

2009

## The portrayal of teenage sexuality in young adult literature

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## The portrayal of teenage sexuality in young adult literature

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#### Abstract

The focus of this study was an investigation in to how teenage sexuality is portrayed in young adult literature. The purpose of this research was to investigate the portrayal of teenage sexuality within young adult literature in the United States. The methodology of this study was a quantitative content analysis of literature intended for young adult readers. Twenty young-adult books with teenage sexuality as a theme and a publication date within the last ten years were randomly selected from the following lists: 2009 Young Adult Library Services Association (Y ALSA): Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers, Best Books for Young Adults, including the 2008 thematic list entitled Sex is... This content analysis includes the type of sexual activity of prominent characters, risk factors or influences in the characters' lives, and ramifications following sexual activity. The majority teenager characters level of sexuality was sex, 100% of teenagers had one or more influential factors for sexuality in their lives, and emotional ramifications were the most common consequence of sexual activity, abstinence to sex.

THE PORTRAYAL OF TEENAGE SEXUALITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A scantily clad librarian painted across the cover of *School Library Journal* (see Figure 1) could make even the most liberal librarian's eyes widen.

*Figure 1.* JPEG Image of librarian. Source: Article by Kelly Czarnecki and Matt Gullett *School Library Journal* (2007).



Does this sensual illustration on the cover of a professional review source, no less, reflect our society? Perhaps this societal view is also reflected in young adult literature. It may be increasingly common for young adult literature to include teenagers engaging in sexual activity.

#### Background

Adolescence comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means to “grow into adulthood” (Kagan, 1998, p. 10). Adolescence is a time of change: personally, physically, and socially. This time period involves identity formation including the possibility of beginning sexual activity. While teens may want love or romance, they likely do not have the life experience to face sexual decisions with potential long-term responsibilities (Wells, 2006).

Exploring sexual activity in young adult literature and prior research about sexual activity of teenagers in society will provide a compass for this country's culture

surrounding teenagers and sex. Young adult literature may reflect or reinforce ideas about teenage sexual activity. This makes for a compelling comparison between teenage sexual activity in literature and reality.

The American Library Association supports intellectual freedom. The Library Bill of Rights states:

Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation (ALA).

Library materials should not be censored. The collection should include controversial topics from a variety of viewpoints. Materials should not be limited to one viewpoint but reflect balance in the collection. Sexuality as a theme does not inherently constitute justification for denying access, according to the principles of intellectual freedom. Like other controversial topics, sexuality is of interest to adolescent students and libraries serve these students' interests and information needs by including high-quality books on this topic.

### Conceptual Framework

Casual attitudes toward teenage sex and a variety of influences and ramifications surround teenage sexuality. Sexual activity is accepted more casually in current society than in past decades though the consequences are the same (Rinehart, 2000). A myriad of risks, motives, and beliefs affect teenage attitudes about sex and sexual behaviors. Ramifications include physical and emotional problems. Rinehart (2000), in her article "Losing Our Promiscuity," found her interview with two teenage girls who were sexually active to be indicative of the times including "the sea change in sexual attitudes and

practice of the past 20 years, a shift of epic proportions” (p. 34). Several influences may contribute to this change in attitude.

Teenagers are influenced by a variety of factors. These include but are not limited to media, family, peers, and cultural background. Meanwhile, teenagers may be physically driven to have sex but not necessarily financially, mentally, or emotionally ready for its possible results (Stine, 2007b).

Sexual activity among teenagers has emotional and physical consequences including potential STDs and pregnancy. According to Wells (2006), emotional and physical consequences result from the high incidence of girls indicating their babies were unplanned. “Between 1940 and 1998, the rate at which girls 10-14 had their first babies almost doubled. . . usually classified as 'nonvoluntary' or 'not wanted'” (p. 93). Rinehart (2000) referred to casual sex as increasingly common and a moral fallout: “With irresponsible, illicit sex, all the worst possibilities in human relationships take shape: hurt, betrayal, jealousy, rejection, a growing inability to trust” (p. 34). Statistics from Stine (2007a) showed:

- \*Percentage of teens who say they are at little or no risk of STDs: 84%.
  - \*Estimated number of teens that get an STD each year: about 9 million.
  - \*Ratio of sexually active teens that will get an STD this year: one in four.
  - \*Percentage of sexually active teens that have never been tested for STDs: 80%.
- (p. 23)

Furthermore, according to Stine (2007b), “Sexually active couples have an 85% chance of pregnancy within the year if they do not use contraception” (p. 10). When one considers teenage sex, this is an overwhelming societal responsibility.

### Problem Statement

Teenagers may be increasingly portrayed as promiscuous in young adult literature.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate the portrayal of teenage sexual activity within young adult literature in the United States. The literature will be selected from current awards lists.

## Hypotheses

1. 75% or more of prominent teenage characters will participate in sex (oral sex or intercourse).
2. 75% or more of prominent teenage characters will have one or more influences for sexual activity present in their lives.
3. 50% or more of prominent teenage characters will be portrayed as having one or more negative consequences due to sexual activity (e.g., physical or emotional ramifications including STDs, pregnancy, hurt, betrayal, rejection, or a growing inability to trust).

## Definitions

*Adolescence* - Adolescence is a time of transition between adulthood and childhood. This time has a richness and diversity unmatched by any other life stage.

Adolescents are travelers, far from home with no native land, neither children nor adults. They are jet-setters who fly from one country to another with amazing speed. Sometimes they are four years old, an hour later they are twenty five. They don't really fit anywhere. There's a yearning for place, a search for solid ground. ~A description of adolescents by Mary Pipher in her 1994 book, *Reviving Ophelia* (Kagan, 1998, p. 10)

For the purpose of this paper, adolescents and teenagers will be used interchangeably.

*Sexual Activity* - Sexual intercourse and other sexual acts, including oral sex and anal sex, are collectively called sexual activity. Sexual activity is often simply referred to as sex

(Stine, 2007a). For the purpose of this paper, sex will encompass oral sex and intercourse.

*Promiscuous* “1: Composed of all sorts of persons or things 2 : not restricted to one class, sort, or person : indiscriminate 3: not restricted to one sexual partner 4 : casual, irregular” (Mish, 2000, pp. 930-931).

### Assumptions

Literature is assumed to be relative to the societal circumstances of a given time period. The portrayal of teenage sexuality in young adult literature may be a reflection of society.

Another assumption is that the award lists from which the books will be selected provide a reliable sample of sexual activity in young adult literature.

### Significance

Radical physical and emotional changes in adolescence lays groundwork for profound sexual experiences and beliefs, two of which are physicality and emotions prior to, during, and following sex. In *Risks of Sexual Activity*, Stine (2007) writes that the following people influence teenagers’ “sexual attitudes” in order from highest to lowest influence: parents, friends, media, spiritual leaders, siblings, and boyfriend/girlfriend (p. 9). The factors involved with sexual activity make the teen years multidimensional and changing.

This research is an inquiry into the portrayal of teenage sexuality in young adult literature. Sexuality is a physically and emotionally loaded topic. The influences on a single individual's sexual activity are deeply personal. Worldwide, teens and sex are both similar and different: “although young people across the globe live in different social,

cultural and economic circumstances, their sexual worlds reveal commonalities as well as differences” (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006, p. 1). Thus, teenagers’ sexual practices and their attitudes and ramifications surrounding sex may reflect each other as well as reveal individual thoughts, feelings, and convictions.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Influences on Teenagers' Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

Ward and Friedman (2006) demonstrated the link between the media and teen sex in "Using TV as a Guide: Associations between Television Viewing and Adolescents' Sexual Attitudes and Behavior." The researchers examined the association between 244 Long Island, New York, high school students' TV viewing and their sexual attitudes and behavior. The students were from English and language classes at a suburban high school and from "intact, well-educated families" in Long Island, New York with the following racial backgrounds: 80% Caucasian or White, 13% Asian American, 5% African American, and 4% Latin American (p. 139). Subjects viewed TV content including (a) one of three sexual stereotypes or (b) neutral content. The students then completed surveys regarding their "attitudes about sexual roles and relationships, their regular TV viewing habits, and their sexual experiences" (p. 133).

Teens may perpetuate sexual stereotypes given the strong link between watching TV and sexual attitudes and experiences (p. 134). Frequency and intensity of viewing sexual content on TV showed significant correlation with teenagers' stereotypical views of sex. The "media is among their top sexual informants, often placing them second after peers and before parents in importance" (p. 133). Ward and Friedman (2006) found an increase in viewing frequency, purposeful motives, and identification with characters positively correlated with "stronger endorsement of Recreational Sex, of Men as Sex Driven, and of Women as Sex Objects" (p. 146) as well



as “more advanced levels of Dating/Sexual Experience” (p. 148). Stronger intention for TV watching (i.e., watching TV for companionship rather than for entertainment) and identification with characters showed higher sexual activity (p. 133). The study discussed two reasons for these associations. The first reason is, “TV often emphasizes a 'recreational' orientation to sexual relationships... [including sex as]... a casual, leisure activity motivated [only] by physical pleasure and personal gain” (p. 134). Secondly, much of TV contains stereotypical sexual roles based on the sexual double standard. This involves the portrayal of females as "sexual objects whose value is based solely on their physical appearance and sexual appeal" (p. 134).

Media plays a significant role in teenage sexuality; meanwhile, language used to talk about sexuality may unnecessarily pressure teens to internalize good versus bad, virgins or not virgins, instead of feeling open to discuss sexuality. Ashcraft (2006) undertook a nine-month ethnography of an STD, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy program entitled ESPERANZA. Ashcraft examined language in 160 hours of observations of presentations and performances as well as interviews to challenge the notion of “readiness” as an obstacle to teens' sexuality. The study included “a Latino program director, a Latino project specialist, [and] 14 Peer Educators ages 16-21” (p. 332). The purpose was to “explore how talk about being ‘ready’ or ‘not ready’ for sex shapes teen and adult understandings of sexuality” (p. 328). ESPERANZA involved the establishment of mentoring relationships between women and adolescent girls in the interest of “adolescent participants [developing] skills for questioning and resisting pressures to be good girls” (p. 73).

Ashcraft (2006) concluded language surrounding teenage sex is confusing and draining. Girls spend an inordinate amount of energy defending their virginity: “Faced with these complex social scripts, girls spend enormous amounts of time trying to 'save it,' 'lose it,' convince others that they have lost or saved it or be 'discreet' instead of focusing their energies in ways that are sexually autonomous, responsible, and pleasurable” (p. 329).

Ashcraft (2006) called this conflict the "newer 'cult of virginity' that encourages both sexes to wait until they are 'ready,'" which is an obstacle to empowering teenagers in their sexuality (p. 337). This language surrounding sexuality may restrict the natural exploration and identity formation of teenage years. Language is seemingly lopsided toward how to say “no” to sex. The “lack of information reinforces dichotomies between 'bad' girls who want 'it' and 'good' girls who do not” (p. 329). There may be minimal discussion about what to do if you do decide to have sex.

Ashcraft (2006) reported talk about teenagers and sex tends to be stereotypical by race and culture. Stereotypes may suppress white women's sexuality and focus on “women of color as immoral or promiscuous” (p. 329). Black and Latin American women are at times labeled more sexual. “Teachers and other authority figures are more likely to perceive the behaviors of Puerto Rican girls as 'oozing with sexuality' even though white girls often engage in similar behavior” (p. 3). Ashcraft recommended gaining insight into the “perspectives of teens of color and other marginalized teens” in order to improve the “scripts” available for students to use in talking about sex (pp. 342-343). This includes deciding to not participate in sex and increased safety in relationships.

Gendered sexual stereotypes are also part of the language troubling teenagers. Ashcraft (2006) reported “dominant representations of male sexuality as predatory and female sexuality as naïve” (p. 338). Males are labeled more sexual, while females tend to be the victims or subjects of males’ actions.

Ashcraft (2006) concluded discussions of readiness and virginity limit teenagers’ ability to make sense of their sexual experiences. Readiness may have a huge range of definition, and discussion of virginity can create unrealistic expectations. Stereotyping by race or ignoring the influence of gender, race, and socioeconomic status on sexual actions tends to hinder sexual meaning making. This study showed language surrounding teenage sexual activity tends to be defensive - instead of proactive - and may squelch authentic discussion among teens about their sexuality.

At a time when teenagers may be vulnerable to influence, many factors surround their sexual decisions. Fetcher (2007) measured multiple influences on teens’ sexual activity using a national sample of high school students (p. 373). These factors included gender, race, residential area, test scores, absence of tragic event, family income, parental involvement, public school, enrollment in sex education in eighth grade and tenth grade, and average income (p. 378). Fletcher studied residential movement and its influence on teens’ sexuality. This focused on “whether a student’s propensity to have sex is affected by the choices of others in his or her school” (p. 376). Indeed, the school was a major influence in teens’ sexual decisions.

Fletcher’s (2007) study of schools showed “moderate differences in school composition can have large effects on the overall rates of teenage sexual initiation”

(p. 386). Fletcher's study of students' sexual decisions showed: “public policies that change the composition of schools (e.g., school voucher programs) could have unintended consequences on the rates of sexual initiation in schools” (pp. 373-374). Meanwhile, certain characteristics of individuals are associated with increased sexual activity. There is “evidence of differences in the importance of individual, school, and peer characteristics” (p. 386).

Fletcher's (2007) study further showed sexual decisions vary by gender and race, public schooling and attendance at sex education classes. According to Fletcher, males and whites are most significantly impacted by outside influences. Also, “students attending public schools are more likely to have had sex, and interestingly, students who report attending sexual education classes during the tenth grade are more likely to initiate sex” (p. 379). Being male or white is associated with being most influenced by outside factors. Meanwhile, attending public schools shows increased sexual activity and taking sex education class shows increased sexual initiation. Public schools and sex education classes “might explain some of the current large variation across schools in sexual initiation as well as pockets of teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births in some communities” (p. 376). Overall, Fletcher recommended interventions or policies for individuals or small groups of students because they indirectly influence the school's broader teenage population.

### Teenage Viewpoints About Sexuality

Thomas and Dimitrov (2007) studied the effects of a teen pregnancy intervention program on teens' attitudes toward sex. The researchers first collected data on 1,136 middle school students from 30 STD/HIV/AIDS credible prevention programs

that were effective based on 13 criteria. Then they studied the effects of a project from the Virginia State Department of Health's Abstinence Education Initiative. The subjects, including both the program participants and comparison group, were 1,136 seventh graders including both African American and White students from three middle schools in Fauquier County, Virginia. The 20-day, sequential program addressed sexual risk-taking behavior and “the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of sexual health” through structured curriculum and video instruction (Thomas & Dimitrov, 2007, p. 176).

Their evaluation of the initial 30 programs showed there were both behavior and attitude changes for the programs that had both as their objectives. They found the promotion of delay of intercourse in pre-teens is an effective criterion for program success. The researchers recommended change in sexual attitudes for change in sexual behavior. The researchers also advocated intervention prior to adolescence. (Thomas & Dimitrov, 2007, pp. 174-175).

In Thomas and Dimitrov's (2007) second part of the study, the pregnancy-prevention program, researchers studied teenagers' ideas about sexuality through a pre- and post-intervention survey completed by the students. The components of teens' attitudes toward sexuality taken into account were self-affirmation, love as justification, sex for approbation, personal efficacy, future orientation, and independence from peer influence. Teens' ideas about sex were constant though also responsive to the program. The study concluded, “constructs related to measures of teens' attitudes toward risky sexual behavior are sufficiently stable and sensitive to changes under the program intervention” (p. 184).

## Teenage Sexuality: Risks, Motives, & Behavior

Remez (2000) studied risk factors and sexual activity in high school students in South Carolina. Remez “explored how 10 health risk behaviors were associated with three outcomes--having had one sexual partner, having had 2-3 partners and having had four or more” (p. 100). She used “responses to [3,805] questionnaires distributed over the 1993-1994 academic year in 56 public high schools” (p. 100). The composition of her subjects included 1,156 white females, 1,143 white males, 829 black females, and 677 black males.

Respondents were asked whether they had ever had sexual intercourse and with how many partners, and whether they had any involvement in 10 health risk behaviors--carrying a weapon, physical fighting, violently assaulting a date, being a victim of date violence, committing rape, being a rape victim, drinking alcohol, bingeing on alcohol, smoking marijuana, and smoking cigarettes. (p. 100)

Health risks involving violence and drug use in teens showed intense associations with an increase in sexual partners. Remez found “students who have engaged in or who have been the victim of a range of risky behaviors are at risk of having had multiple sex partners” (p. 100).

Smiler (2007) studied 105 tenth grade boys to “examine the motivations boys ascribe for their dating and sexual behaviors” (p. 20). The subjects came from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, with the following composition: 71% European American, 22% Latino, and 7.6% African American. Thirty-five percent had been on welfare at some time in their lives. Ninety-two of the boys had started dating - at an average age of 12.2 years old. The average number of dating partners was 3.7. Forty-three of the boys had engaged in sexual intercourse at an average age of 14.4 years old for the first time. The boys who were studied agreed to complete surveys and had

parental, written permission. The surveys were completed in small groups with a member of the research team there. The questions were in regards to motives for “dating and sex,” masculinity ideology,” and “dating and sexual experience” (p. 20).

The researchers calculated endorsement rates for dating and intercourse motives. The top three were, “I really liked the person,” “Really attracted to the person,” and “Wanted to get to know the person better” (p. 21). The boys' motivation for intercourse was also measured. “The four most commonly endorsed reasons were, 'I felt desire,' 'to find out what it feels like,' 'because I liked/loved the person,' and 'my partner wanted to’” (p. 22). The researchers “concluded that boys engaged in dating and sexual behaviors for a variety of reasons that were distinct from wanting sex... Adolescent boys' dating motives focused on conformity, relational, and unintentional reasons...” (p. 26). The adolescent boys were motivated to date and have sex to connect with the person, not just for the act of sex itself. These results contradicted the stereotype that men date primarily for sex. The study evidenced boys show interest in their dating partner as a person. Meanwhile, the notion that girls are not ready to talk about sex may be incorrect. In fact, teenage girls may need to talk openly about sex.

Bay-Cheng and Lewis (2006) examined discussion throughout a feminist mentor program for teenage girls including 19 black and three white sixth graders at Elmhurst Middle School in the Midwestern City, Elmhurst. The subjects were recruited at a school assembly. Some girls expressed interest and asked to be in the program. Three were return participants. The mentors were recruited through a university-e-mail from women's studies, psychology, and African American studies. The researchers studied ethnographic data “to examine how the norms and standards of girls' sexuality are

prescribed” (p. 71). Two white, feminist directors developed the program to motivate teenage girls to challenge the notion of being a “good girl” (p. 73). Topics of discussion included “friendship, body image, teasing and harassment, and goal setting” (p. 74). Mentors were purposely placed and girls were randomly assigned to small groups.

Four graduate students collected data at ten weekly after-school meetings, each lasting 1.5 hours. The researchers studied the treatment of sexuality within these mentoring relationships and large- and small-group activities with “inquiry and analysis [proceeding] on a primarily inductive basis” (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006, p. 75). The researchers found mentors tended to squelch discussion about the girls' sexual responsibility, referring to sex at their ages as inappropriate. The mentors referred negatively (e.g., “slut”) to sexual images of women in the media and undercut the girls' conversations about sex involving friends or sisters.

The idea that the girls were somehow not ready for conversations about sexuality and sexual behavior was belied by the fact that at almost every opportunity, the girls attempted to initiate such conversations... the mentors and program directors, in sharp contrast to their objective of cultivating girls “voices,” censored and disciplined the girls' talk in various ways. Indeed, during the course of the program, the girls' statements regarding the reproductive or sexual capacities of their bodies were shut down, revised, or ignored (p. 77).

Though Bay-Cheng and Lewis (2006) do not advocate sexual images of women, they concluded the program was critical of sexual women, not empowering of girls' own sexuality. The program's negativity toward sexuality suppressed the reality of adolescent girls' need to explore and own their sexuality. “Contrary to discourses of female asexuality and passivity, girls do have sexual interests, desires, and curiosities; what they lack are avenues for exploring and expressing them” (p. 79). Bay-Cheng and Lewis considered societal views of teenage sexuality as limited or “sex-negative” - i.e.,



focused on “dangers and deficits” such as “pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection (STI), and sexual coercion” (p. 71). The researchers suggested, “constructions of adolescent female sexuality are also distinctly raced, such that girls of color are entrapped in a polarized discourse of ‘good White girls’ and dangerous ‘urban girls’” (p. 71). This study demonstrated the hindrance of girls’ sexual empowerment in response to well intentioned, feminist mentors seeking a certain outcome rather than facilitating open discussion. The researchers concluded there is an “urgent need for a more careful and critical reflection on the sexual socialization of young adolescent women, even when it occurs under the auspices of feminism” (p. 82).

Each of the above studies demonstrated the need to empower teens to make wise sexual decisions. There are multiple influences surrounding teens and sex. Certain factors show a link to teenage sexuality. Ward and Friedman (2006) demonstrated the link between watching TV and teens’ sexual attitudes and experiences including stereotypes. Ashcraft (2006) showed an STD, HIV/AIDS, and teenage pregnancy program included tense language such as the “newer ‘cult of virginity’” as influential on teenagers (p. 337). The program’s focus on good versus bad and yes and no to sex instead of open discussion perpetuated stereotypes instead of encouraged discussion. Meanwhile, the program was effective in behavior and attitude changes, which the researchers recommended, preferably before adolescence. Fletcher (2007) showed school composition changes as well as gender and race were influential in teenage sexuality. Attendance at public schools and sex education classes showed an increase in initiating sex. Males and whites were most significantly impacted by outside influences.

Teenage viewpoints about sexuality reveal certain perceptions about sex.

Thomas and Dimitrov (2007) discovered a rise in teens' reports of having oral sex and that oral sex is considered more acceptable in committed but not married relationships.

Teenagers' sexual activity may be influenced by a variety of risks, motives, and behaviors. Remez (2000) found the most intense health risks involved violence and drug use. Involvement in a range of risky behaviors showed risk for having multiple partners. Smiler (2007) determined teenage boys' motives for dating and having sex. The boys were not interested in just sex; they sought deeper relationships. Bay-Cheng and Lewis (2006) revealed restrictions on discussion within a feminist mentor program. The mentors discouraged the open discussion about sex the girls sought, needed and desired.

The above themes provide the characteristics for examination of teenage sexuality in young adult literature. Research showed a variety of factors influence teenage sexuality and that teenage views of sexuality include labels toward promiscuous women and stereotypes by race and culture (Ashcraft, 2006). Meanwhile, research demonstrated teens may need to talk openly but are not necessarily provided the opportunity to do so (Bay-Cheng and Lewis, 2006). Also, boys' motivations to have sex may be relational not just physical (Smiler, 2007). The studies provide background for a content analysis of young adult literature with sex as a theme including teens' sexual practices and the portrayal of those practices.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Teenagers may be increasingly portrayed as promiscuous in young adult literature. The purpose of this research is to investigate the portrayal of teenage sexual activity within young adult literature in the United States. The literature will be chosen from awards lists. The methodology of this study will be a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of literature intended for young adult readers. The content of the books will include teens and sex. White and Marsh (2006) suggested content analysis is flexible and applicable to a broad range of studies. Content analysis allows researchers to make “replicable and valid inferences from texts” (p. 23). Two graduate research papers from School Library Media Studies, University of Northern Iowa, used this method to analyze other aspects of Young Adult literature. For example, Kingery (2002) effectively used content analysis to analyze “Characteristics and Concepts of Muslims Portrayed in Children’s Fictional Literature” (p. i). Berthelson (2006) discovered patterns (e.g., stereotypes) regarding the elderly in fiction for young people by using content analysis. Thus, the researcher will use this research technique to examine teenage sexual practices and the portrayal of those practices.

Examining young adult literature through content analysis will provide insight in to teenage sexual practices, influences on sexuality in teenagers’ lives, and consequences of teenage sexual activity. Content analysis will support the researcher’s focus: to investigate the portrayal of teenage sexual activity in young adult literature in the United States. This research technique is appropriate for present-day issues, thus effective for this research problem and purpose.

## Data Analysis

Content analysis is an effective research method for this study. Carlson (2008) suggested, this method allows the researcher “to identify patterns, frequencies, or potential categories.” This research method is also a descriptive method (p. 100). Themes and their intensity and occurrence will be determined, described, and evaluated through comments or phrases spoken or used to describe the sexuality.

## Procedure

Selected literature will provide a sample for examination of teenage sexuality as portrayed in young adult literature. To conduct this study, the content in books will have sexuality as a theme. Twenty young adult books, recommended for young adults and published within the last ten years will be randomly selected as the literature for this study. Young adult literature will be the recently published titles, include both fiction and nonfiction, and be obtained from lists compiled by The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), available on the American Library Association site, [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org). Books with sexuality as a theme were selected from YALSA’S 2009 Best Books for Young Adults (Appendix A) and 2009 Quick Picks For Reluctant Young Adult Readers (Appendix B). The YALSA list entitled *Sex Is...* is a thematic selection of 20 titles from the 2008 Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults. These titles are listed in Appendix C. The researcher will use random selection to select 20 books from the 37 books mentioned above. The books will be individually read and compared to a checklist for content analysis. The checklist will first be tested on a book that is included in the pool of 37 but not selected for the 20 titles for the study. See Appendix D for the

checklist. The checklist is based on original research questions and research to be used as a basis for conclusions or inferences.

Results will be displayed in tables and narration. The sexual activity of prominent characters will be identified. Also, influences on the prominent characters and ramifications following sexual behavior will be identified. Bar graphs will display frequency of occurrence of each type of sexual activity, influences, and ramifications. Narration for prominent teenage characters will include specific titles of books and characters as they are characterized by the three measures above. The researcher will make inferences about the portrayal of teenage sexuality based on this sample of young adult literature demonstrating sexual practices and how they are portrayed.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS

Teenage sex is an overwhelming societal responsibility with resulting unwanted pregnancies, STDs, and emotionally disturbed teenagers (Stine, 2007a). Teenagers may be physically ready for sex but not emotionally prepared for the consequences (Wells, 2006). This content analysis provides insight about teenagers' sexual activity in young adult literature. Twenty books, 18 fiction books and two nonfiction, were randomly selected from a list of 38 books from three awards lists from Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA): *Sex Is... Category of 2008 Popular Paperback Books for Young Adults*, *2009 Best Books for Young Adults*, and *2009 Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers*. Books from these three awards lists (see Appendix A, B, and C) were eligible for random selection if the book or review indicated a theme of sexuality was present. The list of 20 books analyzed for this study is Appendix D. The researcher analyzed prominent characters' sexual behaviors, influences in their lives, and consequences of sexual activity.

Prominent characters are the teenagers who were at the center of the plot and consistently received attention throughout the story. One of the nonfiction books is Robin Bowman's nonfiction compilation of portraits and interviews of teenagers throughout the United States entitled *It's Complicated: The American Teenager*. For this, the researcher selected two teenagers who are different from each other in their cultural backgrounds and life circumstances as a representative sample of teenagers' ways of life.

First, the researcher determined how many teenagers participated in each type of activity: abstinence, making out, sex, or other (e.g., flirting, dancing, or observing boys in

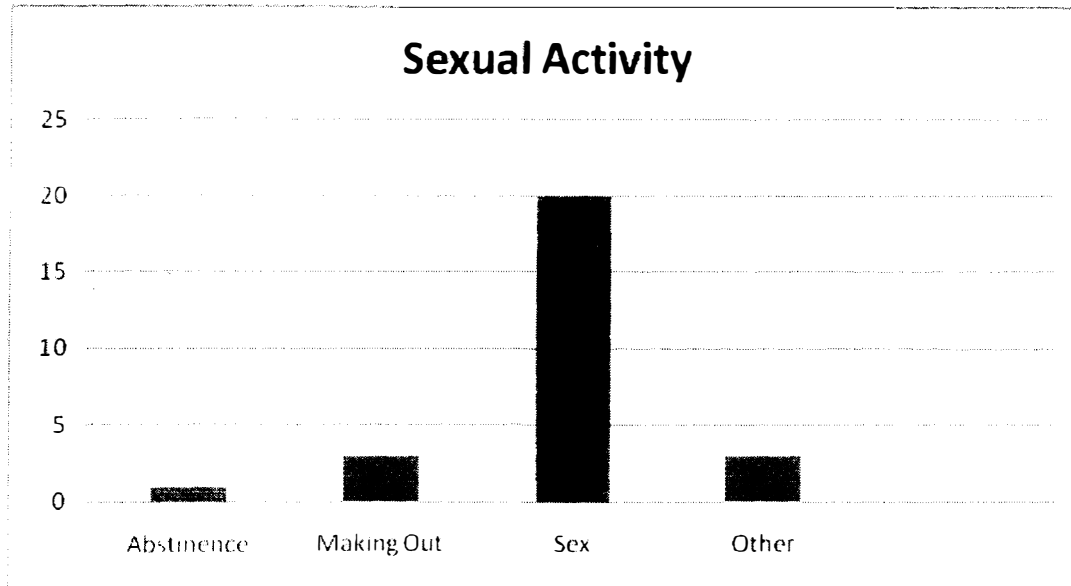
a locker-room). Second, the researcher analyzed how many teenagers had influences on sexuality present in their lives and determined the number of teenagers influenced by each of the following factors: peers, family, media, violence, drugs, school, other, or not available. Third, the researcher determined how many teenagers had each of the following negative consequences as a result of sexual activity: STDs, pregnancy, physical trauma, emotional ramifications, or other

The researcher identified only one type of sexual behavior for each of the 27 teenagers analyzed. When a character portrayed more than one activity throughout the book, only the most invasive activity was recorded in the data analysis. Characters that had oral sex or intercourse were categorized as having sex. They were not also counted as making out. Teenagers analyzed that kissed or experienced physical intimacy were categorized as making out. If a teenage character intentionally abstained from sex, the activity was abstinence. If a teenager had activity that was not sex, making out, or abstinence, it was because they were physically unable to sexually engage or did not have the circumstances available to participate in a sexual activity.

### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis one stated 75% or more of prominent teenage characters will participate in sex.

Table 1

*Sexual Activity*

Of the 27 characters studied, 20 (74%) of 27 the teens analyzed had sex. This was consistent with hypothesis 1. Three (11.1%) teens participated in making out. One (3.7%) teen practiced abstinence. Three (11.1%) teens participated in activity other than abstinence, making out, or sex, described below.

The 20 teens whose activity was sex had a variety of motives or circumstances present. Some characters purposely wanted to lose their virginity to change their image amongst their peers. In *All the Way*, Ian wants to change his reputation as the nice guy, so he drives 935 miles to have sex with a girl he met in an online chat group. In *The Making of Dr. True Love*, Diego tries to get his girlfriend back by losing his virginity with her. In the nonfiction book *Ana's Story*, Ana needed love after being abused and suffered the loss of her parents to death. In *Living Dead Girl*, a kidnapper controls the



female character by re-naming her Alice and repeatedly molests her, hence Alice's feeling dead inside. In *Doing It*, Jonathan has oral sex and Dino has both oral sex and intercourse. In *Desire*, Turo has sex with his best friend: a guy for whom he has homosexual feelings.

Only three (11.1%) teens participated in making out which was physical intimacy but not sex. In *The Virginity Club*, Eva has her first kiss. In *Blood and Chocolate*, Vivian is a werewolf who kisses a human and thinks about—but does not have—sex. In *Fancy White Trash*, Abby is determined to not be like her mother who has married three times and is pregnant and her sister who is also pregnant. Abby experiences Jackson's arms around her and refers to previously kissing him; again, there is physical intimacy but not sex.

The one (3.7%) teenager who practiced abstinence is Amy from Austin, Texas, in *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*. Amy expresses her commitment to abstinence through her Christian faith: "My faith teaches me that you should wait 'til after you're married to have sex" (Bowman, 2007, p. 138).

Three teens (11.1%) participated in activity other than abstinence, making out, or sex. This included dancing and flirting in *What I Saw and How I Lied*, observing guys in a locker room in *Fly on the Wall: How One Girl Saw Everything*, and lying next to her boyfriend, not being physical, in *Baby*. *What I Saw and How I Lied* is based on Evie, a 15-year-old girl in 1947, who develops a love interest, Peter. The romantic interest does not progress to sex, not because of purposeful abstinence, but Peter is having an affair with Evie's mother. In the fiction book *Fly on the Wall*, Gretchen actually becomes a fly on the wall of the boys' locker room, thus not a person and unable to partake in sexual

activity or commit to abstinence even if she wanted to. In *Baby*, Baby has lived on the streets with her boyfriend, Bobby, but breaks away from him and starts a new life.

Neither purposeful abstinence nor sex is described, rather a previous reference to spending the night lying next to each other on top of a milk-truck.

The hypothesis that 75% of teenagers analyzed in books with sexuality as a theme was close to the results. Of the 27 characters analyzed, 20 (74%) prominent teenage characters had sex, nearly exact to the hypothesis. Thus, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

### Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis two stated 75% or more of prominent teenage characters studied will have one or more influences upon their sexual behaviors present in their lives.

All 27 (100%) of the teenage characters analyzed had influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives. This far exceeded the 75% hypothesized. These influences included peers, family, media, violence, drugs, school, and other influences (e.g., religion, desire to grow up fast, desire to lose virginity, and broken relationships resulting in broken hearts as the precursor to sexual activity).

A total of 45 influences were counted. All influences present in the characters' lives were counted. Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, ten had one influence and 15 had two influences. Two teenagers had three influences: April in *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, and Ian in *Played*. All influences are included in Table 2 to show how many characters had each of these influences present in their lives.

Table 2

*Influences on Teenagers***Influences on Teenagers**

16  
14  
12  
10  
8  
6  
4  
2  
0

Peers Family Media Violence Drugs School Other

Of the 27 teenagers analyzed, 15 (55.5%) were influenced by peers. Peers were the most common influential factor in the teenage characters analyzed. Several books in this study demonstrated the intense influence of peers including upholding or changing sexual labels or reputations. In *All the Way*, Ian wanted to stir up his boring life compared to his friends and no longer be a virgin—the nice boy. In *Doing It*, three male friends had continual, sexually charged conversations. In *The Virginity Club*, competition amongst friends for a scholarship for “purity of the soul and body” resulted in secrets about their actual sexual activity and negative labels toward the known, sexually active character named Debbie including “sexaholic” (Brian, 2004, p. 32). In *Ready or Not*, Sam worried what other people would think of her, and her boyfriend pushed her to have sex. In *Played*, Ian was pressured to have sex with a virgin to join an all-male, school fraternity. In *Fly on the Wall*, Gretchen’s peer influence was distance

between her and her best friend. In *Rainbow Party*, Gin planned a party to have all girls give oral sex to every guy there. The peer conversations throughout the book were centered on the rainbow party. In *Desire*, two friends secretly lied to another friend about love. In *Audrey, Wait!*, Audrey's best friend facilitated Audrey's pivotal decision to break up with her boyfriend. In *Baby*, the teenage girl Baby had been pulled in to trouble on the streets with her boyfriend. One teenage character experienced the peer influence as a positive: November's friends in *November Blues* supported her, pregnant.

Of the 27 teenagers analyzed, 12 (44.4%) were influenced by family (parents, siblings, etc.). The family influences included family problems. In *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, April Collins ended up in foster care as a result of a mother who was a drug addict and the start of April's own drug problems. Bowman (2007) quoted April: "My earliest memory was when I was five and my mother stuck the meth needle in my arm" (p. 82). Later in her profile, April referred to her little brother as a positive, close bond for her, which was hopeful following her early life with a wayward mother. In *Fancy White Trash*, Abby and Kait had divorced parents, a mother who was married three times and pregnant with a guy half her age, and a father on "wife number two or three depending on how you count it" because their parents married each other twice (Geerling, 2008, p. 18). Meanwhile, Abby was positively influenced to have a plan to not turn out like her mother as well as pregnant sister. Abby developed a plan for true love, so as to be different from her family. In *Ana's Story*, Ana lost her parents to death and was raised by physically abusive relatives for a while. In *Blood and Chocolate*, Vivian's father had died and her mother was dating significantly younger men. In *Bloom*, Lauren's mother left the family, and her relationship with her father was distant. In *Fly*

*on the Wall*, Gretchen had divorced parents. In *Doing It*, Dino's mother had an affair with another man resulting in his parents' marriage falling apart. In *November Blues*, November's mother wanted November to give up her baby for adoption. In *Played*, Ian had an absent father, who his sister says he was starting to be like with his deception of Kylie, an innocent girl he deceives in to having sex with him to join a fraternity. In *Ready or Not*, Sam chatted with her sister Lucy about birth control and whether she was ready to have sex or not, Sam's parents let her go away for the weekend with her boyfriend to Camp David, and Sam compared herself to her sister writing: "Top ten reasons why my sister Lucy has it way better than I do" (Cabot, 2008, p. 71).

Of the 27 teenagers analyzed, three (11.1%) were influenced by media including watching television or movies or receiving attention from the press. In *Fancy White Trash*, Abby watched daytime soap operas and Kait watched romantic comedies. The other teenage character influenced by media was Audrey in *Audrey, Wait!* Audrey experienced the media through a song her boyfriend wrote playing on the radio which resulted in her popularity and paparazzi swarming her and writing about her in gossip magazines.

Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, three (11.1%) had violence as an influence present in their lives. This included April in *It's Complicated*, a teenager in Springfield, Missouri, who was raped repeatedly by different people. April was also the only teenager (3.7%) influenced by drugs, whose mother injected her with drugs at age five, started drinking at age two, and previously took a myriad of drugs but is sober at the time she told her story. Another teenager who experienced violence was the main character in *Living Dead Girl*, a 15-year-old female named Alice by her abuser. Alice was the victim

of abduction and continual mental, emotional, and sexual abuse, throughout the story. Finally, Ana in *Ana's Story* was shifted from house to house and eventually a juvenile home after her parents' died of AIDS. She was beaten by relatives and molested by her grandmother's boyfriend.

Six (22.2%) of the 27 teenagers analyzed were influenced by school. This included the four prominent characters in *The Virginity Club*. Their competition for a prestigious scholarship consisted of the creation of a virginity club and endless efforts to uphold their status as sexually pure. In *Played*, Ian wanted to be in a boys' fraternity at school, and compromised his integrity in the process by getting a virgin to have sex with him. In *Rainbow Party*, conversations about sex surrounded the characters including Gin, the main character, at Harding High School. There was ongoing gossip and rumors about sex, planning for and discussion about the rainbow party, labels and nicknames based on sexual experience, and, ironically, even a celibacy club.

Six (22.2%) of the 27 teenagers analyzed were influenced by factors not included in the checklist. The factors not included in the checklist were: religion, desire to grow up fast, desire to lose virginity, and broken relationships resulting in broken hearts as the precursor to sexual activity. One teenager was influenced by her faith. In *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, Amy Heldenfels committed herself to abstinence. Amy referred to her close relationship with God which "teaches me that you should wait 'til after you're married to have sex" (Bowman, 2007, p. 138). In *What I Saw and How I Lied*, Evie wanted to be like her mother, thus accelerating the growing up process. Three teens wanted to change themselves from virgins including Marit in *Pop!*, Diego in *The Making of Dr. True Love*, and Ian in *All the Way*. In *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*,

Nick had a relationship with Norah, who also had a broken relationship and heart as the precursor to their sexual relationship.

Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, 27 (100%) had one or more influence present in their lives. Nine had one influence, 12 had two influences, and two teenagers had three influences present. This far exceeded the hypothesized 75% of teens having one or more influential factors for sexuality in their lives. Thus, hypothesis 2 is accepted.

### Hypothesis 3

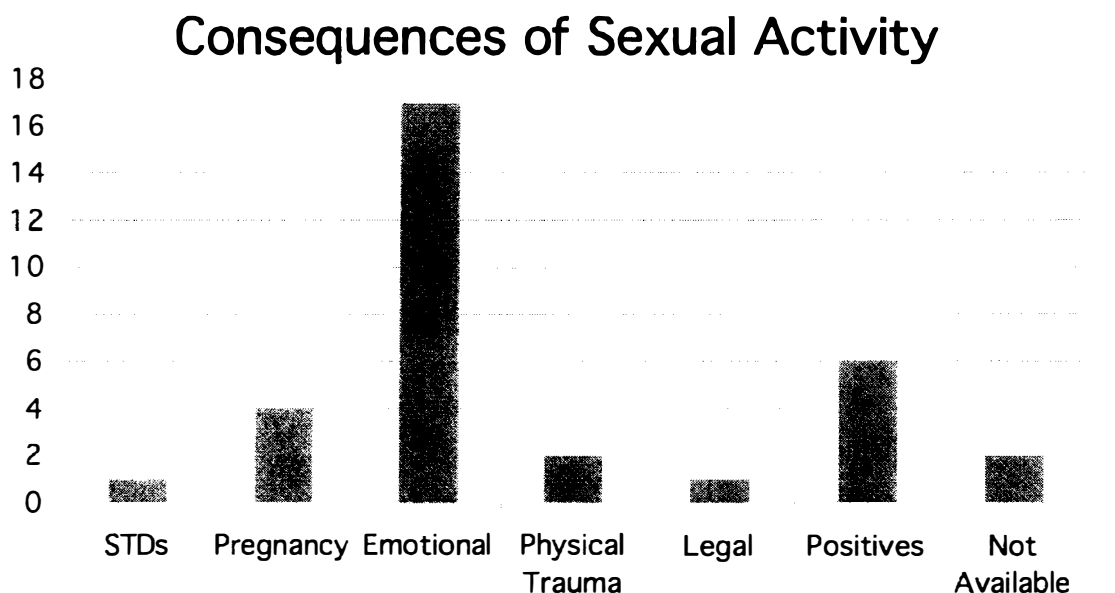
Hypothesis three stated 50% or more of teenage characters will be portrayed as having one or more negative consequences due to sexual activity (e.g., physical or emotional ramifications including STDs, pregnancy, hurt, betrayal, jealousy, rejection, or a growing inability to trust). The researcher determined how many teenagers had each of the following negative consequences as a result of sexual activity: STDs, pregnancy, emotional problems, physical trauma, or legal issues. Also, positive results were calculated as well as results not available.

Of the 27 characters studied, a total of 31 outcomes were counted, positive or negative outcomes from abstinence, making out, sex, or other activity (e.g., flirting, dancing, and observing guys in the locker-room). Twenty-one teenage characters had one result, three teens had two results, and one teen had four results. Of the 31 results counted, 25 were negative (detrimental to personal growth) and six were positive (catalysts for personal growth). Of the 27 characters studied, 22 (81.4%) had only negative consequences apparently due to sexual activity. Three teenagers had only had positives. Two teenagers had both positive and negative outcomes surrounding sexual activity, abstinence or sex. Two teenagers studied did not have an available consequence

linked to their own sexual activity so are in “not available.” See Table 3 for the number of teens with each consequence displayed.

Table 3

*Consequences of Sexual Activity*



The physical consequences were STDs, pregnancy, or physical trauma. In *Rainbow Party*, Gin was accused of spreading gonorrhea at her rainbow party, and an outbreak occurred at school. Another teenager analyzed, Ana in *Ana's Story*, had HIV, which was not a result of *her* sexual activity but her mother's. Ana contracted AIDS from her mother while pregnant with Ana, thus it is not included as a consequence of Ana's sexual activity.

Four (14.8%) teens had a pregnancy occur. In *Ana's Story*, Ana became pregnant with her boyfriend, which ultimately resulted in positive feelings of hope after previous secrets and shame of living with HIV. Ana had two outcomes: a) teen pregnancy, an initially negative situation and b) hope, so Ana was a teenager analyzed who had both a



positive and negative as a result of sex. Ana's pregnancy was included in the pregnancy category, and her newfound hope was included in the positives. The three other teens having pregnancy as a consequence are November in *November Blues*, April Collins in *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, and Kait in *Fancy White Trash*. In *November Blues*, the teenage girl November learned she was pregnant with the boyfriend she recently lost to death. Thereafter, she struggled with physical and emotional pain and even legal woes due to the pregnancy. In *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, April Collins, age 19, talked about her pregnancy.

I'm going to be a new mom, it's kind of scary. It confuses me and I'm afraid I might mess up... I'm due tomorrow... The father found out I was pregnant and said, "That's your problem," and took off... He wasn't ready for a kid. Everything happens for a reason... (Bowman, 2007, p. 82)

Bowman (2007) photographed April at a youth outreach center for homeless teens, in Springfield, Missouri. April had not seen her mother since age seven and hoped to not turn out like her mother who was "probably dead in a gutter somewhere for all I know" (p. 82). In *Fancy White Trash*, Kait was pregnant by her mother's new husband. Kait's sister, Abby, pointed out the negative of the pregnancy and her subsequent desire to be different from her family. "A definite lesson I've learned from my sisters is that teen pregnancy is not pretty. 'I'm going to break family tradition and make it to graduation without getting knocked up'" (Geerling, 2008, p. 16).

The two (7.4%) characters who experienced physical trauma were Alice in *Living Dead Girl* and November in *November Blues*. In *Living Dead Girl*, Alice's abuser harmed her with malnourishment and molestation. Alice's abuser underfed her to keep her from developing and sexually abused her. In *November*

*Blues*, November experienced specific physical issues as a result of her pregnancy: morning sickness and a premature birth.

Of the 27 teenagers analyzed, 17 (62.9%) had emotional ramifications. The emotional ramifications included lies, secrets, betrayal, rejection, inner conflict, insecurity, bad reputation, name calling, and jealousy. Characters whose sexual behavior resulted in lying or telling secrets were Lauren in *Bloom*, Eva, Mandy, Debbie, and Kai in *The Virginity Club*, and Diego in *The Making of Dr. Truelove*. In Elizabeth Scott's (2007) *Bloom*, Lauren hid her relationship with Evan. She sought a more meaningful relationship than merely being with "perfect," popular, and boring Dave (p. 221). Lauren did not inform her boyfriend, friends, or family about her affair with Evan including claiming she had to leave school to go to the dentist when actually meeting Evan, instead. The plot of *The Virginity Club* was based on lies. Four girls were vying for a college scholarship based on purity. In their pursuit of the \$40,000 college scholarship, they lie about their sexual activity in order to uphold their images as pure. Mandy even started the virginity club at school as a way to hide having sex. Mandy was well aware of her sexual activity while lying about it: "*Screw Mrs. Treemont and her scholarship. They're not going to find out anyway... I am a sexual being! I cannot be denied!*" (Brian, 2004, p. 52). To Mandy's surprise, Kai, one of the four girls, was having sex: "*She stood there the other day, looked at us, and said, 'We're all virgins. Every last one of us!'*" (p. 147). Debbie lied to her mother about going to her friend Danielle's house. Danielle did not even exist; rather she was going to Danny's house who was "Deb's most frequent hook-up partner" (Brian, 2004, p. 26). In *The Making of Dr. Truelove*, Diego created an online identity as an expert on sex, Dr. Truelove, in order to get his girlfriend back.

Examples of characters who experienced betrayal or rejection were Dino in *Doing It*, November in *November Blues*, Audrey in *Audrey, Wait!*, and Turo in *Desire*. In *Doing It*, Dino's attempts to have sex with Jackie fell short when he could not perform sexually, resulting in Jackie's subsequent disinterest in him. November, in *November Blues* did not receive family support to keep her baby as her mother thought she should give the baby up for adoption. In *Audrey, Wait!*, Audrey's ex-boyfriend betrayed her by writing a song about their break-up and revealing sexual secrets which resulted in her sudden, unwanted celebrity status and too much attention from paparazzi. In *Desire*, Turo has homosexual feelings for his best friend, Ryoji. Turo was let down when Ryoji used him for sex instead of genuinely caring for him. Later, Turo discovered Ryoji actually had feelings for him. Meanwhile, Kashiwazaki did not want to let go of the bond they forged while trying to get Ryoji to come forth with feelings. First, the emotions make for a lot of drama, specifically feelings of rejection as categorized in this study.

Inner conflict or insecurity was present in characters from *Bloom*, *Played*, *Ready or Not*, and *Blood and Chocolate*. In *Bloom*, Lauren felt conflicted about being in a relationship with bad boy Evan. He was more exciting and different from her previous, straight and narrow boyfriend. In *Played*, Ian compromised his integrity by getting a virgin to sleep with him and fall in love with him in order to be a part of a fraternity at school. In *Ready or Not*, Sam worried what people thought of her and was ambivalent about whether to have sex or not. In *Blood and Chocolate*, Vivian struggled with her identity as a teenage werewolf, unsure about whether to reveal her identity to the human teenage boy who shared passion with her

A bad reputation or name-calling was present in characters from *The Virginity Club*. Debbie had a reputation as a girl who has sex with several different guys: “Ugh. She’s like a peacock flashing her feathers, Eva thought. Except only male peacocks do that, I think” (Brian, 2004, p. 30). Another teenage girl commented to Debbie, “I guess some people didn’t realize that the Sexaholics Anonymous meeting is being held down the hall” (Brian, 2004, p. 32).

November in *November Blues* and Alice from *Living Dead Girl* suffered emotional trauma. November suffered the grief of losing her unborn baby’s father, her boyfriend whose death was an accident. Alice in *Living Dead Girl* was brainwashed by her abductor so that she would not leave, rather undergo his sexual abuse and find another girl for her abuser to replace her.

There were five characters with positive results following their types of sexual activity included personal insight for Sam in *Ready or Not*, Ian in *All the Way* and Gretchen in *Fly on the Wall*, hope for Ana in *Ana’s Story*, and bonding for Nick and Norah in *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist*. In *Ready or Not*, Sam developed a stronger personal identity. In *All the Way*, Ian realized girls at home were quite all right, after driving 935 miles to have sex with a girl he met online. Ian’s trip made him realize he actually loved a girl close to home. In *Fly on the Wall*, Gretchen spent several days as a fly in the wall in the boys’ locker-room. Gretchen observed the boys including their thoughts, feelings, and actual bodies and in doing so, gleaned insight from her observation of the boys. As a result, Gretchen felt less isolated from her peers and more confident in herself. In *Ana’s Story*, Ana became pregnant with a boyfriend and gave birth to a healthy baby. Ana found love for the first time in her life. Her pregnancy led

to positive feelings of hope after previous secrets and shame of living with HIV. Sexual activity resulted in a closer relationship for Nick in *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*.

Finally, in *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*, practicing abstinence allowed Amy Heldenfels, age 19, to stay true to herself including her faith:

I believe that if you can discipline yourself to save yourself for, hopefully, the perfect person, or someone who loves you that much, then you can tell him that, "I had faith that one day I would love you this much that I saved myself for you" (Bowman, 2007, p. 138).

From the above examples, four cases of sex and one of abstinence preceded positives.

One (3.7%) of the 27 teenagers analyzed had legal issues. November in *November Blues* was faced with the decision to keep her baby or give her baby up for adoption. Her boyfriend's parents and lawyer wanted the baby, a piece of their son who died. Presented with adoption papers and a full four-year college scholarship, November decided to keep her baby.

There were two characters with results as not available because there was not a link between their sexual activity and results. These results were positive but not because of their own sexual behavior. Abby in *Fancy White Trash* did not have her own apparent consequence for sexual activity, rather her One True Love Plan, which was a result of her family's sexual activity and resulting pregnancies. Baby in *Baby*, broke away from her boyfriend and had a happy ending without him, because she got a healthy new foster home which also led her to a newfound bond with sled dogs which helped her grow personally.

Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, two had more than one negative consequence of sexual behavior. In *November Blues*, November suffered a myriad of

problems: pregnancy, physical discomfort, emotional trauma, and legal problems. In *Living Dead Girl*, the character named Alice by her perpetrator was emotionally and physically traumatized from mental and emotional manipulation, malnutrition, and sexual abuse.

Two characters had both a positive and negative experience. In *Ready or Not*, Sam felt unsure of whether to have sex or not, but following sex ended up feeling like a stronger person. In *Ana's Story*, Ana became pregnant, and as a result, found hope in her life. Previously abandoned due to the death of her parents, an initial negative consequence resulted in a positive, family to love.

Of the 27 characters studied, 21 (77.7%) had physical or emotional ramifications following sex. This far exceeded the hypothesized 50% or more of teenage characters portrayed as having one or more negative consequences due to sexual activity. Thus, hypothesis 3 is accepted.

In summary, the overwhelming majority teenage characters analyzed participated in sex, had one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives, and had one or more negative consequences apparently due to sexual activity. The percentage of teens analyzed engaging in sex was 74%. The percentage of teenagers analyzed who had one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives was 100%. Peers, family, and school were the most common influences. The percentage of teens analyzed having negative consequences apparently due to sexual activity was 77.7%. The percentage of teens analyzed who had emotional ramifications which was the most common consequence of sexual activity, was 62.9%. The percentage of teens analyzed that had physical ramifications was 22.2%. Sex, influential factors, and

negative consequences were predominant in the teenage characters analyzed for this study. This sample of books analyzed for this study made readily apparent that sex (intercourse or oral sex) is the most frequent activity of teenage characters in young adult books with a theme of sexuality. The majority of teenagers analyzed had one more influences for sexual activity present in their lives, and one or more negative consequences surrounding sex.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Adolescence is a time of change: personally, physically, and socially. A variety of factors influence teenagers' sexual behaviors, particularly peers (Wells, 2006). Teenagers may be physically ready for sex but emotionally unprepared for the consequences (Stine, 2007b). For this study, twenty award-winning books represented young adult literature with teenage sexuality as a theme. This study analyzed the sexual behaviors of teenagers, the influences on them for sexual activity, and the consequences of sexual activity. The literature demonstrated sex (intercourse or oral sex) was the most common sexual activity (ranging from abstinence to sex), all characters had one or more influential factors in their lives, and the most common consequences of sexual activity were emotional ramifications.

#### Summary

The first hypothesis addressed the sexual activity of teenagers: The majority of prominent characters in the books for this study engaged in sex. Of the 27 teenagers analyzed, 20 (74%) had sex making it the most common sexual activity in the study. Teens studied were classified under one physical activity, the most invasive activity in which they participated: sex, making out, or abstinence. Making out was the second most common activity. Abstinence or behavior other than those listed was third including dancing and flirting in *What I Saw and How I Lied*, observing guys in a locker room in *Fly on the Wall: How One Girl Saw Everything*, and lying next to her boyfriend, not being physical, in *Baby*. The results were nearly exact to the hypothesized 75%, but the hypothesis was rejected based on only one percent difference.



The second hypothesis addressed was influences on the sexual activity of teenagers: 75% or more of teenagers analyzed would have one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives (e.g., peers, family, media, violence, drugs, or other). Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, 27 (100%) had one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives. Peers (55.5% of teenagers analyzed) were the most common influence, followed by family (37% of teenagers analyzed) and school (22.2% of teenagers analyzed) and influences other than those listed (22.2%) of teenagers analyzed including religion, desire to grow up fast, desire to lose virginity, and broken relationships resulting in broken hearts.

Peer influence included teenagers' preoccupation with their images as a virgin or as promiscuous, perhaps wanting to overturn labels. Lying about sexual behavior was common (e.g., a virgin wanting to no longer be called a virgin or having sex but protecting their reputation from promiscuous). This is consistent with the literature review. Ashcraft (2006) found the language in a teenage pregnancy program was tense and influential on teenagers such as the "newer 'cult of virginity'" (p. 337). The program focused on good versus bad and yes and no to sex instead of open discussion about sexuality. The teenage girls in *The Virginity Club* who had sex lied about it instead of being honest, in their quest for the purity scholarship at school. Like the teenage pregnancy program, there was no middle ground to talk openly, rather only pure or not pure. Furthermore, Bey-Cheng and Lewis (2006) found societal views of teenage sexuality as limited or "sex-negative." In addition to the teenage girls' lies, *The Virginity Club* included a negative perception of Debbie, who had slept with several guys, as she was inflicted with a reputation as a promiscuous girl.

Family was the second most common influence in this study. Of the 27 characters analyzed, 10 (37%) were influenced by their family. Ward and Friedman (2006) referred to family as the third most influential factor in teens' lives in their report about teens and media influence. Similarly, family was a common influence in this study.

According to Ward and Friedman (2006), the influence of media on teens' sexual attitudes and experiences was second only to peers and more common than parents. The content analysis differed from the literature review. The content analysis showed media was one of the least influential factors (11.1%) among teenage characters. Meanwhile, the literature reviewed showed for teens, the "media is among their top sexual informants" (p. 133).

Two teenage characters had violence present in their lives. April, a pregnant teen in a homeless shelter, in *It's Complicated* reflected the literature review as she was raped repeatedly by different people and recovering from drug abuse. Remez (2002) found violence and drug use in teens showed intense associations with an increase in sexual partners. The other teenager who experienced violence was the main character in *Living Dead Girl*, a 15-year-old female named Alice by her abuser. Alice was the victim of abduction and continual mental, emotional, and sexual abuse, throughout the story.

Of the 27 teenage characters analyzed, 27 (100%) had one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives. This far exceeded the hypothesis of 75% or more as having one or more influential factors for sexual activity present in their lives (e.g., peers, family, media, violence, drugs, or other). Various studies demonstrated

multiple influences do tend to be present in teenagers' lives, possibly influencing sexual behaviors and attitudes. Thus, hypothesis 2 was accepted.

The third hypothesis addressed the outcomes surrounding the sexual activity of the teenagers studied. Of the 27, teenagers analyzed, 21 (77.7%) had physical or emotional ramifications following sex. This far exceeded the hypothesized 50% or more of teenage characters portrayed as having one or more negative consequences due to sexual activity. Thus, hypothesis 3 was accepted.

### Conclusions

Teenage sex portrayed in the twenty books in this study largely matched teenage sexuality in the literature review. Sex dominated (74%) the level of sexual activity present in the prominent teenage characters of the 20 books in the study. This is consistent with Smiler (2007) who studied tenth grade boys: 43 of the 105 boys studied engaged in intercourse for the first time at 14.4 years of age.

The literature review included various studies demonstrating multiple influences are present in teenagers' lives, possibly influencing sexual behaviors and attitudes. The teenagers in the books analyzed reflect Fletcher's (2007) study which showed "evidence of differences in the importance of individual, school, and peer characteristics" (p. 386). All (100%) of the teenage characters had one or more influential factor for sexual activity present in their lives. Teenagers were influenced by peers, which Ward and Friedman (2006) found second only to media. In *Played*, Ian was pressured to have sex with a virgin to join an all male, school fraternity. This is consistent with Ashcraft's study (2006) that found "dominant representation of male sexuality as predatory and female sexuality as naïve" (p. 338). The high number of teens analyzed as influenced by peers is

consistent with the literature. Fletcher (2007) found peers' choices were a significant influence in teenagers' lives.

Health risks were present in a few of the teenagers studied. Two teenagers had violence as a present influence in his life, and one of those teenagers also had the influence of drugs. This reflected Remez's (2000) conclusion that teenagers with risk factors present in their lives are at risk of having had multiple sex partners. April in *It's Complicated: the American Teenager* manifested this exactly, having taken alcohol and drugs and being raped multiple times. Alice in *Living Dead Girl* was emotionally trapped in the control of a man who repeatedly by her abductor. Elizabeth Scott wrote a profound depiction of Alice's disappearance and subsequent abuse in *Living Dead Girl*, which was a topic few books in this study included.

Media was uncommon in the books as one of the lowest in frequency for influences. This was inconsistent with the literature. Ward and Friedman (2006) concluded there is a strong link between teenagers' TV watching and their sexual attitudes and experiences and determined the frequency and intensity of TV watching was correlated with perpetuated sexual stereotypes. Television may be a subconscious agent, passive or indirect for storylines, and difficult for powering up a story. Television may be a driving force for teenage sexuality but not integral to plots or profiles of teenagers. Interaction with peers perhaps creates more drama and develops the social aspect of a teenager's life, subsequently a storyline. Meanwhile, maybe TV is too obvious and a quick source to blame for teenage issues, more obvious than the dynamics of peer and family relationships.

Violence and drugs were the other two of the three lowest in frequency of influences. Authors of fiction, in particular, may not use violence or drugs to craft their stories, as their audience may be more drawn in by relational drama. Perhaps the writers or readers of these books are more interested in the relationships and romance than violence. Violence and drugs are not mutually exclusive with relationships. However, young adult literature may often be intended for entertainment and catharsis. Thus, writers may spend more time on developing the relationships that evoke emotion as soap operas do, rather than weaving in disturbing threads such as violence and drugs. In the case of *Living Dead Girl*, the purpose was to enlighten readers on the harsh reality of sexual abuse and captivity. Thus, the sexual abuse was the main theme. *Living Dead Girl*, a book with violence towards a teenage girl (sexual abuse) was serious material to digest which was in stark contrast to the more humorous, amusing approach of *Fancy White Trash*, for example. The only character influenced by drugs was April from the nonfiction compilation *It's Complicated: the American Teenager*. Robin Bowman's intention with the nonfiction compilation was to portray the truth of American Teenagers, from rural to urban, conservative, moderate, and liberal. This reality may be harsh and perhaps not a coincidence that drugs were present in nonfiction, rather than fiction. Abuse was present in *Ana's Story* which was written by Jenna Bush to depict the reality of a Latin American girl: a story of including hope including the abuse Ana suffered and the shame of living with HIV followed by the love Ana found in her life.

The decision to read or write any type of material is a personal decision. Given this intellectual freedom, authors and readers vary on the inclusion of influences in reading material. Emotional ramifications far exceeded physical consequences. Internal

conflict, compromised integrity, lies, and jealousy often followed sex, and preoccupation with image was a common theme.

Emotional ramifications ranged from emotional trauma to various forms of manipulation such as secrets, lies, name calling, and teasing as well as inner conflict, insecurity, and emotional trauma. Entire books were written around these ramifications including *The Virginity Club* in which the characters try to “keep the V.” The four girls competing for the \$40,000 college scholarship lied, told secrets, and used negative labels toward sexually active girls. This is consistent with Clayton and Trafimow’s two-part study that showed “negative ‘slut attributions’” toward sexually active women (p. 683). Also, Clayton and Trafimow referred to an increase in HIV in women, possibly due to the label “too eager for sexual encounters” made toward women who carry their own protection (e.g., condoms) against STDs (p. 683). *The Virginity Club* followed the drama of upholding a pure image in spite of having sex. Ashcraft (2006) concluded discussions of readiness and virginity limit teenagers’ ability to make sense of their sexual experiences. The girls in *The Virginity Club* were defensive by lying and hiding having sex instead of being proactive and honest about their experiences.

*The Virginity Club* demonstrated the enormous amount of energy girls spend on defending their virginity, even lying about having sex to protect their image amongst their peers as sexually pure. This is consistent with two of the literature studies. First, Bay-Cheng and Lewis (2006) found mentors negatively labeled women in the media and squelched discussion amongst the girls studied. Second, Ashcraft’s study of language surrounding virginity and sex showed language tends to be restrictive instead of open communication about sex. The author of *The Virginity Club*, Kate Brian, was

enlightened by the irony surrounding teenage girls, as the main characters create and join the virginity club to defend their virginity and uphold their image as pure. Kate Brian likely had background knowledge about upholding virginity, and lying about having sex if necessary to do so as a familiar situation to teen girls.

Inner conflict or insecurity was present in several teenage characters. This is consistent with the literature that says adolescents are travelers, not sure of their home yet (Kagan, 1998, p. 10). They are forming their identities, sometimes experimenting with different ones or covering up their true selves in order to be socially accepted. Examples of characters doing this include Lauren in *Bloom*, who kept her affair with Evan a secret from her conservative, more socially acceptable boyfriend. In *The Making of Dr. Truelove*, Diego actually formed an online identity as an expert in sex in order to convince a girl to return to him. Sam in *Ready or Not* was not sure if she was ready to have sex or not but goes ahead and does so. This relates to how teenagers may be physically ready for sex but not emotionally prepared for the outcomes (Stine, 2007b).

Authors of bestsellers are likely well versed in teenage life as their writing needs to be relative to reality. Teenagers who see a reflection of real life or gain insight into their own experiences will rate a book much higher than if there is little to no connection to their thoughts or feelings. Furthermore, the American Library Association maintains its credibility with reliably interesting books on their awards lists. Drama in relationships and in the social setting likely draws in readers as they relate to the emotions in their own lives.

November in *November Blues*, faced a very real possibility for teenagers having sex: pregnancy. November was left with a profound situation. Her boyfriend died from a

pledge stunt and she later found out she was pregnant with his baby. November experienced physical trauma during the pregnancy, has the emotional trauma of deciding whether to keep her baby or give the baby up for adoption and legal problems when her boyfriend's parents want to adopt the baby, and her mother supports doing so. This is a gripping story for a reader who is interested in identifying these realities and perhaps relate personally to November's experiences. Sharon Draper approached this serious problem gracefully writing about a true to life situation.

Ana in *Ana's Story* is a profound depiction of both positives and negatives resulting from sexual behavior. Ana became pregnant and ended up discovering love for the first time in her life. Her story is a compelling testimony of a girl overcoming some of the worst circumstances to a life of hope. Ana is the only character who had HIV which she contracted from her mother while pregnant with Ana. Jenna Bush seemingly wrote this book to shed light on a young woman saddled with despairing circumstances, thus enlightenment, not amusement.

Pregnancy in the teenagers analyzed was different from the literature. Stine (2007b) found, "Sexually active couples have an 85% chance of pregnancy within the year if they do not use contraception" (p. 23). Of the 27 teenage characters studied, only four (14.8%) had a pregnancy occur. If the 20 teenagers analyzed who were sexually active matched this statistic, 17 would be pregnant, not just four.

The rare inclusion of physical consequences, particularly STDs, is consistent with Stine's (2007a) study that found 84% of the teens studied thought they were at little to no risk of STDs. Authors may be privy to the fact that most teenagers may not thinking about their risks of STDs but are more caught up in the emotions of sex and other trials



and tribulations of the teenage years. Furthermore, STDs is not an entertaining topic, rather unpleasant which may be why the fiction books did not address this, only nonfiction (written as reality).

Physical consequences were not as common as necessarily expected. The number of teenagers analyzed who had an STD as a result of their sexual behavior was not consistent with the literature. Gin from *Rainbow Party* was the only character that had an STD as a result of her own sexual behavior. According to Stine (2007a), an estimated 9 million teens get an STD each year, and the ratio of sexually active teens that will get an STD this year is one in four. Thus, the presence of STDs in the characters analyzed was scarce compared to these statistics. Twenty of the 27 characters studied were sexually active, so at the rate of one in four, there would be five characters with STDs, not just one.

Perhaps popular books for teenagers do not tend to include pregnancy and STDs as they can be harsh realities as physical ramifications. If readers intend to read for stress relief, not to grapple with serious problems, books that are not concentrated on the physical ramifications may fit that need.

Positive results from sexual behaviors included personal insight for Ian in *All the Way* and bonding for Nick and Norah in *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*. Abby in *Fancy White Trash* did not have her own apparent consequence for sexual activity, rather her One True Love Plan, as a result of wanting to be different from her family. Ana in *Ana's Story* experienced hope. These characters show that sexual activity is not black and white but full of different influential factors and outcomes depending on the individual.

## Recommendations

Teenagers may be increasingly portrayed as promiscuous in young adult literature, which this content analysis reinforced. The researcher recommends replicating this study with another set of young adult literature books. The study would determine if the majority of teenage characters have sex in those books as well. The books may be a random sample from the most frequently circulated library items in school libraries to determine reliability of the results in this study.

The researcher recommends a study of gender or racial stereotypes regarding teenagers and sex. For example, are the majority of teenage girls sexually labeled, looked down upon for having sex, etc.? Are the majority of boys labeled negatively or rather portrayed as macho? This may be another quantitative content analysis.

The researcher also wonders about the reflection of reality in young adult literature. A recommendation for further study would be interviews with teens – randomly selected from various schools, socioeconomic levels, multiple religions (strong convictions to lack thereof), cultural backgrounds, and a balance of boys and girls. Robin Bowman (2007) completed a project like this already: “traveled “21,731 miles through most of the regions and corners of the nation, met thousands of young men and women, and formally photographed and interviewed four-hundred nineteen of them, all of whom are represented in this book” (pp. 9-10). This study alone shows that many authors write books with teenage sexuality as a theme. The study would be not merely a replication but would differ by two years later and another set of subjects. As society changes rapidly, feedback from teenagers may change also. Embarking on a journey throughout the United States would provide a grasp of the reality of our teenagers’ lives: a

meaningful extension of this study. Furthermore, smaller-scale studies with a parallel approach to Robin Bowman's book including 26 different questions to ask teens would provide insightful samples of reality. This would provide additional opportunities to compare this content analysis to reality, following the background in the literature review, and perhaps inform authors, teachers, and parents of teenage life for current and future projects and every day application.

Another recommendation, perhaps coinciding with the above study of American teenagers today, is to analyze teenagers' awareness of sexual activity, influences, and ramifications. This may consist of interviews or surveys, which would enlighten the researcher and also teenagers regarding young adult sexual practices, influences, and consequences. This may increase teenagers' awareness of the sexual content they read in literature, watch on TV or movies, or participate in and what precedes and follows those activities.

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## APPENDIX A

## 2009 BEST BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Compiled by Young Adult Library Services Association

“The books, recommended for those ages 12-18, meet the criteria for both good quality literature and appealing reading for teens” (YALSA).

*Fiction*

*Audrey, Wait!* by Robin Benway, 2008

*What I Saw and How I Lied* by Judy Blundell, 2008

*Mexican WhiteBoy*. By Matt de la Pena, 2008

*Fancy White Trash* by Marjetta Geerling, 2008

*The Last Exit to Normal* by Michael Harmon, 2008

*Baby* by Joseph Monninger, 2007

*The Wild Girls* by Pat Murphy, 2008

*The Spectacular Now* by Tim Tharp, 2008

*The Brothers Torres* by Coert Voorhees, 2008

*Nonfiction*

*It's Complicated: The American Teenager* by Robin Bowman, 2007

*Before Their Time: The World of Child Labor* by David L. Parker, 2007

## APPENDIX B

## 2009 QUICK PICKS FOR RELUCTANT YOUNG ADULT READERS

Compiled by Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)

“The Quick Picks list suggests books that teens, ages 12-18, will pick up on their own and read for pleasure; it is geared to the teenager who, for whatever reason, does not like to read” (YALSA).

*Fiction*

*November Blues* by Sharon Draper, 2007

*I Know It's Over* by C. K. Martin, 2008

*Living Dead Girl* by Elizabeth Scott, 2008

*Nonfiction*

*Ana's Story: A Journey of Hope* by Jenna Bush, 2007

*Falling Hard: 100 Love Poems by Teenagers* by Betsy Franco (Ed.), 2008

*One Hundred Young Americans* by Michael Franzini, 2007

*Love Letters: 150 Letters You Were Never Meant to See* by Bill Shapiro, 2007



## APPENDIX C

## “SEX IS...” CATEGORY OF 2008 POPULAR PAPERBACKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Compiled by Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)

*The Making of Dr. True Love* by Derrick Barnes, 2006

*All the Way* by Andy Behrens, 2007

*The Virginity Club* by Kate Brian, 2008

*Doing It* by Melvin Burgess, 2006

*Ready or Not* by Meg Cabot, 2008

*Played* by Dana Davidson, 2007

*Hail Caesar* by Ha Thu-Huong, 2007

*The Order of the Poison Oak* by Brent Hartinger, 2006

*Desire* by Maki Kazumi, 2004

*Blood and Chocolate* by Annette Curtis Klause, 2007

*Nick & Norah's Infinite* by David Levithan & Rachel Cohn, 2008

*The Little Black Book for Girlz: A Book on Healthy Sexuality* by St. Stephen's Community House, 2006

*Fly on the Wall: How One Girl Saw Everything* by E. Lockhart, 2007

*The Straight Road to Kylie* by Medina Nico, 2007

*Doing it Right: Making Smart, Safe, and Satisfying Choices About Sex* by Bronwen Pardes, 2007

*Rainbow Party* by Paul Ruditis, 2005

*Bloom* by Elizabeth Scott, 2007

*Pop!* By Aury Wallington, 2006

*Absolute Boyfriend, Volume 1* by Yuu Watase, 2003

## APPENDIX D

## TWENTY BOOKS FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

*What I Saw and How I Lied*

*Audrey, Wait!*

*Rainbow Party*

*Desire*

*Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*

*Pop!*

*Fancy White Trash*

*Ana's Story*

*The Making of Dr. True Love*

*Baby*

*Blood & Chocolate*

*All the Way*

*Living Dead Girl*

*Ready or Not*

*Played*

*November Blues*

*Doing It*

*The Virginity Club*

*Bloom*

*It's Complicated: The American Teenager*

## APPENDIX E

## RESEARCH CHECKLIST FOR YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE SELECTIONS

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Sexual activity of prominent character(s)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Abstinence
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Making out (activity without sex)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Sex (oral sex or intercourse)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Other (flirting, dancing, observing)
  
2. Influences on or risk factors for the prominent characters' sexual in/activity:
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Peers (friends; boyfriend/girlfriend)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Family (parents, siblings, etc.)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Media (TV, the press)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Violence (carrying a weapon, physical fighting, violently assaulting a date, being a victim of date violence, committing rape, or being a rape victim)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Drugs (drinking alcohol, bingeing on alcohol, smoking marijuana, or smoking cigarettes)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ School
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Other
  
3. Physical and emotional ramifications following sexual activity of prominent characters:
  - \_\_\_\_\_ STDs
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Pregnancy
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Emotional (hurt, betrayal, jealousy, rejection, or a growing inability to trust)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Physical trauma
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Legal
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Positives