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“Enjoy Your Sexuality, but Do it in Secret”: Exploring Undergraduate Women’s Reports of Friends’ Sexual Communications

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Abstract

In the current study I used mixed methods to explore the messages that undergraduate women ($n = 415$) reported receiving from their male and female friends regarding sex and romantic relationships. Reports of friends’ messages varied widely and entailed both support for and criticism of sexual gatekeeping and sex positivity (e.g., sexual agency) and advice regarding sex and romantic relationships. Four individuals, including the author, developed codes to examine this wide range of responses to sexual expectations and prohibitions and independently and reliably coded the data. Response patterns illustrate that reports of female friends’ messages were typically longer and more nuanced than reports of male friends’ messages. Sex-positive messages and sexual gatekeeping messages were frequently reported simultaneously, and this pattern of co-occurrence illustrates the tensions between diverse discourses regarding women’s sexuality. The diversity in reports of friends’ messages challenges popular notions that friends’ influences are wholly problematic and highlights a need for more gender-focused sex education curricula.

Keywords

sex roles; college; communication; friendships; sexuality

Exploring Undergraduate Women’s Reports of Friends’ Sexual Communications
“You should enjoy being a female and not feel hindered by stereotypes and really enjoy your sexuality but do it *in secret*. Don’t be outward with sexual promiscuity.”

21-year old student, on what her *female* friends told her
about sex and relationships

“If you aren’t having sex within the first month, he is going to dump you. Guys like you based on how much you pleasure them. Guys are going to talk about things and joke about things with their guy friends.”

20-year old student, on what her *male* friends told her
about sex and relationships

From the passive, partner-pleasing ways of traditional femininity to the sassy, assertive sexuality portrayed in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (Kim & Ward, 2012), divergent discourses regarding female sexuality abound. Emerging adulthood is a central time for young people to explore multiple cultural discourses outlining the norms of love, work, identity, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). For young women, explorations of love may be influenced by the purported “hookup culture” that emphasizes casual sexual encounters and sexual experimentation (Bogle, 2008). However, young women’s sexual explorations may be complicated by traditional gendered sexual norms (Hamilton & Armstrong 2009). For women, sex within long-term, romantic, committed, and heterosexual relationships is most aligned with traditional femininity and considered ideal, yet it contradicts the hookup culture that is widely portrayed in entertainment media and ingrained in the popular imagination (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). How do young women in college negotiate these potentially conflicting sexual discourses? Many undergraduate women turn to their friends to clarify sexual norms and to seek guidance for sexual decisions (Holman & Sillars, 2012; Menegatos, Lederman, & Hess, 2010; Patrick, Morgan, Maggs, & Lefkowitz, 2011; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Indeed, young women report having more frequent, comfortable, and open discussions about sex with their same-sex friends than with their mothers (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). Because young women frequently turn to their friends for advice on sex and relationships, reports of friends’ messages may highlight the ways in which women conform, challenge, and/or cope with multiple discourses. What do friends communicate to emerging adult women about sex and relationships?

Friends as Sexual Socialization Agents

Only a few studies to date have focused specifically on the role of friends’ sexual communications on emerging adult women’s sexual socialization (e.g., Lefkowitz, Boone, & Shearer, 2004; Trinh & Ward, in press). Yet research on friends’ sexual communications is warranted because friends play a multifaceted role in sexual socialization. Friends serve as advisers, referents, and informants, and they provide opportunities for young people to enact the sexual scripts that they learn. For example, 72% of emerging adults reported meeting potential romantic partners while they are spending time with their friends, and 69% reported that they or their friends have formed long-term relationships with their friends’ help (Ackerman & Kenrick, 2009). Even when friends are not present to facilitate connections between potential partners, emerging adults report turning to them after the fact. For example, 98% of emerging adults reported that it is typical to talk to their friends after a hookup (Paul & Hayes, 2002). The functions of such discussions frequently entail providing support, advice, and validation (Morgan & Korobov, 2012).

It is not surprising that the specific content of young women’s conversations with their friends varies greatly. For example, undergraduate women, on average, report many discussions about dating; occasional discussions about fertility, condoms, contraception, and sexual behaviors and feelings; and one-time discussions about abstinence (Lefkowitz et al., 2004). Similarly, Levin, Ward, and Neilson (2012) found that undergraduate women reported minimal discussions about abstinence and more frequent discussions regarding positive sexuality (e.g., sex is fun) and the sexual double standard (e.g., unlike men, women who are sexually assertive, experienced, and unabashedly enjoy sex are typically perceived

as promiscuous, immoral, and troubled). Sexual risks and dangers were rarely discussed; for example, frequencies of discussions regarding sexually transmitted infections and date rape averaged between “none” and “once” (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). Discussions about sex and relationships with friends are not only diverse, but they can also be divergent. For example, undergraduate women reported frequent discussions about the importance of romantic relationships *and* the acceptance of casual sex (Fletcher et al., 2015; Trinh, Ward, Day, Thomas, & Levin, 2014). Although the diversity of sexual topics and expectations in young women’s sexual conversations have been noted, few have examined how such messages may vary depending on who is communicating to whom.

Survey research has typically overlooked or controlled for the gender of friends. Yet, ethnographic research demonstrates that same-sex friends, by and large, reinforce and regulate young people’s gender performances (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bettie, 2003; Smiler, 2012; Tolman, 2002). Other-sex friends may play a critical role in sexual socialization too; young people believe that having other-sex friends affords unique opportunities to learn about the other sex and to meet more other-sex peers (Hand & Furman, 2009). In fact, the “other” perspective is featured regularly in popular women’s and men’s magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*’s “Ask Him Anything” column and *GQ*’s “Ask a Real Live Lady” column. Undergraduate women reported receiving more messages promoting abstinence until marriage and the importance of relationships from their female friends than from their male friends, and they report that their male friends convey significantly more messages promoting recreational sex (Trinh & Ward, in press). Research on how female and male friends send different messages may highlight the ways in which women and men uniquely shape sexual socialization.

Diverse and Divergent Gendered Sexual Expectations for Women

The mix of sexual messages to women reflects the ongoing cultural evolution in sexual scripts. Traditionally, women are expected to be passive, pleasing, and relationally oriented (Tolman, 2002). Kim et al. (2007) described these gendered sexual expectations as a part of the “Heterosexual Script,” and Phillips (2000) labeled this type of femininity the “Pleasing Woman” discourse. These norms, however, may appear antiquated given recent cultural phenomena promoting new femininities that emphasize empowerment, individualism, and achievement among girls and women (Budgeon, 2014; Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013). In contrast to the “Pleasing Woman” who is devoid of sexual desire and agency and filled with selflessness, Phillips (2000) described the “Together Woman” prototype as the “modern” woman, who is self-reliant, assertive, and “entitled to accept nothing less than full equality and satisfaction in her sexual encounters and relationships” (p. 47). How are these divergent discourses of femininity reshaping sexual scripts?

Focus groups, interviews, and ethnographies have provided insight into young women’s understandings of complex and diverse gendered sexual norms, role, and expectations (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Bay-Cheng, Livingston, & Fava, 2013; Bogle, 2008; Gilmartin, 2006; Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004). Navigating what it means to be a sexual woman is complicated by the fact that a woman’s sexuality is tied to her morality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). From wearing a skirt that is

“too short” to having “too many” sexual partners, any “misstep” may result in a woman being ostracized and labeled for promiscuity (e.g., slut, whore, skank) (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Rahimi & Liston, 2009). It is not surprising that young women delineate numerous “rules” that regulate sexual and nonsexual facets of a woman’s life including dress, alcohol consumption, friends, decorum, and personality (Bogle, 2008; Hillier, Harrison, Warr, 1998). Despite all the rules, it remains unclear how young women can actively and assertively pursue their sexual needs and desires without being stigmatized.

The Current Study

Because young women and their friends come of age during the same historical period, they are likely navigating similar social contexts and norms. Therefore, discussions among young women and their friends regarding sex and relationships may be particularly nuanced. What kinds of messages do undergraduate women report receiving about being or becoming a sexual woman? Is respectability via sexual gatekeeping still a major concern for women? How are women advised by their friends to pursue their sexual needs and desires? The present study explored undergraduate women’s reports of their male and female friends’ communications regarding sex and romantic relationships via three specific aims. My first aim was to document the prevalence of specific values regarding sex and romantic relationships in undergraduate women’s reports of friends’ messages. My second aim was to test whether reports of messages women heard, differed between female and male friends. My final aim was to identify underlying themes in the sexual expectations undergraduate women face.

Method

Participants

Participants were 451 undergraduate women enrolled in a large, public university in the Midwest. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 22. Participants were recruited from the Psychology Subject Pool ($n = 310$) and from discussion sections of an Introduction to Developmental Psychology course ($n = 141$). Women from the Psychology Subject Pool took part in a large survey study on sexual socialization that sought to examine their use of social media (e.g., Facebook); time spent watching television genres (e.g., reality television); attitudes toward gender, sex, and sexual minorities; and experiences with digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration (e.g., threatened to post an embarrassing photo of one’s partner). Women from the discussion sections, however, only completed the open-ended questions of the aforementioned survey. All women received course credit for participation, and their responses were anonymous and confidential. Because participants from the Introduction to Developmental Psychology course were only asked to provide their age and gender on their forms, and all participants in the current study were women, only age differences between the two groups could be tested. Yet, given the limited age range, age differences in the prevalence of specific messages were not tested. Participants in the Psychology Subject Pool were, on average, younger than participants from the Introduction to Developmental Psychology course (19.15 versus 19.88 years old). This age difference

was unsurprising, given that the Psychology Subject Pool consisted of students in Introduction to Psychology, a prerequisite for Introduction to Developmental Psychology.

More is known about the Psychology Subject Pool subsample. Two hundred and eleven participants were White (68.0%), 54 were Asian (17.4%), and 21 were Black (6.8%). Only nine participants identified as Latino (2.9%), nine as Middle Eastern (2.9%), and five as multiracial (1.6%). Only one participant did not report her race/ethnicity. Two hundred and eighty-nine women (93.0%) identified as exclusively or predominantly heterosexual. Five participants identified as bisexual (1.6%), 2 as predominantly homosexual (0.6%), and three as exclusively homosexual (1.0%). Eight women did not respond (2.6%), and three women (1.0%) indicated that they were unsure of their sexual orientation. Parents' education, an indicator of socioeconomic status, was measured as the number of years of schooling completed. Participants, on average, had mothers who graduated from college ($M = 16.17$, $SD = 2.34$) and fathers who received some graduate school training ($M = 17.02$, $SD = 2.80$). Religiosity was measured with three items, each on a 5-point scale. Participants rated how religious they were (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*), how often they prayed (1 = *never*, 5 = *very regularly, at least once a day*), and how often they attended religious services (1 = *never*, 5 = *very regularly, usually once a week*). Responses across these three items were averaged, and participants, overall, were moderately religious ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.13$). Women rated their level of sexual and dating experience on a 10-point scale with the following anchors: 1 (*just starting out/virgin*), 3 (*some dating/virgin*), 4 (*1–2 sexual relationships and no longer a virgin*), and 10 (*have had several sexual relationships*). Participants, on average, had 1–2 sexual relationships ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 2.38$).

Procedures

I used open-ended questions to solicit reports of friends' sexual communications. Participants read the prompt, "Frequently, we receive messages about romantic relationships and sex from the important people in our lives, such as our parents and friends. Sometimes, these messages conflict, and sometimes they agree. What kind of messages have you received?" Participants then answered two questions "What did your male friends tell you about sex and relationships?" and "What did your female friends tell you about sex and relationships?"¹ Participants were instructed to write as many statements and messages as they could remember. Each participant's response represents their report, summary, and/or translation of their friends' communications. For brevity and clarity, I simply refer to participants' responses as reports.

Code Development

Following the recommendations set forth by Braun and Clarke (2012), code development was an inductive, deductive, and iterative process. I worked with three undergraduate research assistants to code and to analyze data. First, we each worked independently by

¹The survey contained two additional questions regarding sexual communications from mothers and fathers. Young people's relationships with their parents typically differ from their relationships with their friends, and the literatures on parental and peer influences and relationships each have related, yet unique, theoretical foundations. Given these distinctions analyses in the current study only focused on reports of friends' communications. We will develop hypotheses, code, and analyze the data from the questions regarding communication with parents at a later date.

reading a random sample of 80 responses to identify as many themes as possible. The second step involved collaboration; my undergraduate research assistants and I discussed all themes. The commonalities found across themes were used to form and revise initial coding schemes. These first two steps were done repeatedly for approximately 120 responses until saturation occurred, whereby no new additional themes were detected (Bowen, 2008). For the third step, each person independently used these coding schemes to code the same portions of data. In the fourth step, coding discrepancies were discussed, and codes were revised to enhance clarity and to capture greater breadth in the data. Steps 3 and 4 were done repeatedly until codes were no longer revised. A total of 13 codes were created. These codes are listed on Table 1.

Description of Codes

Thirteen codes were grouped into three main codes. The labels for the three main codes were selected and based on previous research regarding traditional femininity and sexual agency and align with the study's goal to explore the messages women report receiving about how they should and should not be sexual. I refer to the 13 codes as subcodes, and the three groupings of these subcodes as main codes. Refer to Table 1 for a description of the main codes, sub-codes, and examples of coded reports of friends' messages.

Main code 1: Sex Positivity—The first main code is *Sex Positivity* and is based on Philips' (2000) description of the "Together Woman" discourse. *Sex Positivity* was selected to explore women's sexual desire, agency, and challenges to traditional femininity. This main code includes discourses whereby sex is normative, shameless, and pleasurable. Because having casual sex may be less socially acceptable even if desired, this main code also included any mention that having sex outside of relationships is perfectly acceptable. There were four subcodes. Reports of messages that conveyed support for women's pursuit of their sexual needs and desires were coded as *Sexual Agency and Desire*. Reports of messages that conveyed that sex is enjoyable and fun were coded as *Sexual Pleasure*. Reports of messages that conveyed that sex is not serious were coded as *Sex is Casual*, and reports of messages that conveyed that having sex and having sexual desire are normal and natural were coded as *Sex is Natural*.

Main code 2: Sexual Gatekeeper—The *Sexual Gatekeeper* main code reflects the conventions that dictate when and under what conditions sex is considered acceptable for young women. Specifically, sex is viewed as acceptable within very narrow contexts: romantic, long-term, committed relationships, or marriage. Actual or perceived failure to meet the aforementioned expectations may result in young women being ostracized and labeled for promiscuity and immorality. Given these restrictions, reports of if-then messages about sex were common (e.g., *if you are in love, then you can have sex*). *Sexual Gatekeeper* was selected as a main code to explore the constraints on women's sexual experiences by capturing the variety of gatekeeping messages young women reported receiving.

Six subcodes captured the nuances in the conventional values and expectations that underlie traditional femininity. Three subcodes focused on the conditions that make sex acceptable. One subcode was *Abstinence until Marriage*. The second subcode was *Right Timing* and

referred to any reports of messages that encouraged young women to wait until they were older and/or until they were “ready.” The third subcode was *Wait for Love* and referred to any reports of messages that instructed a woman to not have sex until she is in love and/or to wait until she has found the person she wants to marry. Two subcodes focused on how sex is most appropriate in relationships. Reports of messages that explicitly prohibited hookups and that encouraged involvement in romantic relationships were coded as *Meaningful Relationships*. The other subcode was *Role of Sex in Relationships* and referred to any reports of messages that conveyed that sex is best when one is in a relationship and that sex strengthens a relationship. The last subcode was *Keep it Classy* and refers to the reputational consequences of violating gendered sexual norms and conventions that restrict women’s sexual explorations.

Main code 3: Instrumental Advice—The third main code, *Instrumental Advice*, consisted of all reports of messages that gave tips on how to optimize sex, relationships, and sexual health. *Instrumental Advice* was selected because young women turn to their friends for advice about sex and relationships (e.g., Morgan & Korobov, 2012). There were three subcodes. First, *Sex Advice* pertained to reports of messages regarding sexual techniques to enhance pleasure. The second subcode, *Sexual Health*, referred to all reports of messages regarding strategies to minimize sexual health risks. The third and final subcode, *Relationship Advice*, consisted of reports of messages that conveyed any advice about what one should do to initiate, maintain, or end a romantic relationship.

Coding Procedures and Analyses

After the codes were established, selective coding began so that all data were coded using the same coding schemes (Charmaz, 2006). Two pairs of coders coded all the data, independently of each other. Coding and analyses were done using *Dedoose*, a web-based mixed methods research program. A participant’s entire response to each question represented a unit of analysis. Each unit of analysis could receive up to four codes. The limit was set to four because preliminary coding trials indicated that most units of analyses received fewer than five codes. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen’s Kappa because pairs of coders were assigned a set of main codes and subcodes. Cohen’s Kappas are reported for each subcode in Table 1. When disagreements occurred, coders discussed and resolved coding discrepancies to come to an agreement.

Mixed methods analyses were used to achieve the specific aims. The first aim was to document the prevalence of undergraduate women’s reports of friends’ messages that conveyed specific sexual expectations. I calculated the percentages of participants who reported receiving messages for each main code (e.g., *Sexual Gatekeeper*) and the number of participants who reported messages for each subcode (e.g., *Sexual Agency and Desire*). To achieve the second aim of identifying whether women’s reports of communications varied by friend’s gender, I conducted McNemar tests for each main code and subcode. Because multiple tests were used, I applied Yate’s Corrections. For the third and final aim, I used thematic analysis to illustrate patterns found across young women’s reports of friends’ sexual communications. According to Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 57), thematic analysis is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of

meaning (themes) across a data set.... and allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.”

Results

Approximately 92% of women ($n = 415$) reported that they received messages about sex and relationships from their friends. Eight percent of women ($n = 36$) reported no communications on the topic of sex and relationships from female and/or male friends, and 75% of these women ($n = 27$) reported that they did not have friends or did not talk about sex and relationships with their friends. Some women reported receiving messages about sex and relationships only from their male friends ($n = 8$) or only from their female friends ($n = 79$). Fisher's exact tests were conducted to examine whether women who reported receiving messages from only male friends differed from women who reported receiving messages from only female friends. There were no significant differences for each main code. A total of 751 reports of friends' messages were coded.

Aim 1: Prevalence of Sexual Expectations in Reports of Friends' Communications

Young women reported receiving messages that promoted diverse sexual expectations and prohibitions. Frequencies and percentages for all reported messages from male and female friends are listed in Table 2. Results regarding female friends' sexual communications are presented first.

Reports of female friends' communications—Approximately 43% of women ($n = 175$) reported receiving *Sexual Gatekeeper* messages (e.g., “Wait till you're in a relationship. Look for good guys. Play hard to get. Don't make the first move”). Approximately 36% of women's ($n = 145$) reports of female friends' messages conveyed *Instrumental Advice* (e.g., “We usually talk about cute boys and flirting. Generally my friends think indirect, subtle approaches are preferred”). The least prevalent discourse was *Sex Positivity*, as 32% of women ($n = 130$) reported receiving these messages (e.g., “My friends love sex and everything related to it”).

Reports of male friends' communications—Approximately 41% of women's ($n = 140$) reports of male friends' communications consisted of *Sex Positivity* messages (e.g., “Definitely expressed concern and care. Still encouraged to go get it, do what I wanted, not necessarily what the guy wants”). Nearly 28% of women ($n = 98$) reported some form of advice from their male friends making *Instrumental Advice* the second most prevalent message (e.g., “My male friends advise me when or when not to text someone. Usually they advise me to be bold and go for it”). The least prevalent messages were *Sexual Gatekeeper* (e.g., “They say not to give in easily because it will not be fun or worth it for the guy to continue”). Only 22% of undergraduate women ($n = 76$) reported receiving *Sexual Gatekeeper* messages from their male friends.

Within each of the three main codes, reports of the most prevalent and least prevalent subcode messages were the same across female and male friends (see Table 2). Within the *Sex Positivity* main code, the most common subcode message reported was *Sex is Casual* (e.g., “They say sex is not a big deal and everyone does it in college”), and the least common

message reported was *Sex is Natural* (e.g., “They say sex is natural and nothing to be ashamed of”). Across components of the *Sexual Gatekeeper* main code, the most common subcode message reported was the *Role of Sex in Relationships* (e.g., “They say sex is for love, and makes you feel closer to your partner”), and the least common subcode message reported was *Abstinence until Marriage*. In terms of *Instrumental Advice*, *Relationship Advice* was the most common type of advice given (e.g., “Make sure he values your feelings and opinions. Trust your instincts”). Advice on *Sexual Health* was the least common type of advice (e.g., “Use Protection. Pregnancies can occur”). Statements coded as *Relationship Advice* from male and female friends were similar in the values they conveyed (e.g., “They say honesty is key and game playing is annoying”).

Aim 2: Gender Differences in Reports of Friends’ Communications

Some reports of communications varied between male and female friends. Because the data are paired, I conducted a McNemar’s test for each subcode and main code. Findings for all McNemar’s tests are reported in Table 2. There were no gender differences across the subcodes and main code of *Sex Positivity*. On the other hand, gender differences were found for the *Sexual Gatekeeper* main code and subcodes. More reports of female friends’ messages were coded as *Right Timing*, *Wait for Love*, *Role of Sex in Relationships*, and *Keep it Classy* than reports of male friends’ messages. Compared to reports of male friends’ messages, more reports of female friends’ messages were coded as *Sexual Gatekeeper*. Finally, in terms of *Instrumental Advice*, more reports of female friends’ messages were coded as *Relationship Advice* and *Sexual Health* than reports of male friends’ messages. Overall, more reports of female friends’ messages than reports of male friends’ messages were coded as *Instrumental Advice*.

Aim 3: Exploring Underlying Themes across Reports of Friends’ Messages

It is important to note that the prevalence rates on Table 2 do not take into account the fact that some messages targeted to emerging adult women were “mixed.” In other words, some women’s responses regarding friends’ messages received multiple subcodes across different main codes. For example, one woman wrote, “My female friends have always said to enjoy yourself while in college but don’t go overboard with sexual partners.” The first half of the message—“My female friends have always said to enjoy yourself while in college...”—was coded as *Sexual Pleasure*, a *Sex Positivity* subcode. The last half of the message—“...but don’t go overboard with sexual partners”—was coded as *Keep it Classy*, a *Sexual Gatekeeper* subcode. Because analyses that focus on the prevalence of “pure” messages likely missed the nuances in mixed messages, a thematic analysis was conducted for the final aim of exploring the underlying themes across reports of friends’ sexual communications. The thematic analysis yielded two major themes, and these themes are discussed in light of results that documented the prevalence of qualifiers.

Theme 1: Context—not desire—shapes sexual rules—The lack of consensus in women’s reports of friends’ communications regarding sexual norms was the rule rather than the exception. Approximately 58% of women’s reports contained words that qualified statements (i.e., “It’s okay if...”), signaled contrast or disagreement (e.g., “but”), and suggested a plurality of opinions and norms (e.g., “some say..., but others say...”). The

diversity and nuance in these messages partly stemmed from the fact that sexual desire was rarely attributed to women. In fact, only 18 (4%) participants reported messages from friends that acknowledged women's sexual desires, and only one of those messages conveyed clear and *unqualified* support for sexual agency (i.e., "My girlfriends tell me to do what I want, to not hold back, and to enjoy myself"). Because women's sexual desire was rarely acknowledged, young women were rarely advised to base their sexual decisions on their sexual desires.

Instead, participants reported reasons for sexual decisions that reinforced stereotypical notions that women are passive, relationally oriented, and devoid of sexual desire. For example, many women reported receiving messages about the need to evaluate how they feel towards their relationship before deciding to have sex (e.g., "My friends say no sex until you are in a really committed relationship and are pretty sure you will get married to that person"). Few women reported receiving messages about the need to evaluate how they themselves feel in the moment before deciding to have sex, and almost all of these messages focused on feeling ready, rather than feeling sexual desire and arousal (e.g., "My friends always say you should do it when you're ready but don't regret it and don't do it to just do it"). It is important to note that messages that promote caution and deliberation are not inherently antithetical to sexual agency. Indeed, encouraging women to consider how they feel, and what they want from a sexual partner and/or a sexual experience, is an exercise in sexual agency. Yet, friends' focus on relationship and partner factors illustrates the salience of traditional femininity.

The complexities regarding women's sexuality do not go unnoticed, especially among women. In fact, 87% of mixed messages ($n = 208$) came from reports of female friends' communications, whereas only 13% of mixed messages ($n = 32$) came from reports of male friends' communications. With the additional nuances in mixed messages comes length; the average length of women's reports of female friends' messages ($M = 21.8$ words, $SD = 12.36$) exceeded the average length of male friends' messages ($M = 16.1$ words, $SD = 10.89$), $t(414) = 10.38$, $p < .001$. Some reports of female friends' mixed messages reflected numerous sexual norms (e.g., "They say it's ok to hook up with a guy you like. It's alright to keep your standards high and not to settle. It's okay to wait to have sex"). Given these norms, it is unsurprising that undergraduate women recalled different pieces of advice (e.g., "Messages I have received include: wait until marriage for sex, wait until the right boyfriend for sex, and just have sex"). Some mixed messages reflected the diversity in sexual attitudes and experiences within one's group of friends. For example, one woman described her female friends as "a mix of having casual sex with no relationships and friends who were waiting for the right relationships." Religiosity was a noted point of difference (e.g., "Many of my friends think sex is normal and awesome, but my more religious friends think it is wrong"). Far from being one-note, undergraduate women's reports of female friends' communications were more complex than conservative or permissive.

Theme 2: Discretion is advised—Underlying the nuances in reports of friends' advice about sex and relationships is the limited and constrained support for women's sexual agency. As previously mentioned, only one woman's report was solely coded as *Sexual Agency and Desire*. Most reports of friends' messages blended advice, precautions,

sanctions, and/or divergent norms simultaneously. Specifically, reports of friends' advice on sex and relationships typically addressed one or more of the following issues: sexual double standard, sexual health risks, emotional consequences (i.e., "feeling used" and "taken advantage of"), and reputational costs of violating norms of femininity. The most common messages reported pertained to the sexual double standard. For example, one woman summarized her female friends' messages: "They say having sex when you are not in a relationship is skanky." It was clear that the taboo of casual sex primarily applied to women; one participant quoted her male friends, "Men can sleep around and it's a good thing, but when women sleep around, they're dirty." Ultimately, undergraduate women reported that they were rarely advised to take a casual approach to sex, let alone to have casual sex.

Ironically, friends' support for women's sexual experiences outside of relationships typically reinforced the sexual double standard. For example, one undergraduate woman wrote, "They say it's okay to be a 'bad girl' as long as I don't get a bad reputation." This statement is typical of many statements that express ambivalence towards violations of traditional femininity. The reassurance that it is acceptable for a woman to engage in potentially reputation-damaging behaviors is undermined by the fact that this support is contingent upon a woman developing some semblance of a sexual gatekeeper, by being covert. Secondly, the phrase "bad girl" reinforces the idea that these behaviors are immoral and that a woman's sexuality is linked, not only to her gender, but also to her morality. The numerous stigmatizing labels for women who are "bad" may make it difficult for women to feel unashamed when discussing their sexual desire and experiences (e.g., "I'm not trying to be a whore and sleep around, but there's nothing wrong with experimenting"). Many undergraduate women also reported being advised to be "safe," "careful," and/or "smart." Reports of these messages more likely served as veiled references to navigating romantic relationships and hookups than minimizing risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections. Indeed, few women ($n = 58$; 14%) reported receiving messages about sexual health risks, and even fewer women ($n = 6$; 1%) reported receiving messages that addressed specific forms of protection (e.g., birth control, condoms, regular testing for sexually transmitted infections). Without outright rejections to the sexual double standard, discretion may emerge as the primary response to diverse and sometimes divergent sexual expectations and norms. For example, one woman quoted her female friend, "You should enjoy being a female and not feel hindered by stereotypes and really enjoy your sexuality but do it in secret. Don't be outward with sexual promiscuity." Interestingly, this participant underlined "in secret" six times. Continuous conceptualization of women's enjoyment of their sexuality as promiscuity qualifies the support given for sexual experimentation and pursuit of sexual pleasure. Ultimately, young women rarely received messages that challenged traditional gendered sexual expectations.

Discussion

From "having fun" to "waiting for the one," reports of friends' messages to undergraduate women varied widely and hardly resembled the stereotypical portrayal of college "girls gone wild." This medley of messages that promoted romantic ideals, hookups, and safety illustrates the importance of sexual motivations and situational factors for undergraduate women's sexual decisions. Contrary to stereotypes regarding negative peer influences and

peer pressure, reports of friends' communications are not wholly permissive or risk-laden. Therefore, the suspicion and unease surrounding friends' influences in young people's lives may not always be warranted. Further, the reports of diverse sexual messages also demonstrate that there is no single sexual script. Not only do many sexual scripts co-exist, the varied interpretations of such scripts makes sexual communications particularly rich and nuanced. By analyzing retrospective reports of friends' sexual communications, the present study documents the prohibitions and expectations regarding young women's sexuality.

Three significant yet preliminary findings emerged from the data. First, the majority of undergraduate women reported receiving messages about sex and relationships from their friends, and overall, these communications were neither wholly permissive nor conservative. My findings align with previous research, whereby college students reported having more frequent and comprehensive conversations with their friends about sex and romantic relationships than they do with their parents (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007; Levin, Ward, & Neilson, 2012). The difference between the current study's more conservative characterization of friends' sexual communications and previous research's (e.g., Coley, Lombardi, Lynch, Mahalik, & Sims, 2013; Kenney, Thadani, Ghaidarov, & LaBrie, 2013) characterization of more permissive peer sexual norms may be due to pluralistic ignorance. That is, young people may consistently overestimate the extent to which they believe their peers have permissive sexual attitudes and take sexual risks (Chock, 2011; Holman & Sillars, 2012; Lewis, Lee, Patrick, & Fossos, 2007). This reality-perception gap likely closes with the consideration of closer friends. Indeed, Agnostinelli and Seal (1998) found that college students' ratings of their close friends' sexual attitudes were more similar to their own; that is, they believed their close friends held more responsible and less permissive sexual attitudes than the average college student. Because disclosure among friends is common, young people likely have a more accurate read on their friends' sexual experiences than their peers'.

The second significant finding was that many reports of female friends' messages addressed numerous contextual and situational factors surrounding hookups, romantic relationships, and sexual initiation. One possible explanation is that these diverse messages emerge due to the simple fact that relationships and sex are complicated. Indeed, adolescent girls and emerging adult women's reports on sexual motivations, consent, sex, and desire frequently reveal ambivalence towards sex and romantic partners (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Another possible explanation for this nuance and sensitivity to context is that women's sexuality has traditionally and continuously been policed. Friends collectively regulate adolescent girls' and undergraduate women's sexual reputations (Bamberg, 2004; Bogle, 2008; Kreager & Staff, 2009). Sexual respectability is bestowed upon women whose sexual experiences fit the narrow criteria of Rubin's (1984, p. 281) "charmed circle": "heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, and vanilla." *Sexual Gatekeeper* messages align with Rubin's (1984) "charmed circle," Kim et al.'s (2007) "good girl" coding scheme, and Phillip's (2000) "pleasing woman" discourse. Further, reports of female friends' sexual messages heavily focused on relationship and partner characteristics, which coincides with the notion that women's sexuality is "other-oriented...rather than independently meaningful" (Montemurro, Bartasavich, & Wintermute,

2015, p. 154). The proliferation of *Sexual Gatekeeper* messages suggests that being or appearing to be a “good girl” remains a significant task for many undergraduate women and their same-sex counterparts.

Conversely, undergraduate women typically reported that their male friends often encouraged them to “have fun” and to “just do it.” Male friends’ sex-positive messages run counter to research that demonstrates that undergraduate men endorse traditional sex roles and the sexual double standard more than undergraduate women (Allison & Risman, 2013; Fugère, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008). Yet the brevity of male friends’ messages makes it difficult to determine the extent to which male friends promoted sexual experimentation and hookups for women. Were these sex-positive communications simply a result of a flirtatious encounter, or were these men genuinely encouraging women to be sexually agentic? Regardless of whether messages from male friends were restrictive or permissive, the majority of men’s messages were simple. In fact, only 13% of all mixed messages ($n = 32$) came from male friends.

Regardless of the source, many messages to undergraduate women promoted safety and caution, and this is the third and final finding. Friends may restrict and sanction undergraduate women’s sexual experiences and interests. For young women, friends’ broad cautionary statements (e.g., “be careful”) may represent their attempts to encourage one another to make safe and efficacious sexual decisions without “parenting” one another. In their study of 141 college students, Menegatos et al. (2010) found that most college students would advise their female friends to take minimal or moderate sexual risks. An alternative possibility is that friends’ words of caution may serve as attempts to police and sanction women to adhere to gendered sexual norms. Milhausen and Herold (1998) found that in a sample of 174 undergraduate women, nearly half (46%) believed that women judged other women’s sexual behaviors more harshly than did men. More clarity is needed to discern the nature of friends’ precautionary messages.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations of using retrospective reports of friends’ sexual communications, and the findings should be interpreted with caution. First, such reports are prone to bias; what is recalled is unlikely to be exactly what was conveyed. A second limitation is the lack of details regarding who the friends were; it was unclear whether these friends were best friends or mere acquaintances. Given that sex is often a sensitive subject, it is likely that undergraduate women’s reports of communications differ between their closest friends and their acquaintances. A third limitation is the lack of context in reports of friends’ sexual communications. Because participants were not interviewed, reports of ambiguous messages (i.e., “be safe”) could not be clarified. Similarly, the tones of friends’ purported messages are largely unknown. One rare exception was a participant’s report of her male friends’ message to her which was, ““You’re still a virgin!?”—with a tone of contempt.” A fourth limitation is that the timing of the messages is unclear. It is possible that recent messages may be more influential than messages conveyed in early adolescence. Finally, the homogeneity of the sample did not permit any testing of class, sexual orientation, and race differences or other characteristics that might moderate findings.

Future research should consider the contexts that underpin friends' sexual communications. What sparks a conversation about sex among young women and their friends? From how they look to what they do, women's sexuality is so heavily policed that there are ample opportunities for young women to solicit advice from their friends. These opportunities for sexual communications to arise reflect the dynamic and ongoing nature of sexual socialization. Although sexual communications are more frequent among same-sex friends than other-sex friends (Trinh & Ward, in press), more research is needed on the role of other-sex friendships in sexual socialization. Indeed, young people indicate that speaking with their other-sex friends exposes them to a new perspective (Hand & Furman, 2009). Whereas the present study focused on a binary (male versus female friends), future research should consider how friends' gender identities shape how sexual scripts are conveyed, mocked, denied, or subverted. More research on diverse groups of women is critical to understand how sexual expectations are class- and race-based. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) have documented how class shapes undergraduate women's hookup tendencies. Given that some women of color are stereotyped as hypersexual and/or exotic (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Cho, 1997), and reputation management is a common concern (Bogle, 2008), race likely shapes the advice and warnings that women convey to one another.

Practice Implications

The desire to protect young people's sexual health is widely shared, yet there is little public consensus regarding what are the best policies and programs to implement. Findings from the present study point to the need to bring gender to the fore because many messages reported by undergraduate women were gendered. For example, messages promoting sexual gatekeeping are based on dominant gendered sexual discourses that equate masculinity with sexual prowess and insatiability. Sex education curricula should teach students to be literate and critical thinkers regarding gender and power (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Controversial, albeit critical, discourses regarding consent and sexual agency can also be addressed. Haberland and Rogow (2015, p. 516) referred to such curricula as the "empowerment approach to comprehensive sexuality education" (for an example, see Grose, Grabe, & Kohfeldt, 2014). Young people who understand how dominant sexual scripts are created may be better equipped to advocate for their sexual needs and desires, regardless of whether or not they conform to societal expectations about what women or men should do.

Because young people work with their friends to co-construct their understanding of sexual and romantic scripts, peer-led discussions about sex, gender, and power may yield insight into the situations and conditions that facilitate or hinder girls' sexual agency. For example, interviews with young women between the ages of 14 and 17 illustrate the complex role alcohol plays in fostering and hindering women's sexual agency (Livingston, Bay-Cheng, Hequembourg, Testa, & Downs, 2012). For young women in that study, benefits of drinking alcohol included lowering their inhibitions toward wanted sex and provided an excuse for unsanctioned behaviors (e.g., blame the alcohol and not oneself), whereas consequences of drinking alcohol included being impaired, being less able to refuse unwanted sex, and feeling more regret after sex. Research on focus groups highlight the ways in which young people inform and contest what they believe is "true," "normal," and "wrong" about sex and relationships (Bay-Cheng, Livingston, & Fava, 2013; Charmaraman & Mckamey, 2011). By

listening to these discussions, educators and practitioners can identify and address common concerns and questions that young people have and work with them to explore their complexities.

Conclusions

Reports of friends' sexual messages were solicited via open-ended questions, and the nuances in these purported messages highlight the need to expand the assessment of sex-related topics to capture the importance of contextual and situational factors that underpin sexual decisions and indecision. The ambiguities in reports of sexual communications identified here illustrate the need for additional empirical attention to young people's *interpretations* of sexual messages. The separate assessments of female and male friends' sexual communications afford a rare yet important glimpse into the different perspectives and pressures undergraduate women face in navigating complex and competing discourses on gender and sexuality.

Both popular media and empirical studies have typically focused on friends' negative effects on young people's sex lives. However, the current study shows that friends' influences are complex. Nuances in young women's summaries and translations of friends' purported messages illustrate that young women are not passive, uncritical recipients of sexual messages. Instead, young people make meaning of the messages they receive about sex and relationships. Probing young women's understandings of what it means to be sexual affords us the opportunity to evaluate and unpack the rich, gendered, and complex expectations and prohibitions that we, as a society, convey.

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Table 1

Codes for Reports of Friends' Messages Regarding Sex and Relationships

Main codes	Subcodes	Cohen's Kappa	Examples
Sex Positivity	Sexual Agency and Desire	0.79	My girl friends tell me to do what I want, to not hold back, and to enjoy myself.
	Sexual Pleasure	0.78	They say it's fun and feels good.
	Sex is Casual	0.75	They always advocate having sex casually. They say that it is fun and not a big deal.
	Sex is Natural	0.91	They say it is natural and nothing to be ashamed of.
Sexual Gatekeeper	Abstinence until Marriage	0.96	Wait until marriage or you will regret it.
	Right Timing	0.79	My close male friends have told me to not have sex until I am ready, even if the guy is pressuring me.
	Wait for Love	0.85	They say to wait for the right guy.
	Meaningful Relationships	0.79	They discourage me from sex and hookups. They want me to have more meaningful relationships.
	Role of Sex in Relationships	0.75	They say sex is for love, and makes you feel closer to your partner.
	Keep it Classy	0.80	They say to keep your number of partners low so you don't seem like a whore.
Instrumental Advice	Sex Advice	0.92	One message was a boy in my hall was telling a group of girls the best way to give a blow job.
	Sexual Health	0.95	My guy friends say I should use protection and that it is okay to say no if I don't want to.
	Relationship Advice	0.86	They say don't seem over interested, play it cool, and don't ask "where is this going?"

Table 2

Comparison of Friends' Sexual Communications from Men and Women

Main Codes	Subcodes	Women (<i>n</i> = 407)	Men (<i>n</i> = 344)	<i>p</i>
Sex Positivity				
	Sexual Agency and Desire	18	17	0.96
	Sexual Pleasure	48	51	0.80
	Sex is Casual	60	73	0.23
	Sex is Natural	8	10	0.79
	Total	130(32%)	140(41%)	0.44
Sexual Gatekeeper				
	Abstinence until Marriage	15	6	0.08
	Right Timing	20	6	0.01
	Wait for Love	24	4	<0.01
	Meaningful Relationships	29	18	0.10
	Role of Sex in Relationships	49	24	<0.01
	Keep it Classy	42	19	<0.01
	Total	175(43%)	76(22%)	<0.01
Instrumental Advice				
	Sex Advice	45	31	0.10
	Relationship Advice	86	61	0.01
	Sexual Health	42	16	<0.01
	Total	145(36%)	95(28%)	<0.01

Note. The totals for each theme represent the number of women who received messages from any number of subcodes. These totals are adjusted for double-counting; therefore, the totals are not sums across prevalence rates of subcodes because a woman can report receiving any number of subcodes.