

Gender, Sex, & Emerging Adulthood

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INTRODUCTION

Social norms suggest that sex and intimacy play different roles in the lives of emerging adult men and women. It is in emerging adulthood that individuals explore what they want in a partner and what their expectations are for sex (Gala & Kapadia, 2014). Emerging adulthood is a key developmental period when individuals typically are exploring and making meaning of their intimate relationships (Arnett, 2015). National trends suggest that experimentation with various forms of non-committed relationships has increased for this age group (Olmstead, 2020). This trend appears to be especially true for females (Netting & Reynolds, 2018). Young women are utilizing casual sex to explore their sexual identity, while men are more driven to casual sex for sexual pleasure (Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017). Yet, heteronormative scripts and a sexual double standard impact women's sexual satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Uecker & Martinez, 2017). Women's sexual pleasure is shaped by feelings of safety, comfort, and empowerment (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). Research suggests that women are more vulnerable when engaging in sex whether it be due to nonconsensual sex, lower self-worth, or being perceived negatively (Fielder & Carey, 2010; Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017; Uecker & Martinez, 2017; Heinrichs et al., 2009).

Women's self-esteem as a result of their sexual experiences, is found to be largely influenced by their relationship with their body and their sexual subjectivity (Horne & Zimmer, 2006; Heinrichs et al., 2009; Hannier et al. 2018); research on heterosexual men's self-esteem in relation to sex has largely been neglected. Although there is some research comparing women's and men's views on casual sex, there is little research on how sex influences emerging adult intimacy development over time and how, in turn these experiences impact their self-esteem. Much of previous research has primarily relied on survey data to understand women's and men's experiences and perceptions. Narrative identity scholars posit that individuals can make meaning

of their life or achieve self-understanding when given the opportunity to construct their life in story-like or narrative terms (McAdams, 2013, Adler et al. 2017). Therefore, in this study I explore the relationship between sexual experiences, self-esteem, and empowerment among emerging adult men and women using a narrative identity approach.

Trends in Sexual Behavior

Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage between the ages of 18 and 25 when young adults are free to explore who they are and want they want (Arnett, 2019). The notion of emerging adulthood as a developmental period arose as demographic trends in primarily western countries indicated that women and men were postponing marriage and parenting and instead focusing their late teens and early twenties to explore their identity, career, and relationships. Relationship formation is a key feature of emerging adulthood. It can involve divergent pathways that include both a number of committed and non-committed relationships. Yet while overall sexual activity in today's generation of emerging adults has been found to be declining (Twenge, et al., 2017), experimentation with various forms of non-committed relationships has increased. For example, the majority of college-age men and women report having had at least one Friends with Benefits relationship (Williams & Jovanovic, 2015). This trend overtime in non-committed relationships appears to be especially true for females; males on the other hand have shown an increased trend in engaging in more committed forms of relationships (Netting & Reynolds, 2018). Importantly, it is through these intimate connections, that young adults explore their own emerging identities (Netting & Reynolds, 2018) which can further impact their self-esteem and self-worth (Townsend et al., 2019).

Trends indicate that emerging adults' likelihood of having sex outside of a committed relationship and their number of sexual partners, are similar for men and women which has not

changed overtime. Data gathered by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) compared women and men aged 18-24 from two U.S. national cohorts, 2006-08 and 2011-13. These data demonstrated that the percentages of emerging adult women and men who reported overall sexual contact with opposite-sex and same-sex partners, including vaginal, oral, and anal sex, was similar across the two cohorts (Chandra et al., 2011 & Copen et al., 2016). Despite men and women reporting similar likelihood of engaging in oral sex with an opposite-sex partner in both cohorts, there was evidence to suggest women are more likely to perform oral sex than to receive it (Leveque & Pedersen, 2012). The differences in emerging adult women and men's may be explained by factors such as heteronormative scripts, sexual subjectivity, and empowerment (Uecker & Martinez, 2017; Horne & Zimmer, 2006; Jovanovic & Williams, 2018).

Although the data on sexual activity shows that many young adults have experienced various forms of sexual behavior by age 24, it does not capture the frequency at which these behaviors occur. In a recent study examining the frequency of sexual activity in a large national sample, Ueda et al. (2020) found that between 2000-2002 and 2016-2018, the proportion of 18- to 24-year-old individuals who reported having had no sexual activity in the past year had increased from the early cohort to the more recent one. This trend was particularly true among men (18.9% vs 30.9%) but less so among women (15.1% vs 19.1%). Ueda et al. (2020) noted that the increase in sexual inactivity was observed only among men identifying as heterosexual. Similarly, Johnston et al. (2021) found in a representative national sample that among males, the percent reporting no partners in the prior year rose from 16.9% in 2005 to 23.5% in 2020. Among young adult females, those reporting no sex partners increased from 12.3% in 2005 to 16.5% in 2020. Interestingly, while the percent of young adult males reporting multiple sex partners has been declining—from 27% in 2005 to 24.6% in 2020—the percent of young adult

females reporting multiple partners in the prior year has remained consistent from 22% in 2005 to 22.7% in 2020. Along with frequency of sexual acts and engagement of sexual partners, regret and sexual enjoyment are important to observe.

Regret & Sexual Satisfaction

Using a large national sample of 21,549 heterosexual women and men, Uecker and Martinez (2017) found that women tend to regret hookups more than men and often tie more emotion to sex than men. They also observed how gender norms prevail in preventing women's ability to enjoy sex. They found first time hookups with a new partner that involved vaginal intercourse, 28 percent of women and 14 percent of men regretted the hookup. When they looked at men and women who both had and had not experienced a casual hookup outside of a committed relationship, 66 percent of women and 46 percent of men regretted a certain sexual act. It is also important to point out that a considerable number of women and men did not regret a recent hookup. Uecker and Martinez, (2017) argued that the gender gap found in first time vaginal sex with a new partner implies that women are still influenced by persistent gender norms.

Along with regret and sexual agency men and women have been found to question women's right to sexual pleasure in hookups but not in committed relationships (Armstrong et al., 2012). Armstrong et al. (2012) sampled 13,484 college women and asked about their most recent hookup to collect views on orgasms and sexual enjoyment. The three factors that predicted women's orgasms and sexual enjoyment were specific sexual acts, experience with a specific partner, and commitment. Specific sexual acts such as vaginal intercourse, oral sex, and hand stimulation of genitals increased the likelihood of a women having an orgasm. The familiarity a women had with her partner and a higher record of hookups with her partner also

increased a women's chances of an orgasm. Women appear to require a sense of trust or closeness with their partner in order to have their sexual needs met. In a follow up to Armstrong et al.'s (2012) quantitative analysis of survey questions they conducted interviews with 25 men and 43 women interviews and asked about their experiences with hookups and relationships. Men validated women's experience with orgasming with a caring partner or someone they were in a committed relationship by mentioning their view that when they are hooking up their partner orgasming is not as much of a priority as it would be in a committed relationship. The sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure that men reported in the interviews has probable cause for the way women's experience with sex impacts their self-esteem.

Gender Norms and Emerging Adult Sexual Behavior

The pervasiveness of heteronormative scripts in today's US culture continues to impact women's sexual experiences. In a sample of 467 U.S. college students between the ages 18 and 27, Gamble (2019) found that sexual entertainment, such as porn, related to women's participation in unwanted sex because sexual entertainment provides a message that men's sexual pleasure must be prioritized over women. Sexual entertainment was also found to increase women's beliefs in heteronormative scripts and although a similar relationship was found among men the correlation was not large enough to draw conclusive evidence (Gamble, 2019). Sexual subjectivity, which includes prioritizing one's pleasure and sexual agency, remains controversial. Women vary between being criticized for having too much sexual subjectivity or for possessing too little.

Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2006) assessed female participants between the ages 16 and 22 on their sexual body-esteem, sexual desired pleasure, and sexual self-reflection. They found that women's experiences with sex as well as how they view their bodies, their right to

sexual pleasure, and their sexual self-impacts their empowerment inside the bedroom. Additionally, they showed that women's enjoyment of sex is negatively impacted due social stigma and patriarchal oppression. Men are often regarded as being able to freely enjoy sex without any repercussions; although we do not know how this impacts men's self-esteem and empowerment in their romantic histories (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). Kettrey (2018) used data from 22 colleges across the United States and captured a sample of 7,853 women. Kettrey found that women are still more likely to be the victims of sexual assault while men continue to be the perpetrators. As a result, women tend to stop engaging in hookups after two years of college (Kettrey, 2018).

Research on Friends with Benefits suggest that empowerment, safety, control, and disempowerment are important aspects in women and men's ability to achieve comfortability and equality in sexual relationships. Jovanovic and Williams (2018), facilitated focus group discussions that focused on emerging adults' views of Friends with Benefits (FWB). Their sample included 71 women and 35 men at a Southern California university. They identified four key themes involving college students views on FWB relationships: the empowerment of young women, the disempowerment of young women, creating a safe option for women, and the control and power dynamic. They found that both men and women perceived FWB relationships as a context where women have the opportunity to freely express their sexuality and sexual desires. Yet, at the same time, the double standard remains leading women to feel more judged than men for engaging in FWB relationships. Despite, women also expressed the theme of safety or the notion that in an FWB women know their partners so do not feel less risk engaging in sex. Lastly, a number of women also expressed a sense of control in a FWB given their ability to initiate or end the sexual relationship (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018).

How Men and Women View Intimate Relationships

During emerging adulthood, women and men both view relationships as a means to determining what they do and do not want (Norona et al., 2013). The view of intimate relationships and its benefits differ between men and women. Sakalli-Ugurlu (2003), examined the expectations of 413 university students (208 men and 205 women) that were all in heterosexual relationships to determine how satisfaction in romantic relationships and attitudes of gender stereotypes relates to their future time orientation in romantic relationships. Future time orientation was defined as seeing and planning a future with your partner. Using the Future Time Orientation in Relationships Scale and the Attitudes Toward Gender Stereotypes About Romantic Relationships, Sakalli-Urgulu assessed heterosexual relationships and found that women were more future oriented than men. Women's views of the future with their male partner were predicted by attitudes of their male partners assertiveness and dominance whereas for men their own assertiveness and satisfaction with the relationship was more prevalent in predicting future orientation. Women reliance on men's assertiveness and dominance demonstrates the different standards both genders rely on to feel secure in a relationship's future.

When concepts of power are called into question, men and women's views of the impact power has on their investment in their relationship varies. Ten-minute conversations between same sex friendships from 37 women and 32 men in college were recorded and coded by Norona et al. (2013), to inspect the possible differing descriptions of women's and men's romantic relationships. Gendered scripts portraying men as nonchalant and assertive and women as vulnerable and submissive in relationships were a prevalent theme in these conversations. Women were found to talk more about intimate parts of romantic stories such as their feelings toward the subject of that story (Norona et al., 2013). Throughout emerging adulthood gender

scripts still have the power to influence how one views intimate relationships. Regarding the actual dynamics of power in intimate relationships Traeder and Zeigler-Hill (2020), found that in their sample of 74 heterosexual couples in the U.S., women and men's desire for power impacted their relationship in differing ways. Women were less likely to desire power when they perceived having existing power in the relationship, and relationship satisfaction, investment, and commitment were high. Men tended to report higher levels of desired power, yet desired power did not have any correlation with their investment in the relationship. The power dynamics between men and women in intimate relationships leads one to question what part those dynamics play in emerging adults' sexual relationships.

Sex and Self-Esteem

Men's and women's sexual and intimate histories impact their self-esteem in contrasting ways (Heinrichs et al., 2009; Horne, 2009; Hannier et al., 2018; Townsend et al., 2019; Kwang et al., 2013). Women and men also tend to differ in what they worry about when they are out of relationships. Men worry more about social standing and how they are perceived by others when they are out of a relationship whereas women tend to worry about their level of interdependence with their partner (Kwang et al., 2013). When both men and women pursue sex for sexual pleasure or romance -- known as autonomous motives- they view sex positively rather than pursuing sex to receive self-affirmation or partner approval -- known as nonautonomous motives. Unfortunately, if both men and women have autonomous motives for engaging in casual sex, women are more likely to experience sexual victimization. This negative experience parallels with the fact that if women and men chose to engage in sex for nonautonomous reasons both have a decrease in self-esteem, but women also experience depression and sexual victimization

(Townsend et al., 2019). Women and men experience casual sex similarly when they share the same motives, yet women still face additional negative risks.

Women's self-esteem in sexual relationships is impacted by body image (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). Hannier et al. (2018) further explored this notion by examining the direct impact of women's satisfaction with their body on their sexual self-esteem. The higher a woman's BMI the lower their physical satisfaction which in turn contributed to lower sexual self-esteem. Hannier et al., 2018 demonstrated how a women's perception of their own attractiveness and how they view their body impacts their comfortability in their sexuality. Along with physical satisfaction there are other factors and measures that impact women's sexual self-esteem. Women and men's sexual self-esteem which is defined as how one sees themselves in the context of being a sexual being, was negatively affected in a similar sense when experiencing sexual victimization. Women and men who experienced sexual victimization tended to become less confident in their sexual selves after experiencing sexual victimization (Krahe & Berger, 2016; Mayers et al., 2003) Women and men's sexual self-esteem also predicted a positive relationship with communication in their sexual lives (Oattes & Offman, 2007).

The lack of research regarding men's self-esteem in relation to their romantic histories leaves open the question of how men are affected by their sexual relationships. Women have very definitive experiences that shape their empowerment in sexual relationships, yet for men, all we know is how their sexual self-esteem is affected. In the current study we used a narrative identity approach to examine the love life stories of emerging adult men and women to see how sex impacts emerging adults' sense of empowerment and self-esteem in their romantic histories.

Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative identity scholars posit that individuals can make meaning of their life or achieve self-understanding when given the opportunity to construct their life in story-like or narrative terms (McAdams, 2013, Adler et al. 2017). These stories intertwine into shared themes that often include motivational themes, affective themes, themes of integrative meaning, and structural aspects of narratives. Motivational themes include agency, communion, and growth goals. Affective themes contain redemption, positive resolution, and contamination. Themes of integrative meaning include meaning making, exploratory processing, and accommodative processing. Lastly, structural elements include degrees of coherence and complexity. The uniqueness of narrative identity is that it allows subjective information to create an objective impact (Adler et al., 2017). For example, if multiple emerging adult women talk about how their experience with sex has always been negative, one could infer that emerging adult woman struggle to find positive meaning in sex. The Life Story Interview that is often used to collect narrative data utilizes chapters (periods over a lifetime), specific scenes, and asks one about their self-predicted future (Adler et al., 2017). These factors depict the development of one's character and help the narrator understand themselves (Adler et al., 2017; McAdams, 2018).

Narrative identity begins to become constructed during late-adolescent and young-adult years and the process continues throughout one's life. Cultural norms are often used to create life stories and these stories which create an identity serve the purpose of giving meaning to one's life. Narrative identity is used to describe how someone currently is, the progression of how they came to be who they are, and where they believe life will take them next. Themes regarding narrative identity include redemption and meaning making. Redemption demonstrates how a person deals with a setback or negative experience. Meaning making identifies how everything in one's life served a purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). A remarkable aspect of

narrative identity is that a person's narrative identity often shares commonalities with another. Researchers can then extract cultural values due to those commonalities (Dunlop et al., 2020). Lastly, the content of key scenes can be observed for relationships of well-being and health behaviors (Adler et al., 2017; Cox & McAdams, 2014; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Narrative identity not only helps researchers understand the perspectives people have on life but also how those perspectives affect them.

Conclusion

Starting in emerging adulthood, women and men find themselves in the midst of a period of exploration and possibility (Arnett, 2019). Women are affected by heteronormative scripts and sexual subjectivity (Gamble, 2019; Kettrey, 2018). They tend to receive the most criticism for engaging in casual sex and face more negative consequences of sex than men such as sexual victimization and regret (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Uecker & Martinez, 2017). Their sexual satisfaction is contingent on specific components like commitment and familiarity with their partner (Armstrong et al., 2012). There is an existing gender gap in regret of hookups with 20% more women regretting hookups that involve vaginal intercourse (Uecker & Martinez, 2017). Women are more likely to see their body as a defining factor in how they enjoy sex (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). The support women receive from their partner, societal expectations, and the attitude women have toward sex exerts power over their sexual self-esteem (Heinrichs et al., 2009).

The investigation of emerging adult men's sexual self-esteem and its parallels or differences from emerging adult women begs to be explored further. The way women and men view their relationships is very telling of the additional negative impacts women face in sex and their love lives. Sexual self-esteem is commonly found to relate to communication and

experience of sexual victimization but its context in the narrative of emerging adults' love lives is unknown (Schuster et al., 2020; Krahe & Berger, 2016; Mayers et al., 2003). Men and women value different factors in their relationship (Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2003). Men worry more about how they are perceived whereas women worry more about their investment and dependence in their relationship (Norona et al., 2013). Gender norms and heteronormative scripts have played a part in shaping these perspectives. The purpose of the following study was to examine how sex impacts emerging adults' sense of empowerment and self-esteem in their romantic histories.

METHOD

The purpose of the following study was to examine how sex impacts emerging adults' sense of empowerment and self-esteem in their romantic histories. Previous literature indicates that women face different barriers than men due to the stigmatization they face when engaging in casual sex (Gamble, 2019; Kettrey, 2018). These barriers include sexual victimization, regret, sexual subjectivity, and heteronormative scripts (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Uecker & Martinez, 2017; Gamble, 2019). Men, on the other hand, benefit from heteronormative scripts in terms of power and privilege they wield in the bedroom (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Uecker & Martinez, 2017; Gamble, 2019). Although they tend to experience barriers much less than women, they too are affected by sexual victimization (Krahe & Berger, 2016; Mayers et al., 2003). Due to the developmental importance and complexity of intimate relationships in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), the current study uses the Love Life Story Interview (LLSI; Dunlop et al., 2018), a narrative identity instrument, to examine how women and men describe their romantic histories and specifically the ways in which their sexual experiences relate to their feelings of self-esteem and empowerment.

Participants

Participants included 31 students at a large public university in southern California. Participants were recruited through an introductory psychology course as well as through various university organizations such as the Panhellenic organization, Men's and Masculinity program, and other student clubs. The recruitment flyer encouraged any student, 18 years and older, to partake in an interview about their “love life story” where love life included romantic and sexual interactions both committed and non-committed. Additionally, the recruitment materials informed participants that the interview would take place via Zoom where they would be able to change their name and turn off their camera for the purpose of confidentiality. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix A.

The gender makeup consisted of 15 males, 15 females, and 1 transgender male. Less than the majority were White (39%), other ethnicities included 32% Asian, 19% Latinx, and 6% Mixed (African American/White and Asian/White). Regarding sexual identity, 13% of participants identified as bisexual, 6% Bi-Curious, and the remaining 81% identified as straight.

Interview Protocol

The current study uses the Love Life Story Interview (LLSI; Dunlop et al., 2018), a narrative identity instrument, to explore women and men’s romantic histories. The LLSI (Dunlop et al., 2018) is a modified form of the Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 2008), which encompasses romantic and sexual interactions which occur over one's love life. The LLSI (Dunlop et al., 2018) is an open-ended semi-structured interview that allows participants to share stories about their overall love life (chapters), key scenes (high point, low point, challenge, vivid memory, turning point, failure, and regret), and general questions, including how they imagine their love life developing in the future. The narrative identity interview is constructed to encapsulate several aspects of participants' romantic and intimate relationships and the internal

process and meaning of the relationships described. Each participant completed the entire LLSI, Appendix B includes a copy of the LLSI. The Narrative Identity Approach allows researchers to actively examine how participants tell their love life stories which leads to analysis of word choice. Word choice can elicit observations of a participant's wellbeing in a specific relationship, or the autonomy gained when they leave an unhappy relationship.

Prior to the interview, research assistants thoroughly practiced using the LLSI. The interview began with confirming that the participant signed the consent form and then the protocol was said word for word. After each question was answered, interviewers were allotted the ability to ask for clarification on statements made by the participant or reassuring statements such as “Thank you for sharing that with me.” At the end of each interview, a series of demographic questions were asked that included age, ethnicity/race, sexuality, and gender identity. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by Zoom software then corrected for accuracy by research assistants. The transcript was double checked by another transcriber to ensure accuracy and filler words such as “um” and “like” were excluded.

Data Analysis

We used systematic thematic analysis in order to extract key themes from the selected participant's transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Two coders independently read each transcript and identified key themes. We found that both women and men spoke about how sex made them feel about themselves, determining what they wanted out of sex, and viewing sex as their own autonomous choice. Two key themes were therefore identified: 1) Self-esteem and 2) Empowerment. Self-esteem was defined as self-regard in the context of sexual attraction and sexual engagement. Empowerment was defined as the sense of freedom to explore one's sexuality and enjoyment of sex.

Particular topics that related to each theme were given codes and a rubric was created for coding (see Appendix C). Three coders read and listened to all 31 of the participant's transcripts and noted each time a code was present in each key scene of the Love Life Story Protocol (Appendix A). After coders coded independently, they met to discuss any discrepancies and discussed each code until interrater agreement was achieved.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

We organized the results around the two themes. Each theme will be delineated by the codes created to represent either Self-esteem or Empowerment. Comments that are presented in quotations will be included that reflect participants' experiences and demonstrate the nuances of emerging adult's experiences with self-esteem and empowerment in intimate relationships. Figures 1 and 2 indicate the number of participants that expressed each theme. It should be noted that participants could express more than one indicator or code for empowerment.

Figure 1. Number of Females & Males Reporting Empowerment Codes

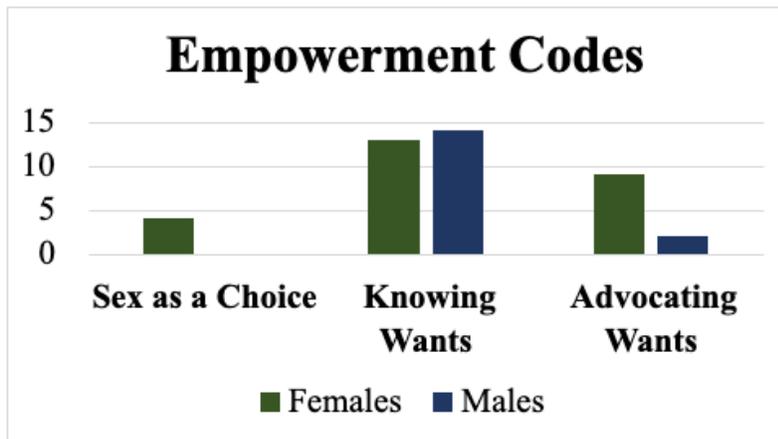
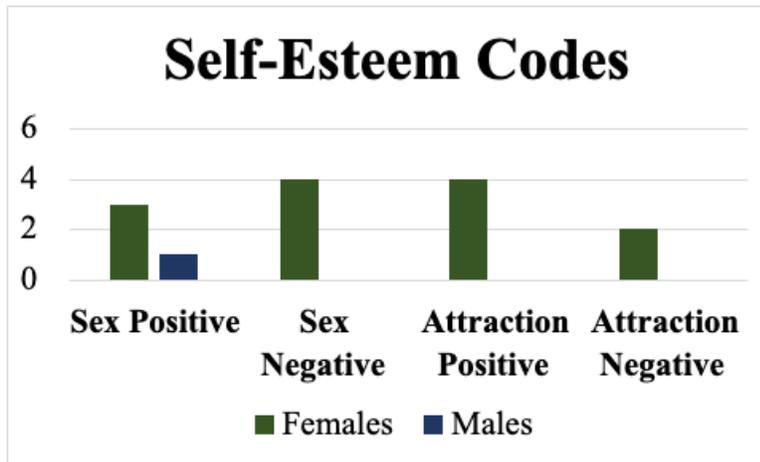


Figure 2. Number of Females and Males Reporting Self-Esteem Codes



As seen in Figure 1 the most frequently expressed indicator of empowerment for both men and women were knowing wants. More women than men described advocating wants and only women mentioned sex as a choice. Interestingly, as seen in Figure 2 the theme of sex impacting self-esteem was present for women but almost entirely absent for men.

Theme 1: Empowerment

Empowerment, which was a common theme found across the majority of the transcripts, was delineated by viewing sex as a choice, knowing wants, and advocating wants. These sub-topics helped to define empowerment as having a sense of freedom to explore one's own sexuality and enjoyment of sex. We were interested to see how these topics differed, if at all, for men and women.

Sex as a Choice

Viewing sex as a choice is a key part of empowerment because one is making the decision to engage in sex for one's own autonomous reasons. These autonomous decisions translate to feeling true freedom to explore one's own sexuality rather than feeling pressure by external forces. This was a common narrative that was often mentioned in many participants stories when

we first began to index the different aspects of empowerment. As we began to focus on finding where sex was seen as a choice, we found that only females displayed this narrative.

The majority of the female participant's stories involved narratives of owing someone sex or deciding they did not owe that person sex. For example, when Amy said: "But it's also I'm trying to tell myself I don't really owe him... I don't really owe him to keep hooking up with him or whatever." Amy explains that she realized that she has the ability to speak up and push back when sex is imposed on her whether through societal pressure or direct pressure from a partner. Melissa expressed a similar sentiment, "They kind of kept trying to hook up with me and I was like, 'No, I don't want to. No, I don't want to' and they kept trying to push themselves on me and, finally, I just got up and left". The quote is also representative of a common sentiment expressed by the women in our sample. As emerging adult women spoke about feeling pressured to have sex with a partner, they felt put in a position where they had to assert themselves to get out of an unwanted sexual encounter.

We found that men more often expressed feeling obligated to prioritize sex in their relationship even when they desired more emotional connection. This was exemplified when Jack stated, "...I didn't really care so much about [sex]. I just found spending time with her was really cool and she was a very cool person to be with. So that's all I really wanted [emotional connection] at first anyway. So, I told her that I don't mind [if they do not have sex]." Many of the men also appeared to distance themselves from the societal expectation that men should have lots of sex and enjoy it. Similar to Jack, Cody describes how despite engaging in sex he didn't really enjoy it, "... guys start to get really interested in [sex]. And they start to say maybe I could try it one of these days. I never really got too excited about it, I was never too keen on it, interested, just everything kind of fell flat on its face."

The theme of empowerment also involved instances where empowerment was lacking, or participants felt disempowerment. It was defined as one feeling like they did not have the freedom to explore their sexuality and enjoy sex.

Women and one male felt pressured into sex they did not want to have whether it was by means of pressure from their partner or society. Of all the male participants, only one male mentioned sex as not a choice twice. The lack of a substantial number of males compared to the eleven females that did not experience sex as choice points out a difference between the frequency at which females feel disempowered in sex compared to males. The male participant, Cody quoted above, said something similar: “You know, before I've had sexual interactions it felt kind of ok, whatever, just do it and move on, do it for the enjoyment of the other person, but I never really enjoyed it. I just found it as too much effort.” He puts his partner's needs before his own and in the process feels uncomfortable with engaging in sex. In a similar thread, women such as Gabriella said, “And I just have memories of just being involved with him, and kind of being pressured into things that I wasn't necessarily ready to do, and feeling uncomfortable and knowing that it was wrong, and just kind of going along with it.” This paints a picture of how women feel obligated or expected to engage in unwanted sex. The quote by Marie further demonstrates this when she states: “...I would always hook up with someone and then they would hit me up and then I would end up hanging out with them again and again and again, even if I didn't want to.” This also points out an additional nuance to how women feel disempowered through their sexual interactions because not only do they feel obligated to engage in unwanted sex, but they feel stuck in a cycle of having a sexual relationship that felt out of their control. These experiences of disempowerment are reflective of the pervasive double standards and gender norms women encounter even today.

Knowing Wants

Although no male participants related sex to being a choice, fourteen males realized what they wanted out of sex through sexual engagement. The majority of these males concluded that sex meant more to them than it did prior in their romantic life. Ryan exemplified this when he said: “Originally, it was just something that was cool to me, I was like oh my gosh people have sex that sounds cool and nice. And then it started to change as something to relieve stress and almost like a tool. And now it's something that's very intimate and special. And just kind of... I don't know, I savor it.” When we would ask what role sex played, we often got similar responses as Ryan. For example, when Marcos replied, “Sex is nice, but I wouldn't say it plays a big role necessarily, because what I seek is not the sexual tension, but more so the, the attention you get from your partner, you know, just being there with them”. Additionally, a transgender male participant responded along the same lines: “I prefer romance over physical, sexual stuff...” This may reflect societal expectations for men to be hypersexual and enjoy sex with more than females in the sense that male participants pushed back on that narrative and asserted that they preferred sex to be meaningful.

In contrast to males when females described what they wanted out of sex they tended to utilize the experiences with sex to set standards for themselves. Rachel said, “I think it [the sexual experience] definitely set my expectations a little higher, in terms of what I expect to get out of relationships, both casual and formal. Both in terms of, with sex specifically, how much do they pay attention to me, and how much do they care about what I want to get out of the relationship.” Georgia further exemplified how female participant's interactions with sex made them realize what they wanted out of sex when she said: “It [the casual hookup] just showed me I'm much better in a committed relationship, rather than doing a bunch of things [sexual

activities] with a bunch of dudes". Sexual subjectivity which is the prioritization of one's sexual pleasure and agency is found in female participant's desire to explore what they wanted out of sex and relationships (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006).

Advocating Wants

Regarding advocating for wants, more female(nine) than male(four) participants described this in their narratives. Female participants tended to talk about how they made the decision to leave an undesirable situation because it did not contribute to their wellbeing. For example, Martha described a realization that she deserved more than what she was receiving in the sexual relationship stating, "I didn't keep going back to this person, I didn't let myself, I kind of stopped myself and made the decision to end things and move on and learn from it." Another aspect that female participants advocated for was what they wanted out of sex whether it was trying something new or expecting a relationship. Emma described communicating sexual feelings, "it took me a little while to tell my current boyfriend about and just talk with him about in terms of sex, but it's not it's not something that I can't handle I actually just was talking to him last night about something new that I've been scared to bring out for a while." This demonstrated how female participants learned to communicate what they wanted from sex. Ayesha explained how she realized she wanted a relationship from the sexual engagement she was having with someone when she explained: "And then recently one of the dudes I was hooking up with after hooking up with him for a couple months, I was kind of like 'Hey we need to be in relationship, otherwise I'm leaving'".

Although females spoke about their individual experience and how they advocated what they wanted males differed in how they related to advocating wants. The male participants we interviewed only described advocating for what they wanted regarding sex it in the context of

being in an intimate relationship. For example, Michael spoke about “when we started having problems of jealousy and all that, we talked about it and we grew and we, we had to find out that love isn't just sex, it's what you do for the other person. The sacrifices you make, as well.” This contrasts with traditional gender norms that suggest males should be less attached in relationships and be more nonchalant (Norona et al., 2013).

Theme 2: Self Esteem

Self-esteem was defined as the way the individual feels about themselves in the context of sexual attraction and sexual engagement. Sexual encounters that negatively and positively impacted participant’s attitudes towards themselves were experienced overwhelmingly by females in comparison to males.

Attraction Negative & Positive

Women who were in situations where someone was sexually attracted to them either did not feel worthy of that attention or viewed the attention to validate how they feel like sexual objects. The former statement was demonstrated by Sara who said “Um, and then, if I feel like I can see someone who might attractively tick my boxes, I just get too nervous because I’m like ‘okay, this person wouldn’t want to be with me’ because I just don’t have the confidence for that.” Sara’s experience with mutual sexual attraction highlights feelings of not being enough for a potential partner. Ella mentioned when describing a number of causal hookups, “And then, after that, I felt like that's all anybody ever wanted and that's all that was ever wanted out of me. So, sex was the focal point and all my relationships after that one.” Ella explains how she felt sexualized, and her identity became what she could offer sexually to her partners.

Positive self-esteem derived from sexual attraction was often expressed by women. Elizabeth said: "sometimes it just makes me feel good that there is some person that actually kind of wants me [sexually] in that moment". It is interesting to point out that Amy, quoted above, mentioned that: "just controlling a [sexual] situation by being the one to cut off contact or being the one to instigate something and just proving to myself and them that I can attract them, if that makes sense." Elizabeth's statement highlights how women feel better about themselves when they receive attention from someone in a sexual manner. Elizabeth and Amy's experience exhibits the intricacies between sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification that, at times, can be positively perceived by females rather than negatively.

Sex Negative & Positive

We found that our participants expressed both negative and positive experiences when engaging in sex.

Sex Negative

When females described sex in a negative context, they would often say something along the lines of what Valerie said: "sex is... I feel like for a long time, like all I thought I was. Until my relationship now I thought well people just want to use me for sex because that's all I was letting people have with me, I wouldn't really share feelings and stuff so it would only ever amount to me having sex with someone and then that's it." Sexual attraction and sexual engagement influenced how female participants grappled not only with their self-esteem but also their identity. They had a hard time finding autonomy in their sexual relationships and often felt 'worthless' after engaging in sex with men. Margaret similarly mentions "I literally felt like a hooker or something I was like what did I just do, that's so not like me, the attraction took over

my brain and didn't leave room for love for myself for a second I just felt I felt so dirty about it.” Margaret's experience with a casual hookup emphasizes the common theme found among females. They often felt guilty and used after sex which related directly to the concept of sexual subjectivity where one believes they are the subject rather than object of sexual desire (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). Women may experience a low sense of sexual subjectivity which negatively influences how they perceive themselves.

Another element involving sex and self-esteem was how women described feeling when they tried to end a sexual relationship. This was observed when Kelly mentioned, "I just felt bad...I was using him whenever we hooked-up. So, I just felt bad and then I just ended up completely ignoring him". This parallels with female participants experience with empowerment when engaging in sexual relationships that they no longer wanted to be a part of. The inherent guilt females inflict upon themselves may be due to the role that is imposed on them in heterosexual relationships. As Norona et al. (2013) put it, gendered scripts were prevalent in conversations of romantic encounters and women were depicted as submissive so when participants assert themselves, they may expect a backlash of some sort than can induce guilt.

The one male whose experience with sex negatively impacted how they viewed themselves was caused by a completely different reason. Adam said in referring to his partner telling him how she feels “She’s like, you know, sometimes I don't like it when you grab me there and I don't like you when you grab me there without asking me first. I'm like, oh I'm so sorry I didn't know because that was my first time. And it was a very uncomfortable situation for me, I didn't know how to talk about sex with a girl. So yeah, that was really, bad because I had really felt bad about what I did. I thought I did really...I did something really wrong.” He felt bad about himself because he crossed a line with a sexual partner due to a lack of communication

Sex Positive

The sexual encounters that positively impacted participants' self-esteem also was found to be more prevalent in females (three) than males (one). Kayley said, "when I got older, I thought a way to prove to people that I was valuable was by showing them that I was good at sex, or something like that." Kayley's statement may be controversial because acting a certain way in order to feel valuable is not viewed as a good thing but the fact that she felt better about herself by being viewed as 'good at sex' contributed to her a positive sense of self. This is interesting because, like having sex negatively impact one's self esteem, this instance corresponds with sexual subjectivity as well. Female participants viewed as a sexual object or them believing they were sexual objects affected their self-esteem in varying ways.

Often sexual experiences resulted in women realizing they deserve to be valued as a person and not a sexual object. This is exemplified when Alexandra states: "And just, kind of able to transition to this middle ground where I'm not forcing myself to be committed in a way that I'm not ready to be, but at the same time, I'm still expecting to be valued and respected in the way that it should be." Alexandra explains her experience with sex and concludes that it is important to prioritize how she is treated inside or outside a sexual relationship.

The singular male who did see himself positively after experiencing sex said that: "In some ways, you know, sex is, it can bring you closer together, or it can bring you further apart. It's just how you, you view sex, and it's how you want to go about sex. And it's, it's a way to explore who you are as people, what, what you like, and I've done a lot of exploring with you know, my sexual encounters, and it's just, it helps, it helps you grow as a person, I think." This male approached sex as an opportunity for personal growth and felt better afterwards. Sexual objectification serves as a center to catalyze the impact of sex on self-esteem for women but not

for the two males whose self-esteem was impacted by how they treated their partner or the lessons they learned from sex. Although representing only one transgender participant Kyle stated, "I guess like I said, the only the only time I've ever had sex was this last-my last relationship with [Jake] I mean it was pretty important, I guess, I would say, because it was one of those things where it helped me to kind of, I guess to reconcile with my gender and all that too." Transgender emerging adults may view sex as mechanism that can help determine how they feel about their body and gender which can be validating or invalidating.

DISCUSSION

The narrative interviews demonstrated that there are discrepancies between male and female participants' experience with sex and the impact it had on their self-esteem and feelings of empowerment. Three out of the four sub-themes for self-esteem were solely experienced by females. Only one male spoke about how his sexual experience positively impacted the way he viewed himself in relationships. The male participant explained how his relationship facilitated a sexual experience where he felt like he grew as a person which contrasts with the way females individualized their experience. This male's experience correlates with Kwang et al.'s (2013) research on self-worth derived from relationships because they found that men base more of their self-worth in relationships. Female's tendency to be concerned with issues of interdependence justifies why female participants in this study related to individualistic and autonomous perspectives not only for self-esteem subthemes but also for empowerment (Kwang et al., 2013). These individualist and autonomous perspectives involved female participants tendency to find their own voice and identity outside of sex which made them more confident in the agency they held in a causal or formal relationship. Viewing sex as a choice also poses the question as to how social norms impact women in comparison to men. Women on average experience sexual

victimization and regret at higher rates than men which may explain the situations women face that force them to assert themselves in sexual situations (Gamble, 2019; Kettrey, 2018; Uecker & Martinez, 2017).

Empowerment as indicated by realizing wants, was more evenly experienced by females and males. As males explored what they wanted and concluded that they prefer sex to be with someone they care about. This conclusion may map out men's struggle to live in a heteronormative cultural that expects them to be hypersexual and instead they desire freedom to decide what sex means (Richardson, 2010). Many more women (nine) compared to men (four) advocated their wants, and they often spoke about making the decision to leave a situation when they felt obligated to engage in unwanted situation that involved sex. Another important aspect of female participants advocating for wants is that they communicated what they wanted from sex whether it was trying something new or demanding that they wanted a committed relationship. These areas in intimate relationships that female participants advocated for underscore the stigmatization that women often face when they express their sexuality and their attempt to push back against gender norms that portray them as submissive. The dissimilarity in the manner that female and male participants advocated for themselves was exemplified in the males' collectivistic versus females' individualistic approach in viewing their wants in a relationship.

The few times sex was expressed as something negative among males as opposed to the frequency among females emphasizes how women's experiences with sex are often negative due to regret, sexual victimization, and the pervading orgasm gap (Olmstead, 2020; Uecker & Martinez, 2017; Townsend et al., 2019). These experiences are often perpetuated by gender norms that stem from heteronormative and patriarchal views. Overall, our findings suggest that

although today's emerging adults may have more freedom to assert their sexual desires, women's sexual agency is still dictated by social norms (Uecker & Martinez, 2017). This may, in part, explain why women's but not men's self-esteem is integral to their sexual experiences (Heinrichs et al., 2009; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014).

LIMITATIONS

Although this study looks at female and male participants it largely neglects the experiences of transgender and nonbinary emerging adults. It also continues to assume and illustrate the binary of gender and highlights differences rather than similarities between binary gender. The majority of this study was composed of participants that were heterosexual so our findings can only be applicable to binary participants that are heterosexual. To date, there are no studies that examine how sex impacts intimate relationships for varying sexualities and gender identities that are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. We also were not aware if all participants were able bodied and cannot delineate the applicability to that community. We hope that the replication of our study will be done with those who are not able bodied, those who do not have a binary gender, and those who do not identify as heterosexual. We did have about 13% of participants who identified as bisexual but all, but one was female.

The racial and ethnic makeup of our study was more diverse than the actual demographics of the university from which we recruited from but unfortunately our participant pool did not have anyone who identified as African American. The engagement of hookup culture and sex is known to slightly differ between white students and black students with black students found to be less involved in hookups and romantic relationships over an observed period of time. Commuter students and those of lower socioeconomic status are other factors that affect the frequency of sexual and romantic engagement due to work obligations and family (Olmstead,

2020). This was not delineated within our sample because this question was not included in our demographic question and answer portion of our interview, so we have no knowledge of how economically diverse our sample is.

It is also important to note that most participants were given credit for their participation in our study through the SONA system, therefore most participants were taking a Psychology course that required them to participate in psychology studies on their campus. This may have created a confounding variable because those interested in psychology may possess similar personality traits. We also primed participants to talk about the role sex plays in their love lives due to the Sex and Sexual Communication question we asked in the Love Life Story Interview found at Appendix A. This priming may play a part in how sex was explained by the participant, but many subthemes were found in varying descriptions of key scenes and not just in the Sex and Sexual communication question.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study prove to be promising and hopefully catalyze more research that involves not just more men but nonbinary folk and those who do not identify as heterosexual. Through the analysis of participant's transcripts, we were able to explore how self-esteem and empowerment in relation to sex play a role in emerging adults' intimate relationships.

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Appendix A. Love Life Stories Project Informed Consent Form

A research project on emerging adults' love life stories is being conducted by Jasna Jovanovic in the Department of Psychology and Child Development at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. The purpose of the study is to understand how college-aged young adults construct the story of their romantic and sexual experiences and how these stories inform or are informed by aspects of one's sense of self or identity.

You are being asked to take part in this study by participating in a semi-structured interview in which you will describe your love life story to this point in time. By love life we mean the range of romantic and

sexual interactions, both committed and noncommitted, that for you make up the story of your love life. Your participation will take approximately one hour. Your interview will be conducted on Zoom by Dr. Jovanovic or one of her research assistants. The interview will be audio-recorded so that we can go back and analyze the themes that emerge from the stories we collect. When you join the Zoom session you will not be required to turn your video camera on.

Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research, and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. You also may refuse to answer any question or questions that you prefer not to answer. At the end of the interview, you will be asked for demographic information: age, gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. As with the interview, you may refuse to answer any question or questions that you prefer not to answer.

Your responses will be protected and kept confidential to safeguard your privacy. Audio-recordings will be transcribed. Once transcribed we will delete the audio recording. We will change your name and any other names you mention to a pseudonym, so that only pseudonyms appear on the transcription. Your name will not appear in a file or on the transcription. We will also change details of your background that you might mention in the interview, such as city of residence, so that you will not be recognizable should your responses appear in any publications. All interview materials will be kept confidential, with access provided only to the principal investigator. One exception will be to provide research assistants with audio recordings of the interviews for transcription. The assistants will not retain copies of the recordings or transcribed interviews after the transcription is complete. Transcriptions will be password protected so that only Dr. Jovanovic can access. This means there is very little risk that your identity might be compromised. While very unlikely, there is a small risk that your privacy would be compromised if your responses are accidentally disclosed along with your identity. The transcriptions will not be shared or reused for other research purposes. The transcriptions will be destroyed only after the results of the study have been published in scholarly outlets.

The interview questions are designed to allow you to recount or describe elements or events of your love life story that you choose to discuss. The questions are open-ended and are not about specific relationships or incidents you might have experienced. Please know, however, that when interviewed if you reveal an incident of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, dating and domestic violence or stalking by a Cal Poly student or employee, we are required to report this to Cal Poly's Title IX office. Someone from the Title IX office would then follow up with you via email with additional resources and instructions on how to file a complaint if you choose.

The possible risk associated with participation in this study is the sensitive nature of thinking and answering questions about your intimate relationships. The possible benefit is that participants may enjoy talking with researchers about their love lives. Again, it is important to know that you may choose not to answer a question or discontinue your participation all together. If you should experience any emotional distress, please be aware that you may contact Cal Poly's Counseling Services at 756-2511.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact Jasna Jovanovic, jjovanov@calpoly.edu.

If you have concerns about the conduct of the research project or your rights as a research participant, regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Michael Black, Chair of Cal Poly Institutional Review Board @ 805-756-2894, mblack@calpoly.edu, or Ms. Trish Brock, Director of Research Compliance, at (805) 756-1450 or pbrock@calpoly.edu.

If you are 18 years or older and agree to voluntarily participate in this research project, please indicate your consent with your signature below. When you join the Zoom call, you will be prompted to consent to allow the session to be audio-recorded.

Participant signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix B. Love Life Story Interview (LLSI)

Hi, I'm [NAME] thank you for participating in our study. I just want to check that you signed the consent form [IF THEY HAVEN'T ASKED THEM TO SEARCH EMAIL AND SIGN]

Before we start audio-recording, I'd like you to change the name on your zoom screen, if you haven't already, to ensure your privacy.

I'm going to start recording; you will need to consent to continue. It will be an audio-recording only. If for any reason your internet goes out, or mine goes out and we can't return to the meeting, someone from the research team will email you to reschedule so we can complete the interview.

This is an interview about the story of your love life. By love life I mean the range of romantic and sexual interactions, both committed and noncommitted, that for you make up the story of your love life to this point in time. I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your love life – a few chapters, scenes, and ideas. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened in your love life and how you imagine your love life developing in the future. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about one hour.

You should not think of this interview as a “therapy session” of any kind. The interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear the story of your love life. As social scientists, my colleagues and I collect people's stories in order to understand the different ways our love lives unfold over time and what our stories tell us about who we are as individuals. Everything you say is voluntary and confidential. You may refuse to answer any question or questions that you prefer not to answer and can end the interview at any time.

The questions are open-ended and are not about specific relationships or incidents you might have experienced. Please know, however, that when interviewed if you reveal an incident of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, dating and domestic violence or stalking by a Cal Poly student or employee, we are required to report this to Cal Poly's Title IX office. Someone from the Title IX office would then follow up with you via email with additional resources and instructions on how to file a complaint if you choose.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Life Chapters

Please begin by thinking about your love life as if it were a book or novel. Please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. Please give each chapter a title and then tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about. For example, a chapter might refer to a person you had a relationship with OR a chapter could be by a period in your life. Please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief. You'll have an opportunity to come back to the details of your chapters later in the interview.

[Note to interviewer: If the participant states they have no love life or have never had a relationship, first prompt them to think about beyond their current situation and consider relationships in the past. If they still say they have never had a love life/relationship you can say "Intimacy can be defined in many ways, to some, it may be romantic or sexual interactions. To others, it may be emotional intimacy or closeness to others. Your love life story can also include feelings of crushes for the first time, attraction to others, a desire for relationships/intimacy."]

[Note to interviewer: For the Life Chapters if the participant mentions a particular person in a chapter you can follow up by asking the participant to describe the nature of the relationship, how did it begin and how old was the participant at that time? Also, you can ask them to say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next.]

[Note to interviewer. For the remainder of the interview feel free to ask questions for clarification or elaboration.]

Key Scenes

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your love life, I would like you to focus on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. Remember that these key scenes can be from any part of your love life story including any romantic and sexual interactions, both committed and noncommitted.–Feel free to share as much detail you are comfortable with. The first key scene will be a high point from your love life story.

1. **High point.** Please describe a scene or moment in your love life that stands out as an especially positive, happy, experience. What happened, who was involved, and when in your story did it take place?

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- Why do you think this particular moment stands out as a high point?
- How does this high point affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this high point says about who you are as a person?

[Interviewer note: If the participant is having a hard time coming up with a high point, you can suggest that they pick a single relationship that was a high point of their love story.]

2. **Low point.** Now I'm going to ask you about a low point. Thinking back over your entire love life, please identify a scene or moment that stands out as an especially negative, sad, or bad experience. What happened, who was involved, and when in your story did it take place?

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- Why do you think this particular moment stands out as a low point?
- How does this low point affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this low point says about who you are as a person?

[Interviewer note: If the participant is reluctant, tell them that the event does not really have to be the lowest point in the story but merely a negative experience of some kind.]

3. **Turning point.** Now I'm going to ask you about a major turning point in your love life, a scene or moment that marked an important change in you or your story. Again, for this scene please describe what happened, who was involved, and when in your story it took place.

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- Why do you think this moment stands out as a turning point?
- How does this turning point affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this turning point says about who you are as a person?

[Interviewer note: If the participant has difficulty identifying a turning point suggest it may be more of a realization about themselves than an event.]

4. **Vivid memory.** Now I will ask you about a vivid memory. Please identify one scene from your love life that you have not already described (in other words, do not repeat your high point, low point, or turning point scene) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful, positive, or negative. Please describe this scene in detail, tell me what happened, who was involved, and when in your story it took place.

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- Why do you think this particular moment was so vivid?
- How does this vivid memory affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this vivid memory says about who you are as a person?

5. **Challenge.** Now I'm going to ask you about a challenge. Looking back over your entire love life, please identify a particular scene or moment in your story that posed the greatest challenge. Please describe this scene in detail, tell me what happened, who was involved, and when in your story it took place.

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- Why do you think this particular moment was a challenge?
- How did you address or deal with this challenge?
- How does this challenge affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this challenge says about who you are as a person?

6. **Failure, regret.** Now I'm going to ask you about a failure or regret. Looking back over your entire love life up until now, please identify a particular scene or moment when you experienced a failure or regret. What happened, who was involved, and when in your story did it take place?

- What were you thinking and feeling?
- How did you cope with this failure/regret?
- Why do you think you perceive this moment as failure/regret?
- How does this failure/regret affect the overall story of your love life?
- What do you think this failure/regret says about who you are as a person?

General

Thanks for your responses so far. We're almost done here and only have a few more questions to go.

1. **Aspects of Self.** Often our love life is shaped by aspects of our lives that may be central to our identity or sense of self. Parts of ourselves might include our gender identity, race or ethnicity, cultural traditions, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, personality, ability status, mental/physical health, family, or anything else that is relevant to you. Looking back over your love life please describe the aspects of yourself that you feel shaped your love life story.

- When reviewing the scenes of your love life story, how do you feel these aspects of yourself played a role or impacted your story?

2. **Sex & Sexual Communication.** For some people, sex is a part of their love life story. What role has sex played in your love life story?

- How have your feelings towards sex changed over the course of your love life story?

3. **The next chapter.** The story of your love life includes key chapters and scenes from your past, as you have described them, and it also includes how you see or imagine your future. Please describe what you see to be the next chapter in your love life. In other words, what is going to come next in your story?

[Note to Interviewer: If person gets stuck on the impact of COVID ask them to think beyond this time]

4. **Central theme & personal development.** Thank you for this interview. I have just one more question. Looking back over your entire love life, with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, what do you believe is a central theme or idea that runs throughout the story?
 - What are your feelings about your (theme)?
 - Would you say there is a main take away from your love life story?

Before we finish, I'd like to ask you a few demographic questions. As before, you may refuse to answer any question or questions that you prefer not to answer.

1. How old are you?
2. How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
3. How would you describe your current gender identity?
4. Do you identify as transgender or nonbinary?
5. How would you describe your current sexual orientation?

Do you have any questions before we end the interview?

On behalf of myself and Dr. Jovanovic, we would like to thank you again for participating in our study. If you have any further questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to reach out to Dr. Jovanovic.

[Note to Interviewer: Additionally, if this interview brought up unwanted or negative feelings for you, Cal Poly's Counseling services are available, and their information can be found on the consent form]

Her contact information can be found on the consent form. Thank you so much and have a great rest of your day!

Appendix C. Coding Rubric**Theme 1: Empowerment**

Code	Topic	Definition
SC	Sex as a Choice	Deciding to or to not engage sex because of their own wants rather than acting on pressure received from society or a partner.
SNC	Sex Not as a Choice	Feeling obligated to have sex due to pressure from society or a partner.
KW	Knowing Wants	When one knows what they want from a sexual experience or encounter.

AW	Advocating Wants	When one advocates for what they want in the sexual relationship.
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Theme 2: Self- Esteem

Code	Topic	Definition
AN	Attraction Negative	Feeling negative about oneself due to someone being sexually attracted to them.
AP	Attraction Positive	Feeling positive about oneself due to someone being sexually attracted to them.
SN	Sex Negative	Feeling negative about oneself due to a sexual experience.
SP	Sex Positive	Feeling positive about oneself due to a sexual experience.