high interest in sex. It may be that once in a relationship, male adolescents who are experiencing sexual distress do not feel able to or willing to decline engaging in sexual activity and so use relationship avoidance as a way to avoid dealing with their own and their partner's sexual expectations. However, few participants identified sexual concerns as their reason for avoiding relationships. It may be that these young men are not aware or willing to acknowledge that their sexual concerns and problems are influencing their relationship decisions.

Other Reasons for Sexual Avoidance

As expected, participants provided reasons for their sexual and romantic avoidance that were not captured by our predictors. For example, many participants referred to relationship factors, current or past, to explain their decision to avoid sexual activity or romantic relationships. For sexual avoidance, this included negative aspects of the relationship they were in at the time as well as not wanting the relationship to progress too quickly. This finding suggests that some adolescents do not assume that sexual activity will be a part of all relationships but rather see it as dependent on the quality or stage of the relationship. With respect to romantic avoidance, we found that negative relationship experiences can profoundly affect adolescents including closing themselves off, at least temporarily, to future romantic partnerships. For example, many participants indicated that their avoidance decision was in the aftermath of a bad relationship experience—they did not feel emotionally ready to enter another relationship, were not over their previous partner, or wanted to learn more about themselves. This is in keeping with research that has shown that relationship loss is frequently recalled as the most traumatic event of adolescence (Park et al. 1996; Tashiro and Frazier 2003).

A substantial number of participants provided reasons for relationship avoidance that suggest negative attitudes

about relationships in general rather than negative previous relationship experiences specifically. For example, some indicated that they avoided relationships to dodge the negative emotions they associated with being in a relationship such as getting hurt, violation of trust, or dealing with “the drama.” In addition, many participants indicated that they wanted to avoid the expectations that they associated with being in a committed relationship suggesting that they evaluated these expectations negatively. This was not given as a reason for sexual avoidance, however. Thus, these participants may have felt that they could avoid romantic relationships and still have their sexual needs met through casual sex.

There were two reasons that were rarely given for sexual and/or romantic avoidance. First, only a few adolescents indicated that they avoided sex and/or romantic relationships because they had other priorities. In keeping with the view that developing intimacy skills is a key developmental task of adolescence (Furman and Buhrmester 1992; Roisman et al. 2004), adolescents appear to prioritize sexual and relationship experience over other aspects of their lives, for the most part. Second, only a few adolescents chose to avoid sexual activity because of sexual health concerns—pregnancy and/or an STI—despite the myriad interventions aimed at adolescents that stress these reasons. This may be because sexually experienced adolescents believe that they know how to avoid STIs and unwanted pregnancy. This is not consistent with data on the high rates of STIs and unwanted pregnancies in this age group (McKay and Barrett 2010; Statistics Canada 2008). Alternately, the infrequent mentions of sexual health concerns may reflect cognitive dissonance in that once adolescents have made the decision to engage in sexual activity, they minimize their perception of risk.

Limitations

These results need to be interpreted in light of some of the limitations of the study. First, participants were asked whether they had made the decision to *avoid or abstain from (no longer engage in) sexual activities (including genital touch, oral sex, penile-vaginal intercourse, or anal sex) that you had engaged in before*. It is clear from the qualitative responses that most adolescents interpreted this in terms of engaging in any sexual activity. However, it is possible that some participants interpreted this question narrowly with respect to one specific sexual activity. Second, participants provided their reasons for sexual and romantic avoidance in brief online responses to an open-ended question. An interview study would provide a more nuanced understanding of adolescents' reasons for avoiding sexual activity and romantic relationships. Third, we used a convenience sample of adolescents. Although our

participants were diverse in terms of sexual identity, they were all predominantly White in line with the ethnic makeup of the region. Thus, the extent to which the results are generalizable to adolescents in general is not known. Research is needed using more diverse samples, including those of varying ethnic backgrounds and sexual identities, especially with respect to the prevalence of sexual and romantic avoidance. Finally, we relied on adolescents' retrospective self-reports which may have been influenced by various sources of bias (e.g., faulty memory, self-presentation bias). Furthermore, because of the cross-sectional design, we do not know for certain whether sexual coercion preceded avoidance decisions. A prospective design would provide additional insights into adolescents' reasoning and feelings at the time they decide to avoid sexual activity or romantic relationships. It also would provide stronger evidence about factors that contribute to adolescents' decision-making.

Conclusion

The results shed light on an aspect of the intimate lives of adolescents that has received little research attention—purposely avoiding sexual activity or becoming involved in a relationship despite a history of sexual activity. They demonstrate that many adolescents, and more female than male adolescents, have engaged in sexual (and romantic) avoidance for periods that typically last for a few months. These results challenge common discourse around adolescent sexual norms that once adolescents initiate sexual activity, they feel compelled to continue and lack the agency required to judge and avoid situations which might prove difficult, problematic, risky, or harmful in some way (Hust et al. 2008; Miller and Benson 1999). Instead, our findings demonstrate that adolescents demonstrate considerable agency in this regard by choosing purposely, at times, to avoid sexual activity or romantic relationships. This suggests that to fully capture the experiences of adolescents, researchers need to assess not only past sexual experience and current sexual activity (as is currently typically done), but also their intentions regarding future sexual involvement (which is rarely done). Awareness of the prevalence of these avoidance decisions will prove of use in education and prevention programs that require a deeper understanding of varying patterns in adolescent romantic and sexual norms—it is important that such programs are closely tailored to accommodate the range of norms that are representative of youth. It should be made clear in those protocols that: many adolescents decide at times to take a “time out” from sexual activity and romantic relationships; all adolescents have the option to do so; they are not obliged to participate in either intimate

context should the timing or circumstances not feel appropriate; and, they have the right to make active decisions for themselves about when they want to participate, decline, and re-engage.

Avoidance decisions were associated with personal characteristics (being female and more religious) and negative experiences (bad relationship experiences or break-ups, experience of sexual coercion, and lack of sexual pleasure and enjoyment motivate adolescents' avoidance decisions). Of note, avoidance decisions are not an inevitable consequence of dating and sexual involvement in that older adolescents were not more likely to have made these decisions. More remains to be learned about factors influencing these adolescents' decision-making including perceptions of peers' behavior and attitudes, both of which are associated with youth sexual intentions and behavior generally (Buhi and Goodson 2007). In sum, the results from this exploratory, mixed methods study provide new information that can inform youth programming about agency in intimate contexts as well as factors that influence adolescents' decision-making.

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Conflict of interest The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Standard This study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of New Brunswick and the University of British Columbia in accordance with the Canadian *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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E. Sandra Byers Ph.D. is a Professor and Chair in the Department of Psychology at the University of New Brunswick. Her research addresses multiple areas of human sexuality including sexual satisfaction, sexual communication, sexual well-being in a range of at risk populations, sexual health, and sexual violence.

Lucia F. O'Sullivan Ph.D. is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of New Brunswick where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Adolescents' Sexual Health Behaviors. Her primary research interests are sexual health, functioning, and intimate relationships as well as the impact of technology and social media.

Lori A. Brotto is a clinical psychologist. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and head of the Division of Gynaecologic Specialties at the University of British Columbia. She holds a Canada Research Chair in Women's Sexual Health. Her research primarily focuses on women's sexual function and asexuality. She is an Associate Editor for the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* and is the Sexual Health expert writer for the *Globe and Mail* newspaper.