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# Saving Sex for Marriage: An Analysis of Lay Attitudes Towards Virginity and its Perceived Benefit for Marriage

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## Abstract

How do young people interpret virginity loss, and does saving sex for marriage have any socially constructed benefit for marriage? This study answers this question using data obtained from a peer-led Facebook group with more than 175,000 participants, mostly in African countries, particularly Nigeria. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze 100 public wall posts and 3860 comments posted on the group between June 2018 and May 2019. Four distinctive interpretations of virginity loss comprising the gift, precondition, stigma, and process emerged from the data. These interpretations were also gendered, such that a woman's virginity was interpreted as a gift but a stigma for men. The wall posts and comments further suggest that saving sex for marriage may have some culturally sensitive benefits, including trust, and marital sexual satisfaction. Altogether the findings expand the current understanding of the diverse perceived benefits of virginity that move beyond honour and respect to more complex benefits like trust in a union, sexual satisfaction and ultimate satisfaction in marriage.

**Keywords** Sexual abstinence · Marital satisfaction · Women's health · Social media · Facebook · Africa · Virginity

## Introduction

*Nothing gives you honour and respect like when you keep yourself till after your wedding-Comment from a group member.*

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Premarital sexual activity among adolescents and young African adults is generating intense discussion in sexuality research primarily because of the risks of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmittable infections in this population group (Biddlecom et al., 2008; Ghebremichael & Finkelman, 2013; Gyan, 2018; Melhado, 2009; Mensch et al., 2006). There has been a continuous emphasis on providing young adults with sexuality education in part to mitigate the implications that premarital sexual activity has for young adults' health and development (Singh et al., 2005). Throughout Africa, there are various reports on the effectiveness of sexuality education on improving sexual behaviours and treatment-seeking behaviours of young adults (Fawole et al., 1999; Kalembo et al., 2013; Mba et al., 2007; Okonofua et al., 2003; Samuels et al., 2013).

However, many sexuality education across African countries solely promotes sexual abstinence until marriage as a strategy for the prevention of sexually transmittable infections, while other means of safe sex practices such as condom use and non-penetrative sex are often ignored and excluded in sexuality education as a result of religious and social norms (Chirawu et al., 2014; Mukoro, 2017; Van Dyk, 2017). Nonetheless, unprotected sexual activity is never safe, whether before, during, or outside of marriage. As a result, sexual abstinence until marriage cannot adequately protect women in settings where socio-cultural norms, as observed in many African countries, propagate unbalanced sexual relationships that disadvantage women and expose them to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and unplanned pregnancies (Ajuwon et al., 2002; Hageman et al., 2010; Jewkes et al., 2015; Wojcicki & Malala, 2001). More importantly, the continuous emphasis on sexual abstinence until marriage means that young people have to wait until marriage, not when they want or feel empowered to have safe, healthy and satisfying sexual relations (Berer, 2006).

Research on public attitudes towards premarital sexual abstinence shows that it has varied meanings across African cultures (Bhana, 2016; Cinthio, 2015; Mehrolhassani et al., 2020; Mulumeoderhwa, 2018; Palit & Allen, 2019; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). In many African countries, virginity is symbolic of pride, dignity, and respect despite being heavily disputed since emphasizing virginity is likely to promote and sustain stereotypical constructs of virginity. Many cultural norms that encourage virginity also motivate girls to be desired and pursued if they are virgins (Bhana, 2016). A woman's virginity is deemed essential to attract "a good man" (Bhana, 2016). The importance of virginity and chastity are also promoted through several national, cultural and religious programmes—an activity that could pose severe consequences than good for young girls and women if untamed. Simultaneously, the value of virginity and the existing discourse around it could have additional unintended consequences for the same people they intend to protect. For example, saving oneself for marriage has been a key to negotiating bridewealth in many African countries, and non-virgins may be stigmatised in the community and by their in-laws (Bhana, 2016; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). High rates of early marriage in some countries have been attributed to early traditional norms that discourage premarital sexual activity (Nour, 2009).

Today there is immense pressure for young women to remain virgins until marriage, even though this may be challenging given the high levels of sexual violence

and sexual coercion in African countries (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002; Yaya & Bishwajit, 2018). More importantly, the consistent use of hymeneal blood or other means of virginity testing may put women at risk of adverse experiences despite ample proof that it has no scientific validity (WHO, 2014). The continuous emphasis on premarital sexual abstinence in African countries necessitates further studies to illuminate how underlying social norms crystalize female virginity and the pathways through which saving sex for marriage is perceived to be beneficial for marriage. Despite this reality, very few scholarships in African countries have examined the conceptualizations of virginity and its culturally implied benefits for marriage. This study examines the representations of virginity and its perceived benefits for marriage.

### Love, Virginity, and Marriage

Several relevant studies in sub-Saharan Africa and globally have examined the motivations for premarital sexual abstinence among young adults (Abboud et al., 2015; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo et al., 2005; Izugbara, 2007). Adolescents boys in rural Nigeria reported that imposition, choice, self-control and danger were the common motivations for abstaining from sex until marriage (Izugbara, 2007). Similarly, diverse interpretations of virginity loss have been examined in the literature. In a landmark in-depth case study of young adults in the United States, Carpenter (2001) identified three cognitive frameworks for interpreting virginity loss encompassing gift, stigma, and process. Virginity has also been constructed as a sign of the intactness of a woman's honour, and it was widely held that women's sexuality should be confined to and expressed in the context of marriage (Izugbara, 2007). While these studies offer some insights into the interpretations of virginity, they do not deeply explore the meaning making of virginity nor provide a clear perspective of the socially implied marital benefits of saving sex for marriage.

A small body of knowledge has quantitatively examined the relationship between premarital sexual experience and subsequent marital dissolution among women, men, and couples. In the United States, Teachman (2003) observed that multiple intimate premarital sexual relationships were associated with an increased risk of marital dissolution. In contrast, premarital sexual activity or cohabitation limited to a woman's husband was not associated with an elevated risk of marital disruption (Teachman, 2003). Evidence from another study of Lithuanian couples suggests that no significant relationship between premarital sexual experience and marital satisfaction among men and women (Legkauskas & Stankevičienė, 2009). However, as with the previous study, multiple premarital sexual partners were associated with a lower likelihood of marital satisfaction among men in the same sample. While these studies are both in developed countries and suggest that premarital sexual activity may be associated with marital satisfaction, they do not offer a clear picture of the pathways through which virginity or its loss may contribute to marriage satisfaction.

Despite the limitations of previous studies, several common themes emerge from the literature that provides context for the current study. Chief among these is that the conceptualization of virginity or its interpretation can shape how individuals

respond to its loss and the marital experiences of non-virgins. In line with the gift framework proposed by Carpenter (2001), not being a virgin at the consummation of a marriage may be a problem in communities where virginity is treasured. As Carpenter (2001) notes, interpreting virginity loss as a gift is a double-edged sword that can protect against unintended pregnancy or sexually transmittable infections on the one hand but also reinforce adverse consequences for women who are unable to offer the gift to their partner. Men who interpret female virginity as a valuable gift that should be given to one's spouse may be disappointed if the wife does not bleed at the consummation of the marriage and may result in the humiliation of the wife for the entire duration of the marriage (Mehroolhassani et al., 2020; Mulumeoderhwa, 2018).

Furthermore, virginity loss at the consummation of a marital union could help build a more meaningful connection and strengthen intimacy, a relation that may, however, be conflicted in the absence of virginity (Palit & Allen, 2019). In a recent study, young men in the United States emphasized that virginity loss in marriage is more than penetrative sexual activity and entails more emotional engagement, including love, care, trust and feelings of respect in the presence of virginity but shame and disrespect in the absence of virginity (Palit & Allen, 2019). There is a limited account of sexuality, virginity and its implications for marriage in Africa. In the Republic of Congo, young adults perceive girls who marry as virgins as trustworthy individuals and that virginity serves as a basis for a successful marriage (Mulumeoderhwa, 2018). Accordingly, male partners reciprocate virginity by respecting and trusting their virgin wives (Mulumeoderhwa, 2018).

These rhetoric interpretations of saving sex for marriage are rooted in hegemonic masculinities further perpetuated through local and national gender and cultural norms, religious beliefs, media, peer, family, and societal expectations (Blinn-Pike et al., 2004; Carpenter, 2011; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This socially idealized form of masculinity shape a sense of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" gendered behaviour that appears natural, ordinary, and inevitable (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hanke, 1990; Messerschmidt, 2019; Speer, 2001). It perpetuates a sexual double standard that empowers a heterosexual man's entry into manhood by being non-virgins and taking girls' virginity, whether in marriage or outside of marital union (Bhana & Anderson, 2013; Mehroolhassani et al., 2020). In addition, these interpretations of virginity loss have transactional value and provide men with an opportunity to demonstrate their dominance over women and reaffirm their honour and masculinity while controlling women's sexuality (Abboud et al., 2015; Christianson et al., 2020). More importantly, Bhana (2016) argues that virginity could be explored from a cultural currency lens. Men who cannot harness the social prestige associated with marrying a virgin may punish their partner for not being a virgin until marriage (Mulumeoderhwa, 2018). In Iran, failure to provide evidence of virginity on the wedding night has been linked to neglect in marriage and infidelity (Kaivanara, 2016). Taken together, findings from the current body of literature suggest that women who marry as non-virgin may be paying heavily for not being a virgin, especially in societies where it is highly treasured. However, due to the scant research and a lack of conceptual clarity, little is known about the variety of social benefits linked with saving sex for marriage, particularly in African

countries. Nonetheless, understanding how young people conceptualize this issue is critical to alleviating the unintended adverse consequences of sexuality education that solely emphasize sexual chastity until marriage.

## Present Study

Inspired by recent scholarship on the topic, the present study seeks to shed light and extend the literature on virginity and its socially constructed benefit for marriage. We concentrate on two key questions: How do young Africans conceptualize virginity loss, and what are the socially implied benefits of saving sex for marriage for women and men? In answering these questions, we address several shortcomings of the literature on gender, sexuality, culture, and women's well-being. First, relatively little research has explored the subjective meanings of virginity loss and its implications for marital satisfaction in African countries. The preponderance of literature on sexuality and virginity has focused on its embodiments and meanings. To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the first to directly investigate how young African adults crystalize virginity and its perceived benefits for marriage. Secondly, analysing public wall posts and comments on a partially diverse peer-led Facebook group that facilitates discussions about sexuality allows us to evaluate young adults' views in a natural environment without interference and without inducing social desirability. An awareness of the representations of sexual abstinence in an online environment not monitored or moderated by sexual health experts or researchers would not only disrupt current societal-driven portrayals of sexual abstinence until marriage but also help in addressing adverse cultural consequences of not marrying as a virgin and enrich sexuality education efforts targeting young people.

Furthermore, the focus of this research on sexual abstinence until marriage and its perceived benefits for marriage expand current understandings of how deeply rooted socio-cultural beliefs might negatively affect the health of men, women, and families. Studying the stereotypical attitudes of young people to sexual health information can also create a better understanding of how sexual health interventions could pose adverse unintended risks and reinforce existing gender norms if the cultural contexts of such interventions are not taken into consideration (Adato et al., 2016; Guttman & Salmon, 2004; Lenzi et al., 2019; Stoebenau et al., 2016). This analysis is especially crucial in Sub-Saharan African settings where culture and religion play a pivotal role in sustaining gender power inequalities within relationship dynamics and often as barriers to disease prevention (Harrison & O'Sullivan, 2010; Moyo, 2004). More precisely, almost all Africans are religious (Joshnloo & Gebauer, 2020). The levels of religious salience are also high in sub-Saharan African countries, with over 75% in every country surveyed reporting religion as very important (Marshall, 2018). Multiple studies have also highlighted how religion constitutes African societies' main fabric and is intertwined with Africa's socio-political and economic development (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). Religion is also a crucial component of 'Africanness' and could contribute to moral, socio-political and economic transformation (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). Religious rules also guide life conduct within social groups, and it is often organised and widely practised in communities. For

example, non-formative forms of sexuality like premarital sexual activity or homosexuality are often widely considered as not only “unAfrican” but also “not Christ-like” or “unIslamic” (Dreier et al., 2020; Ndzovu, 2016; van Klinken & Obadare, 2018).

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The data were drawn from a public peer-led Facebook group for sexual health promotion among young African adults. Data from a Facebook group was used because Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform by many people of various ages worldwide, including Africa (Brusse et al., 2014; Yonker et al., 2015). The public Facebook group was created in 2016 by an individual and comprised of young adults aged 15 years and above who mostly reside in Africa. According to data from Facebook insights (see Table 1), there were 175,858 participants in the group at the time of this study. The majority of these were living in Nigeria (91%), with a lower percentage of participants from other African countries, including Ghana (0.6%), South Africa (0.4%), Kenya (0.3%), and the Republic of Benin (0.3%). About 51% of the participants were women, and about three-quarters were young adults aged 18–34 (76%).

**Table 1** Group Demographics as of May 31, 2019 ( *Source: Facebook Group Insights* )

Characteristics	Number of Members	Percentages (%)
<i>Country</i>		
Nigeria	160,037	91.00
Ghana	989	0.56
South Africa	692	0.39
Benin	442	0.25
Kenya	434	0.25
Other African	2229	1.27
Non-African	10,835	6.16
Country unknown	200	0.11
<i>Sex</i>		
Women	90,096	51.23
Men	85,737	48.75
Unknown	25	0.01
<i>Age</i>		
13–17	1812	1.03
18–24	64,978	36.95
25–34	68,853	39.15
35+	40,215	22.87
	175,858	100.0

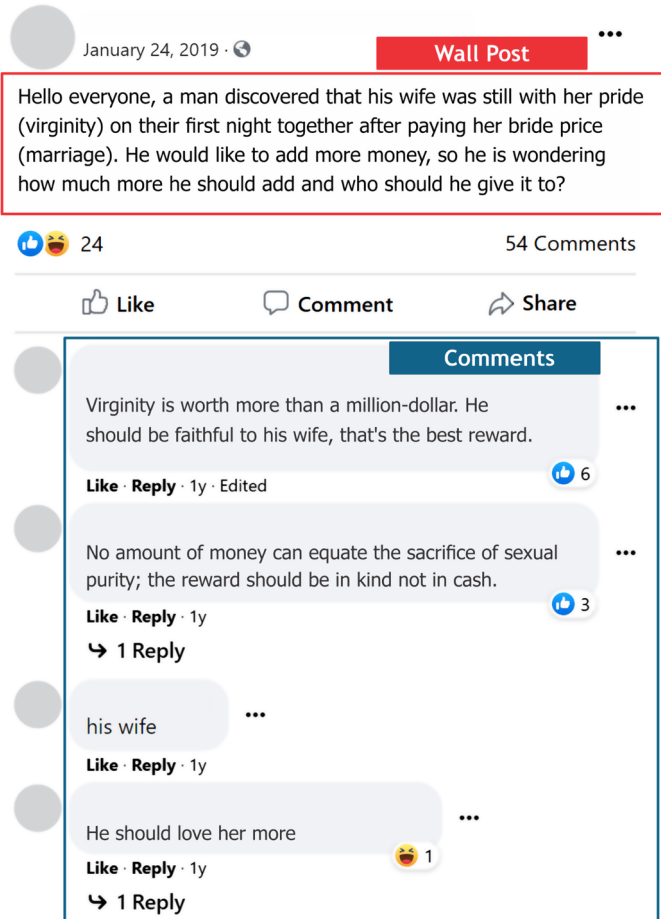


Fig. 1 An example of wall post and comments related to marriage and sexuality on the group

The group's demographic diversity made it a valuable resource for studying diverse perspectives on the pathways through which saving sex for marriage might be beneficial for a marriage. Similarly, all participants in the group were free to post messages and comments in the group allowing a diverse perspective from all participants. A total of 3533 peer-generated sexuality messages shared on the group between June 1, 2018, and May 31, 2019, were retrieved using a data scraping application installed directly on the group with administrative rights. Consent to retrieve and analyse the data was obtained from the group creator. This paper presents only a sample of 100 public wall posts with 3860 comments (herein referred to as data extract) related exclusively to sexuality, dating, and marriage. A snapshot of the data extract, retrieved and analysed in this study, is presented in Fig. 1. All wall posts and comments were in English.

A significant benefit of analysing textual data from social media is that it allows data to emerge organically rather than according to the researcher's constraints. This arguably provides a unique insight into the problem without the influence of the researcher. This way, the wall posts and comments generated from the group might be akin to data produced via a loosely structured focus group in which participants are given the scope to raise topics of importance to themselves in response to an initial topic posed by the researcher. Nonetheless, the anonymity of data from the group did not permit further analysis of the textual data beyond the aggregated demographic data available via Facebook insights (Malesky & Ennis, 2004). As a result, it is virtually impossible to analyze interactions (wall posts and comments) on the group in relation to the content creators' demographics and their virginity status, both of which may be beneficial for this study. For example, gender differences in the interpretations of virginity loss have been reported in previous studies wherein women were more likely to interpret virginity as a gift while men were more likely to view it as a stigma (Carpenter, 2001). Nevertheless, the analysis of the wall posts and comments still provided some nuanced gendered perspective in how virginity is interpreted as well as how it may be beneficial for a marriage.

## Empirical Analysis

All the wall posts and comments retrieved from the group were first stored in Microsoft Excel and subsequently analysed in Atlas.ti v. 8. To code and analyze the data, we relied primarily on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) and Braun et al. (2019) reflexive method for thematic analysis. This analytical approach is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) within a large qualitative dataset, including social media data. One of the advantages of this reflexive approach to thematic analysis is that it is theoretically flexible and can be used within different frameworks to answer distinct types of research questions, including questions related to people's experiences which is the locus of this study. It is also a useful method for summarizing key features of a large data set and examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights to produce a clear and comprehensive analysis of the problem under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An inductive coding approach was used to identify emergent themes and commonalities in how posts and comments on the group conceptualize virginity and its perceived benefits for a marriage. To enhance the analysis and reporting of the study findings, we followed the six steps of credible thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017). The analysis of the data extract began with an initial familiarisation with the data that involves reading and re-reading the texts in the datasets to become deeply familiar with the texts. During this phase, we also documented reflective thoughts and ideas about the coding topic that we referred to in the subsequent phases (Sandelowski, 1995). Succinct labels that capture the entire dataset's key features were subsequently generated and revised in the second phase and as the coding process proceeded. During the production of codes,



we gave full and equal attention to each data extract, including those that diverged from the data's dominant idea.

The generated codes were then pooled together to identify and evaluate the viability of potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). The creation of the themes was data-driven to produce a detailed description of the overall data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, four main themes and multiple subthemes were generated, including those that were marginally relevant for the study as they play a significant role in enriching the study (King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). The coded data extracts for each candidate theme were reviewed accordingly to ensure an articulate discourse pattern. This involved deleting code that substantially overlaps with other codes. The selected themes were further refined to capture a set of ideas that accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final phases of the analysis involved the defining and naming of themes. Consideration was given to how each of the themes fits into the overall story about the textual data and the overarching aim of the study. The themes were considered final after all the data had been thoughtfully read and the coding reviewed (King, 2004). During this stage, three main themes emerged with multiple subthemes. The themes were organized and ordered in a way that best reflects the data.

## Results

Participants in the group painted a remarkably diverse picture of virginity loss and its perceived benefits for marriage. The findings comprise three main themes: (1) describing virginity loss and (2) the perceived benefits of saving sex for marriage (3) gendered dynamics of the benefits of saving sex for marriage. The first theme describes how wall posts and comments on the group describe virginity and how they interpret its loss. This theme offers one vantage point to explore the ambiguity surrounding premarital sexual activity and how the participant crystalizes virginity. Furthermore, the interpretations of virginity loss may also influence how they reciprocate its lack, particularly in marriage. The second theme outlines the perception of the underlying processes through which saving sex for marriage may be culturally constructed to be beneficial for marriage, as reflected in the data extract. The theme explores the potential cultural consequence of virginity loss for marriage and sexual identity. The last theme examines the gendered dynamics of virginity and how it is perceived as beneficial for a marriage. More importantly, this theme explores the sexual double standards that emphasize virginity for women but virginity loss for men and the perceived implications of such experiences for marriage.

## Describing Virginity Loss

### What is Virginity?

Many wall posts and comments in the group describe virginity in terms of “penetrative sexual intercourse”, “the absence of a hymen”, and “the shedding of blood”. In a like manner, some group members agree that a woman could be a secondary virgin if she abstained from sexual activity after a first penetrative sexual experience. As reflected in multiple posts and comments on the group, the term “secondary virgin” was exclusively reserved for women who are victims of sexual abuse or those who pledge to abstain from sexual activity until marriage after a penetrative sexual activity. However, some other members of the group argue that such considerations, especially rape, could be used as an excuse to attract a lesser sanction in marital union.

Furthermore, the lay descriptions of virginity as highlighted earlier emphasize the gendered aspect of virginity and the double sexual standard that emphasize chastity only for woman but not their male partners. Some comments on the group suggest that male virgins could be detected based on their “approach” during sexual intercourse. Those with this view describe male virgins as being naïve and inexperienced at sexual activity. Multiple posts and comments on the group call for a need to emphasize the importance of male chastity, while others believed that it was more important to emphasize female virginity as male virginity would not yield any significant outcome. These descriptions are further highlighted in the comments below. More importantly, some members in the group justify the lack of emphasis on male virginity because “men do not have a vaginal, so virginity belongs to ladies and not guys”.

*Miss/Mrs poster, must all the talks about virginity be preached only to the women? Why can it also not be preached to the male folks? You see, we are the ones making people think that only women should keep their virginity and men can lose their virginity anytime, anywhere. We should be sensible and say the fact also to the men.*

*It is good to preach virginity to the male folks, but it will not make the required impact because a man will not disvirgin a woman without her permission. Hence, the need to hit it more on the female folks.*

Another dominant description of virginity emerged in how the members of the group differentiate between virginity in terms of penetrative sexual intercourse and sexual purity in terms of non-penetrative sexual activity such as kissing, smooching, anal sex, among others. Sexual purity as reflected in the group is all-encompassing, and many wall posts acknowledge its difference from virginity by highlighting that a young adult can be a virgin (penetrative sexual abstinence) but not sexually pure. As indicated in the comment below, some group members further encourage young adults to avoid “sinning against their own body” by being “all-encompassing”, that is, become a sexually pure virgin.

*Virginity goes beyond protecting only the hymen. You can be a virgin, but your breasts may have been fondled since you do not allow penetration. There is a concept of purity, which implies that a lady is a virgin and has not experienced any forms of romantic activities, and no man has accessed any part of her body. Any virgin that watches porn is not a virgin because the person is no longer sexually pure. Do not masturbate, let your boyfriend finger you or your girlfriend give you a blow job, watch porn, use sex toys. You might be a virgin and do all of these but not sexually pure.*

### Interpreting Virginity Loss

As reflected in the comment below, many wall posts emphasize that virginity is a precious and valuable gift that should not be given anyhow but only to one's spouse:

*If you are still a virgin, my dearest sisters, do not waste it because if you give it to your boyfriend, he will not appreciate it, but if you give it to your husband, he will never forget it for the rest of his life. As an adage says, "virginity is a special gift to your husband on your wedding night, not a birthday present to your boyfriend. Use your days wisely.*

Members of the group who interpreted virginity loss as a gift distinguish virgins from non-virgins in various ways. Virginity was described mostly in terms of a woman's pride, dignity, and a precious thing that should be given to one's husband. In a like manner, virgins were described with multiple words, including being "tear rubber" and "brand new", while non-virgins were described as being "cheap", "second hand", "used and dumped", and "useless". Several wall posts in the group suggest that those who save sex for marriage have a high level of self-determination, self-will, good morals, conduct and character. As highlighted by a comment on the group, being a virgin [female] means that: "the lady has the wisdom to overcome sexual tricks and not have sex with a non-marital sexual partner, the self-control to resist sexual urge while being unmarried and the discipline to stand out in a world where many young girls are engaging in premarital sexual activity". Among other features, the data extracts also relayed that virgins are decent, obedient and respectful.

On the contrary, some members of the group argue that virginity should be interpreted as a **precondition** for happiness in marriage, not a gift. A group member mentioned that virginity is not a favour or benefit to any party [oneself, spouse or his/her family]. Instead, couples can expect to attain marital fulfilment if they fulfil a set of preconditions, including abstaining from sexual activity until marriage. As reflected in a wall post in the group:

*Virginity is not a gift; it is a precondition. Suppose you want to get a scholarship; the usual conditions are that you must not be a recipient of another award (not have had sex). That is a precondition; you cannot say that not receiving another award (sexually abstinent) is a gift to the scholarship board (husband) or your affiliated institution (parents and in-laws). No, it is not. One*

*thing that scholarship seeks to achieve is to alleviate the financial burden of students. So that state of not being a beneficiary of another award makes you benefit more from the award, and the impact is greatly notable. Whereas if you get the scholarship as a beneficiary of others, you are less likely to feel the same way.*

Further, virginity was interpreted in terms of stigma. Some wall posts describe virgins (more precisely male virgins) as naïve, inexperienced, and deficient in sexual prowess—an undesirable identity that could motivate males to want to discard the status immediately. This description of virginity also coincides with those who interpreted virginity as a process. To many members of the group who interpreted virginity as such, losing one's virginity (more precisely among males) is part of a process or activity that helps to give one's partner some sexual satisfaction in marriage. As reflected in the comment below, some male members of the group noted that prospective sexual/marital partners (often females) avoided them because they were concerned that virgin males might not meet their sexual needs. In a like manner, some wall posts and comments from some group members suggest that some females would be unwilling to marry a male virgin as he might be unable to sexually satisfy them in marriage.

*I asked the ladies I had previously dated why they ended the relationship because none of them told me that I maltreated her or that she had a problem with my attitude. The ladies [five] made it clear that they cannot marry a virgin man because they do not know if I can satisfy them sexually since I have no experience. I will not lie to you ladies who have helped me narrow my criteria in search of a virtuous wife; I cannot lower my standards.*

### **The Perceived Benefits of Saving Sex for Marriage**

Participants in the group were divided in their thoughts about virginity and its perceived benefits for marriage. Most significantly, some participants noted that character, not virginity was salient for marital bliss. Many authors of the wall posts and comments stressed that virginity alone would not benefit a marriage but also good virtues and character. Others contend that virgins are chaste but often lack respect, are timid, impolite, uncultured, aggressive, unforgiving and deficient in essential characteristics for marital bliss. This is further reflected in a comment on one of the wall posts on the group:

*Some ladies who brag about virginity are somewhat timid, some impolite, uncultured, and aggressive. While they brag about their virginity, that is all they have to offer, forgetting that virginity ends on the wedding night, but extra oil (good virtues) is what will keep the marriage going.*

Other participants in the group who interpreted virginity in terms of a gift nevertheless identified multiple pathways through which saving sex for marriage may be advantageous. As highlighted in the wall post and comments below, various members of the group believe that men who are gifted with their wife's

virginity would be expected to reciprocate in multiple ways, including being faithful to the marriage vows, love and respecting the wife, giving her a peace of mind among several others. All of these are perceived to be pertinent for happiness in marriage.

*Hello everyone, a man discovered that his wife was still with her pride (virginity) on their first night together after paying her bride price (marriage). He would like to add more money, so he wondered how much more he should add and to whom it should be given.*

*No amount of money can equate to the sacrifice of sexual purity; the reward should be in kind, not in cash.*

*Virginity is worth more than a million dollars. He should be faithful to his wife; that is the best reward.*

*I think it should recelbrate it to encourage others*

*The only thing he can do is to love, trust, respect her.*

*In a situation like this, there is nothing the man may offer the woman in life that can equate or compliment the virginity than to give her peace, rest of mind, and fidelity till death do them part. The woman can also enjoy the prizes for a long time till death separates them if she has moral discipline and godliness.*

As noted by another author, “it all boils down to the primary aim and preference of the husband.” Men who see virginity as a gift and cherish it “will never be happy with his wife if she is not a virgin.” In describing the multiple ways in which saving sex for marriage may contribute to marital bliss, some group members leveraged some of the perceived features of virgins and virginity, such as self-control, discipline, and others. Among many other perceived benefits of virginity, the wall posts and comments also suggest that sexual satisfaction in marriage, partner’s marital fidelity, a lower likelihood of partner control, among others, are some perceived benefits of saving sex for marriage. In the sections below, a detailed explanation of each of the perceived benefits is highlighted.

### **Respect, Honour, Love**

Among several perceived benefits of saving sex for marriage, respect, honour, and love were the most mentioned. Many wall posts and comments in the group suggests that men are most likely to respect and offer “extraordinary” love to their virgin wives. This may especially be salient for men who treasured virginity and interpreted it as a gift. As a member of the group highlighted, “it is the dream of every man to have a tear rubber wife”. For example, men may be more inclined to respect their wives, having exuded disciplined, self-control and wisdom to abstain from pre-marital sexual activity.

*Do you think any responsible man will be happy to marry a lady that another man has already used and dumped? That is why any man that marries a non-virgin can never respect and value his wife as the one who marries a virgin.*

Women who marry as virgins are also perceived to be respected by their spouses, their in-laws, and the community at large. Many wall post accentuates that women who marry as virgins can train their children to abstain from sexual activity while using herself as an example in such circumstances. As a result, the male partner would respect her more. A member of the group shared an experience with a female student who was a victim of sexual abuse and punished because her mother had some premarital sexual experience and, as a result, were punished unjustly by the father:

*Their daughter escaped rape at school by a youth Corper (teacher), but her friend was raped. When the matter was reported, the Corper denied it. The school management believed him and tagged the girls as bad girls. When the girl's father was informed about it, he sent the girl and her mother packing. He said that the girl wants to continue from where her mother stopped and that he would never accept that. If her mother had married as a virgin, all of that would not have happened because her father will trust her mother to raise her well. Imagine what the innocent girl is going through just because her mother did not marry as a virgin.*

### Partner's Trust

Many wall posts and comments alluded that virginity is “a gateway to trust that births a solid love which results in a happy home”. As a result, women who marry as virgins were most likely to be trusted by their partners. Trust in such circumstances include the trust that their partner will not engage in marital infidelity in the presence or absence of adversities. Considering that many wall posts in the group suggest that virgins have high discipline and self-control, the same is perceived to be essential to abstain from infidelity in marriage. As such, men whose wives are not virgins at the time of marriage may be unlikely to trust their virgin wives to not engage in marital infidelity regardless of whether they were or were not the premarital sexual partner. For example, non-virgin women who marry their premarital sexual partner may equally not be trusted as non-virgins who marry a man who was not their premarital sexual partner. Some members of the group argue that the inability of the woman to restrain her husband from sexual activity before marriage is an indication that he will not restrain other men.

*Sex outside marriage has a lot of adverse side effects, suspicions being one of them. Most men and women that have had sex outside marriage often find it very difficult to trust each other when they are married, even if they engaged in it with each other! There will be a lot of suspicious and negative thoughts running through their minds, especially whenever their partners are not with them. Some men will not allow his wife to get a job involving frequent travels because he does not trust her to stay sexually faithful to him. Some people cannot cope with the fact that their spouse came back an hour later than usual. There would always be this inner feeling that their partner is unfaithful to*

*them. Because of their past sexual escapades, people like these find it difficult to trust their partners. Such people hardly experience true peace even when they eventually get married because they have proven themselves to have self-control and restrain. When you are used to disciplining your appetite daily, you will not fall cheaply into sexual and emotional temptations.*

In the same way, some wall post examines partner trust in the face of adversity. For example, a comment on the group highlights that virginity before marriage could also enhance trust in a marriage, especially when faced with hardships such as difficulty conceiving or illnesses:

*Take a look at my friend's aunt. She has been married for 16 years without a child. They have done several medical check-ups, and nothing has been reported to be medically wrong with either of them. The man is still clinging to God to date to bless the womb of his wife. He also understands that the wife did not have an unsafe abortion that may have affected her reproductive ability. He encourages her every time and makes sure she does not get worried.*

Many thoughts about trusting one's marital partner emerge from the desire to own the partner and knowing that they are their partner's only lifetime sexual partner. These perceptions also result from the belief that women cannot forget their first sexual partner even after marriage. Some participants affirm that women are likely to remain attached to their first sexual partner even after marriage and maybe engage in marital infidelity with the same if circumstances permit (such as living in the same city, neighbourhood or compound).

*My brother, any girl that does not cry and shout on her wedding night, is not a virgin. Choose wisely, do not allow them to deceive you. She will tell you that she has forgotten about her first sexual partner and cannot return to him after marriage. My brother, it is a lie. Nothing like first love in a woman's life, and nothing will make her forget and hate the man that disvaginized her. After marriage, pray that she does not see the guy again. If not, once she sees the guy, she will sleep with him again and again, so marrying a non-virgin is like marrying someone's wife, take it or leave it.*

## **Sexual Satisfaction**

Multiple posts and comments on the group imply that virgins report the highest level of sexual satisfaction and fidelity in marriage. Some wall posts and comments attempt to link non-virginity with having a wide vaginal canal and is perceived to result in sexual dissatisfaction in marriage. Some members of the group believe that as a result of past sexual experience(s), the non-virgin partner already has a "yardstick" and a reference point for comparison of "sexual performance" in marriage. Those who marry as virgins, on the other hand, are perceived to have the potential to learn how to make love to their spouse and with equal sexual strength. Likewise, a female virgin that marries a man with a small-sized penis may not complain about

sexual satisfaction while a woman with a wide vaginal canal will complain because she is already “loosed”.

*If you get married as a virgin, you will not compare anyone sexually to your spouse. You are content with any performance you see. Others would have to compare with more than 100 people with whom they have had sex. If a man and a woman marry without indulging in sex until marriage, it will not be an issue, even if the sexual activity only lasts for two minutes. If she has not had sex, it does not matter how small your manhood is as a man; you will be enough for her. However, if she is not a virgin, no matter how big or long your manhood is, you cannot guarantee her to stay, keeping her or satisfying her. This can lead to extramarital affairs and, if not nipped in the bud, the collapse of the marriage*

### **Gendered Dynamics of the Benefits of Saving Sex for Marriage**

Beyond identifying some of the perceived benefits of saving sex for marriage, the wall posts and comments on the group also highlight important gender differences in how virginity may be beneficial for marriage, especially between couples. For example, various perspectives from the group suggest that marital bliss is most likely in unions in which both partners are virgins since both partners will have the “joy” of learning from each other. An example of this perception is presented in the wall post below.

*A virgin bride and a virgin groom have the special joy of learning together from no one except each other. On their wedding night, the groom is happy that his bride has not had sex with another man, and she is glad that he never had sex with other girls.*

On the contrary, the adverse consequences of not marrying as a virgin may be exacerbated if the husband is a virgin and the woman is not a virgin at the union’s consummation. Some group comments suggest that a virgin man at marriage would never be happy with his wife if she is not a virgin. More importantly, if he considers virginity as a gift. On the contrary, multiple wall posts and comments also suggest that a union in which only the male partner is a virgin is better than a two-partner virgin union. Some participants who interpreted virginity as a process reflect that the male partner needs to have some sexual experience for the wife to be sexually satisfied in marriage. In the same way, those who interpreted virginity as a gift emphasized that a non-virgin spouse (often male) will cherish the virgin (usually female) spouse more because he receives a valuable gift that he is not able to give. He is also expected to reciprocate in kind.

*Sometimes, when two virgins marry, they will not appreciate each other when only one partner is a virgin. There is usually high respect for one’s partner when one has made a mistake by having sex before marriage but is fortunate to marry a virgin because the partner has what they lack.*



Lastly, a common theme that emerged in all of the gendered dynamics of virginity and marriage is the emphasis on female chastity until marriage. In all of the couple's dynamics, there was at least an emphasis on the woman being a virgin, while there are mixed perspectives regarding male virginity. However, this view may be challenging considering that a non-virgin bride may have been coerced or "deceived to drop their guards down" (have penetrative sexual intercourse) with a non-marital male sexual partner under several circumstances, including to keep a relationship and an expression of love in romantic relationships. Others may have also lost their virginity as a result of previous experience of sexual abuse.

*Many ladies were deceived by men they thought will marry them; they were deceived into dropping their guard. Many guys walk away from ladies simply because the ladies refused to give them sex; some are even tempted to give away their virginity to keep the guys. No one has the right to condemn another when you do not know their stories.*

## Discussion

In several African countries, abstinence until marriage is the focus of many sexual and reproductive health messaging. Several studies have shown that such messages minimize young people's exposure to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Multiple studies have examined the conceptualizations and lay attitudes towards virginity (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo et al., 2005; Carpenter, 2001; Izugbara, 2007; Mulumeoderhwa, 2018; Palit & Allen, 2019). A large body of literature from the United States and other developed countries have also quantitatively examined the relationship between premarital sexual experience and diverse aspects of marital satisfaction and stability (Haseltonu & Buss, 2001; Legkauskas & Stankevičienė, 2009; Teachman, 2003). However, far less is known about the socially constructed and perceived benefits of premarital sexual abstinence or virginity. This study fills this gap in the literature and, in so doing, contributes to the literature on sexuality and marriage in multiple ways.

A key contribution of this study is its fine-grained analysis of wall posts on a peer-led Facebook group to elucidate how interactions on social media could reflect dominant cultural narratives about gender, sexuality, and culture. Several themes emerged from the analysis, including the conceptualization of virginity, its perceived benefit for marital bliss and how these are patterned by gender and relationship dynamics. As highlighted in this study, many ideas about virginity emphasized the gendered and double sexual standards that promote and value virginity for women but not for men (Blinn-Pike et al., 2004). First, the wall posts and comments suggest that "the absence of a hymen" and "the shedding of blood" signified virginity loss for women while there is no such physical marker for men. This description of virginity loss is consistent with the literature (Abboud et al., 2015; Carpenter, 2011) and are rooted in the hegemonic masculinities that reinforces men's dominance over women and promotes sexual double standards, where virginity is perceived as

more valuable – and more identifiable – for females than males (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Connell's (1987, 1995) theory of masculinities shed light on this gendered interpretation of virginity. Accordingly, "Hegemonic masculinity" is a dominant and socially idealized form of masculinity because they shape a sense of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" gendered behaviour that appears natural, ordinary, and inevitable (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hanke, 1990; Messerschmidt, 2019; Speer, 2001). This form of masculinity functions within a topography of orthodox morality and legitimizes patriarchal, hierarchical gender structures via the subjugation of women and other types of masculinity in the social system (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Renold, 2010). The relationship between hegemonic masculinity and sexual behaviour has been studied extensively in the past (Currier, 2013; Dalessandro et al., 2019; Diefendorf, 2015; Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; Miller, 2016; Pascoe, 2013; Shakiba et al., 2021). Hegemonically masculine men are deemed to have an uncontrollable and unquenchable sexual desire. At the same time, women are considered less sexual, expected to be virgins and are policed by assessing their hymen (Wilkins, 2009). This is further evident in the ways that the members of the group describe the gendered dimension of virginity.

Although many members of the group agree that virginity loss was considered possible only through penile-vaginal intercourse, an expanded definition of virginity was also reflected in several wall posts on the group. Some members of the group also focus on social and subjective constructed definitions of virginity loss that includes non-penetrative sexual activity. For example, participants in this group used the term sexual purity to describe no kissing and romantic relationships—a concept closely related to the spiritual dimension of virginity (Palit & Allen, 2019). Members of the group also did not consider non-penetrative sexual acts as a violation of virginity but consider it a form of impurity. This description of virginity presented in the accounts of young adults is consistent with the literature. Scholars have generally described virginity in terms of sexual and subjective dimensions (Blinn-Pike et al., 2004; Carpenter, 2002, 2011; Chambers, 2007; Medley-Rath, 2007).

In our analysis, we also observed the multiple descriptions that participants give virginity loss. Most notably, participants use the terms respect, discipline, among others. These descriptions are consistent with scholarship on the topic and literature on sexuality in Africa in which young people who have sex premaritally are dubbed as irresponsible, spoiled or ungodly (Izugbara, 2007; Lenzi et al., 2019). As previously noted, premarital sexual abstinence is rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, which dubbed the acts sinful, immoral, and wrong (Izugbara, 2007). This finding is consistent with (Bhana, 2016) in South African townships in which girls described deep, internalised cultural connections between virginity and respectability and community identity. On the contrary, participants use derogatory words to describe non-virgins, including someone who is sexually loose, used and dumped, among others.

The interpretations of virginity and virginity loss also reflect how hegemonic masculinities motivate girls and women to be bullied when they deviate from normative sexual behaviours and feminine gender presentations such as abstaining from sexual activity until marriage (Messerschmidt, 2012; Miller, 2016). Surprisingly,

young people who should be key for delivering comprehensive and less threatening sexuality information are observed in this study to be reproducing existing dominant binary gender roles, norms and moralistic positions on gender roles and sexuality. While this pattern of bullying may be conceptualized as a “youth problem,” the patterns also indicate attitudes and ideologies that may be pervasive among adults, the wider community and a reflection of social inequalities (Corsaro, 1992; Klein, 2012).

Our research also paints a clearer picture of the social benefit of saving sex for marriage than prior studies. We found a similarity between the interpretations of virginity loss on the group and the interpretative framework of virginity and virginity loss proposed by Carpenter (2001, 2002). More importantly, the gift and the process framework resonated with how most of the wall posts on the group interpreted virginity loss. The double sexual standard is also reflected in the way that participants in the group interpret virginity loss. Virginity loss for women was interpreted mostly in terms of a gift but shame for men. These findings are consistent with the literature on virginity and sexuality. Among young males in the United States, about one-third of the males viewed virginity as a gift (Carpenter, 2001). In the Republic of Congo, female participants viewed virginity as a gift given to the husband (Mulumeoderhwa, 2018). A woman who has never had sex is seen as innocent and pure, while a man who has never had sex is portrayed as inexperienced (Palit & Allen, 2019). A few members of the group also reiterate that virginity may be a precondition to attain satisfaction in marriage, further confirming the central premise of this study about the possible benefit of virginity.

The members of the group diverged in their perceived marital benefits of sexual abstinence until marriage. While some wall posts on the group suggest that virginity is beneficial for marriage, others emphasize that a man can look past virginity and focus on the girl’s conduct and reputation before marrying her. Among the several benefits of saving sex for marriage, the wall posts highlight the wife’s adornment, respect, trust from the marital partner and sexual satisfaction. Women who married as virgins were perceived to be highly adorned and respected by their partners. This finding corresponds with the only study of the representations of sexual abstinence among rural Nigerian adolescent males (Izugbara, 2007). Prior studies have suggested that in settings where virginity is highly valued, virginity preserved until marriage is symbolic of honour (Cinthio, 2015) and prestige such as higher bride-wealth. The finding that virgins are likely to be trusted is inconsistent with findings in the literature (Mulumeoderhwa, 2018). Mulumeoderhwa (2018), for example, argues that the resulting lack of trust often generates misunderstanding, arguments and conflict between partners. Women who do not bleed during their first sexual intercourse in marriage may suffer humiliation.

Interestingly, participants in the group believed that premarital sexual experience might affect couples’ marital sexual satisfaction. This perception contrasts to a study of sexual and marital satisfaction among American couples, which observed that premarital sexual experience and premarital cohabitation (with each other or someone else) was not associated with husbands’ and wives’ self-reported sexual satisfaction (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). Some also believe that low marital sexual satisfaction because of premarital sexual experience could affect couples’ overall marital

satisfaction or marital infidelity. This finding is consistent with a study of American couples, in which adults who were married to a satisfied spouse were more likely to have higher sexual satisfaction than those married to a spouse that was dissatisfied with the current union (Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

As reflected in the quotes and a prior study, premarital sexual experience may affect marital sexual satisfaction by altering individuals' perception of sexual activity and comparisons with previous sexual partners (Legkauskas & Stankevičienė, 2009). Some prior studies have also suggested that premarital sexual experience may make marital sex less "special", in part because men tend to find their partners less physically attractive after first-time sexual intercourse (Haselton & Buss, 2001). Marital infidelity could also act as a cost and consequence of sexual dissatisfaction among couples (Liu, 2000; Previti & Amato, 2004; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). For instance, using the law of diminishing returns, Liu (2000) showed that infidelity is more likely to occur among those with low sexual satisfaction, while marital infidelity could also cause sexual dissatisfaction for both spouses (Previti & Amato, 2004; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010).

The high premium placed on virginity before marriage, as demonstrated by the wall posts analysed in this study, impacts the lives of unmarried young women in significant ways, particularly considering the high level of self-reported sexual activity in several African countries (Amo-Adjei & Tuoyire, 2018). These narratives also significantly influence and limits girls' sexual subjectivities, including their perceptions of themselves as sexual beings and their ability to make informed decisions about their sexuality and health (Schalet, 2010). Several studies have shown how sexual double standards and other gendered discourses on sexual morality, such as slut-shaming non-virgins, impact girls' relational lives (Crawford & Popp, 2010; Kreager & Staff, 2009; Miller, 2016). Without providing young people with comprehensive sexuality education, young women may suffer grave sexual health consequences in later life even if they are sexually abstinent until marriage (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). For example, university students in Nigeria with some sexual experience had a higher self-efficacy for condom purchase and use than those who self-reported to be sexual abstinent (Ajayi & Olamijuwon, 2019).

Another challenge with emphasizing sex abstinence until marriage instead of comprehensive sexuality as emphasized in the narratives on the group is that young people are not prepared nor informed and may fall victim to the very same things that they were being protected from – "sexual temptations". In their study, Diefendorf (2015) found that how young Christian men negotiated their masculine identities prior to marriage tend to remain in potentially disruptive ways. The inability to fully navigate their sexuality before marriage based on the informed decision rather than denial, seeing sex as something evil or a model of temptation and accountability, positions these men to be unprepared for the sexual lives after marriage, albeit now with little support (Diefendorf, 2015).

Finally, we attempted to offer some compelling evidence regarding the conceptualizations of virginity, but this study is not without limitations. One such limitation is the sample composition. The majority of the participants were from Nigeria. As such, most of the messages and interactions on the group may have been dominated by young adults in Nigeria and may more closely reflect the Nigerian

culture. This, however, does not mean that participants from other countries or cultures were restricted from posting on the group. Lastly, several perceived benefits of saving sex for marriage were identified in this study but evaluating the magnitude of these perceptions among young African adults or the general African population is beyond this study's scope. Furthermore, examining the actual relationship between virginity and the perceived benefits is beyond the scope of this study. As a result, it is anticipated that several future studies will follow this study to provide deeper insights into the associations between saving sex for marriage virginity and some of the perceived benefits identified in this study using robust and nationally representative survey data.

Awareness of such relationships may provide a richer understanding of the magnitude of these beliefs and whether these beliefs about virginity and marital bliss cuts across the different socioeconomic groups. For example, gender differences in the interpretations of virginity loss have been reported in previous studies wherein women were more likely to interpret virginity as a gift while men were more likely to view it as a stigma (Carpenter, 2001). Despite this reality, the anonymity of data from the group did not permit such analysis beyond the aggregated demographic data available via Facebook insights. Nonetheless, we reckon that analyzing masculinity from women's perspectives may provide valuable insight into women's contribution to the construction and maintenance of these perspectives. In the past, masculinity has always been viewed as something generated and enacted by men, positioning women as mere consumers of masculinity rather than active agents in its construction and reproduction. However, it is also likely that women conform to and preserve components of emphasized femininity to attain some of the specific benefits outlined in this study, such as respect and honour from their spouse and his family.

## Conclusion and implications

This study has attempted to illustrate the potential for understanding the complexity of social issues using data from social media platforms like Facebook. Evidence that emerged from this study showed that saving sex for marriage may have some culturally sensitive benefits, including trust and respect from the marital partner, marital sexual satisfaction, and possibly women's experience of intimate partner control and violence. The narratives described in this article further highlight several issues that may be of interest to researchers and policymakers. As highlighted in this study, highly effective and culturally sensitive sexuality education is needed to help young people attain sexuality esteem without posing adverse effects on their health and well-being. The multiplicity of views about abstinence elicited by this study shows that it is dangerous to continue to endorse policies that do not support holistic knowledge about sexuality to all young people. The derogatory manner in which members of the group described non-virgins calls for adequate strategies in addressing masculine ideologies that motivate girls to be bullied for not conforming to normative sexual behaviour. Such traditional norms – in the context of high pressure to

offer sex as an expression of love and in settings with high levels of sexual violence place adolescent girls and young women in a precarious situation. The findings further highlight the need for engaging young adults in sexuality discussions, particularly on platforms like social media that emphasize bi-directional information. As we have shown, such engagements can uncover dominant stereotypes in the community that may put women at risk of adverse sexual health.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the non-medical human research ethics committee at the University of the Witwatersrand (H19/02/25). Additional efforts were also made to comply with all ethical standards in retrieving and analysing the data. To protect the identity and enhance participants' confidentiality in the group, all quotes used in this study were rephrased. The data extract also does not contain any personal or identifying information of the authors.

**Informed consent** A waiver of consent for authors in the network was obtained from the ethical review board since obtaining permission from every content creators in the group is practically impossible. Despite this, written permission was obtained from the group's creator before retrieving data from the group.

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