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Finding Azadi: South Asian Canadian Women's Experiences of Sexual Well-Being

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology

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Abstract

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with cisgender women, age 20-40, and their shared experiences were compiled into two narrative composites. This study is informed by an intersectional-life course framework, exploring sexuality as a site of shifting power relations at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of participants' lives. This study identifies five predominant sexual constructions that South Asian Canadian women understand and experience over time. It also identifies five predominant strategies used by women to maintain a personally meaningful sexual life (sexual well-being). Participants' fluctuating sexual well-being involving active negotiation of the relationship to one's body, identities (including ethnoracial and religious identities), and interpersonal relationships. It finds that women's sexuality is a site of power used to define and maintain boundaries of the imagined nation, in both South Asian and western spaces. Women's sexuality is often tied to ideas of risk, and women are expected to perform ideal types in order to protect the status quo within their families and communities. The study finds that women learn to resist and transform external ideals about sexuality, often by leaning into their cultures and religions to negotiate tensions while remaining connected to their South Asian realities.

Keywords

Sexuality, Sexual Well-Being, Sexual Health, South Asian, Canada, Intersectional Life Course, Power, Agency

Summary for Lay Audience

This study explores how social messages about ideal sexuality impact South Asian Canadian women's lives. This study is based on eighteen interviews with women between the ages of 20-40. They recounted their understanding or experience of aspects of sexuality, such as puberty, intercourse, and partnerships. Their responses have been recombined into two narrative composites, created based on participants' ages, so that we can better understand the context and impacts of sexual constructions on women's lives. The analysis of responses is framed by two main ideas: first, the ways we view and interact with our worlds are impacted by our identities and locations (and vice versa). Second, earlier events in our lives, family relationships, and broader social contexts all shape the way we experience later events in life. Given these two ideas, this study finds that factors like race, religion, migration, and socialisation at home or school all interact to shape the way women express sexuality. As they age, women encounter celebratory and stigmatising social messages (constructions) about sexuality. This study analyzes five messages which often reinforce ideal types of what being good, desirable, and valuable South Asian and western women look like or how they behave. The study argues that these messages matter because they can impact how women feel they can express their sexual identities, boundaries, and needs. They also matter because the messages are often used to maintain identity and group belonging. Women often find themselves learning how to manage their sexuality so that they feel accepted and validated by their families, religious or cultural communities, or western peers. This study also presents five strategies that women learn to use to live out their desired sexual lives (sexual well-being) as the constraints on their sexuality change over time. Despite women's varying sexual identities, partner status, or sexual needs, the participants in this study tended to experience sexual well-being safe and connected to their body, identities, and to a wide range of interpersonal relationships.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	<i>i</i>
Keywords	<i>i</i>
Summary for Lay Audience	<i>ii</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>iii</i>
List of Figures and Tables	<i>vii</i>
List of Appendices	<i>viii</i>
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review 1	3
Conceptualizing Sexuality	3
1.1: Positivist Conceptualizations of Sexuality	3
1.2: Social Constructionist Conceptualizations of Sexuality	4
1.3: The Conceptual Divide: Remaining Problems	5
1.4: Conceptualizing Biopsychosocial Sexuality	6
1.5: Relevance of Biopsychosocial Sexuality	8
1.6: Conclusion	10
Conceptualizing Sexual Well-Being	11
2.1: Existing Research.....	11
2.2: Sexual Well-Being Assessed Through Physiological Facets of Sexuality	12
2.3: Sexual Well-Being Assessed Through Psychological Facets of Sexuality	12
2.4: Existing Approaches to Sexual Health	13
2.5: Expanding Sexual Well-being	14
2.6: Conceptualizing Sexual Well-Being in the Present Study.....	15
2.7: Sexual Well-Being is a Right	17
2.8: Chapter Conclusion	19
Chapter 3: Literature Review 2	21
Situating South Asian Canadians	21
3.1: Understanding South Asian Identities.....	21
3.2: A South Asian Canadian Profile	23
3.3: South Asian Cultural and Religious Constructions of Sexuality	26
3.4: Marriage and Duty	27
3.5: Heteronormative Sexualities	29
3.6: Izzat: Familial Honour and Gender	30
3.7: Managing Sexualized Bodies	31
3.8: Sexuality and Boundary-Making	33
3.9: Variation in Constructions.....	35
3.10: Conclusion	38
South Asian Transnationals in Sexuality Research	38
3.11: Sexual Health Profile	39
3.12: Sexual Subjectivities	42
3.13: New Directions	46
3.14 Chapter Conclusion	47
Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework	49
4.1 Intersectionality Framework	49

4.2 Life Course Perspective	53
4.3 Present Framework: Intersectional Life Course Perspective	57
4.4: Step 1: Life Events, Timing, & Structural Forces	57
4.5: Step 2: Locally and Globally Linked Lives	58
4.6: Step 3: Identities, Social Locations, and Processes of Difference	59
4.7: Step 4: Domination, Agency, and Resistance.....	61
4.8: Relevance of an Intersectional Life Course Theoretical Framework.....	62
4.9 Conclusion	64
Chapter 5: Methodology	65
5.1 Thematic Analysis	65
5.2 Instrumentation and Ethics	68
5.3: Instrumentation	68
5.4: Ethics	69
5.5: Recruitment and Data Collection	70
5.6: Recruitment	70
5.7: Data Collection.....	71
5.8: Participant Contextual Information	72
5.9: Data Analysis	72
5.10: Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data	73
5.11: Phase 2: Generating Codes	73
5.12: Coding Stage 1.....	73
5.13: Coding Stage 2.....	74
5.14: Phase 3: Generating Themes	75
5.15: Phases 4 and 5: Verifying, Refining, and Defining Themes	75
5.16: Phase 6: The Write Up	77
5.17: Rigor	79
5.18: Trustworthiness	80
5.19: Reflexivity.....	81
5.20: Conclusion	86
Chapter 6: Narrative Composites	87
Ravnoor: A Journey from a Fragmented Self in a Fragmented World (age 40)	90
6.1: Childhood	90
6.2: Adolescence	92
6.3: Sexuality Constructed as Dangerous	93
6.4: Sexuality Constructed as the Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making Processes	96
6.5: Sexuality Constructed as Immoral.....	97
6.6: Managing through Compartmentalizing	99
6.7: Adulthood	103
6.8: Sexuality Constructed as Heteronormative Acts and as a Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making.....	105
6.10: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Realities	108
6.11: Conclusion	110
Nilani: A Journey from Self-Rejection and Heteronormativity (age 20)	110
6.12: Childhood	110
6.13: Adolescence	113
6.14: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Life and as Dangerous	113
6.15: Sexuality Constructed as Dangerous and a Heteronormative Act	116
6.16: Sexuality Constructed as a Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making, and as a Heteronormative Act	118
6.17: Adulthood	120

6.18: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Reality and Well-Being Strategies.....	123
6.19: Conclusion.....	126
6.20: Chapter Conclusion.....	127
Chapter 7: Conclusion	128
7.1: Reflexivity and Research Goals	128
7.2: Goal 1: Expanding Sexual Well-Being.....	129
7.3: Goal 2: Expanding Views about South Asian Sexual Conservatism	131
7.4: Goal 3: Dynamic South Asian Cultures and People	132
7.5: Conclusion.....	133
7.6: Domination and Control	133
7.7: Sexual Constructions and Theory.....	133
7.8: Agency and Resistance	138
7.9: Sexual Construction	138
7.10: Sexual Strategies and Theory	139
7.11: Concluding Remarks and Future Directions	144
References.....	148
Appendices.....	173

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Dimensions of Sexuality	7
Table 1 Key Participant Demographic Information	72
Table 2 Ravnoor Composite Details	173
Table 3 Nilani Composite Details	174

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval	175
Appendix 2: Interview Guide	176

Chapter 1: Introduction

My research examines the recollections that South-Asian Canadian women hold about their life experiences of their sexuality and their sexual well-being. In this regard, I investigated the sociocultural constructions of sexuality that are communicated to, and expected of women, which prescribe ideal sexual values, roles, behaviours, and identities. I also explored the strategies South-Asian Canadian women use to navigate these broader constructions of sexuality and the ways that they promote their sexual well-being. I pay close attention to changes across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood within the contexts of social locations and surrounding social worlds. My key research questions are:

“What are the predominant sociocultural constructions of sexuality as experienced by South Asian Canadian women throughout their life course?”

“How do women navigate these sociocultural constructions of sexuality in their pursuit of sexual well-being?”

This research is relevant because it draws attention to the subjectivities of the women who participated in my research. I focus on multiple facets of sexuality, including the ways women navigate desires, gender roles, care strategies, interpersonal relationships, and identities. My study adds to existing research by examining how South Asian Canadian women actively understand sexualities and assert a sexual life that they personally value as they age. I focus on individual positions, interpersonal dynamics, and sociocultural contexts that shape how experiences of sexuality unfold.

In addition to addressing the research questions, I seek to achieve three research goals. Throughout my work, I seek to untangle the power dynamics embedded in women’s sexual lives. These dynamics become clear when considering how interpersonal relationships and social contexts influence women’s understandings and experiences of their sexuality, and vice versa. My work addresses the need for research that explores how women “re-write, re-interpret, resist, and negotiate South Asian diasporic gender and family experiences in new and unique ways” (Mehrotra, 2016, p. 369). Gender and family experiences are strongly connected to constructions and expressions of sexuality. I examine the ways participants accept, rework, reject, and/or balance broader expectations of moral femininity, boundary-making, and belonging in their pursuit of sexual well-being. As a result, my goals in this work are to disrupt three positions that characterize sexuality research and in research on

South Asians populations. First, I reject conceptualizations of sexual well-being that focus on physiological states of sexual function and health. I instead apply an expanded conceptualization of sexual well-being to participants' lives. Second, I reject the idea that immigrants must either acculturate to western sexual liberality to find sexual well-being or retain "traditional" sexual conservatism. Third, I challenge the idea of South Asian cultures and its peoples as a monolith. In so doing, I build on my second goal, highlighting the ongoing cultural transformation and internal variation that exists alongside similarities. In this way, I confront my power as a researcher to unsettle dominant understandings of South Asian Canadian women's lives.

I review existing literature in chapters two and three. In chapter two, I review the dominant understandings of sexuality and sexual well-being and then explore sexuality and sexual well-being as nuanced, flexible concepts. In chapter three, I present existing research on South Asians in Canada, the South Asian cultural contexts that shape sexuality, sexual health research on South Asians, and research that attends to sexual subjectivities of South Asians. In chapter four, I explain the applicability and application of intersectional and life course perspectives in examining, guiding, and understanding my research. In chapter five, I present my methodological approach. In chapter six, I present my findings as two narrative composites. Finally, in chapter seven, I relate the predominant sociocultural sexual constructions and strategies used to navigate these constructions in the pursuit of sexual well-being to existing research and to my theoretical framework. I conclude by exploring how the sexualities of South Asian Canadian girls and women are both a site of control and resistance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review 1

In this chapter I review the research on sexuality and sexual well-being, paying particular attention to how these constructs have been conceptualized. Based on this review, I conceptualize and justify the study of sexuality and sexual well-being as flexible constructs that support the subjectivities of participants. First, I establish my understanding of sexuality by summarizing a conceptual divide around the nature of sexuality. I also explain why sexuality is a relevant area of research. Second, I establish my understanding of sexual well-being by presenting how it is defined and measured in existing research. I conclude by explaining the importance of, and need for, research on sexual well-being.

Conceptualizing Sexuality

Among scholars, little agreement exists around the conceptualization of sexuality and the role that sexuality plays in women's social and personal lives (Weeks, 2003). Still, overarching definitions in western research are discernable (Zeglin & Mitchell, 2014). In this section, I will outline a divide between positivist and social constructionist perspectives of sexuality, drawing attention to the benefits and limitations of each. While there are a range of positions and sub-theories within each perspective (Reissing & VanZuylen, 2015), I limit discussion to the overall positions of the Positivist-Constructionist divide. In general, positivist research attends to biological and/or physiological dimensions of sexuality as immutable, while constructionist research attends to social dimensions of sexuality and focuses on fluidity within these categories. I argue that, by overlooking critical facets of sexuality, the focus of each presents an incomplete picture of the role of sexuality in individual lives. In response, I present a biopsychosocial perspective as my chosen approach to sexuality and discuss its relevance to my research.

1.1: Positivist Conceptualizations of Sexuality

Positivist (also described as essentialist, and/or naturalist) sexuality research tends to argue that sexuality is primarily determined by biological function (Elia, 2016; Epstein, 1994). Facets of sexuality are treated as “natural, inevitable, [and] universal” (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 10). This research emphasizes genetics, hormones, reproductive organs, sexual responses, and drives (Bancroft, 2002; Bywater, 2013). For example, theorists may posit that sexual attraction has developed from evolutionary forces, to maximize reproductive success

(DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Early positivist research was vital in the creation a science of sexuality; it highlighted a basic sexual pattern for men and for women and centred sexuality as an important, universal component of life (Stein, 1989). Despite its contributions, early positivist research often reduced patient voice and problematized patient experiences by linking sexual deviance with biology (DeLamater & Plante, 2015; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Herdt, 2010; Lang & Sutton, 2016).

Contemporary positivism also tends to over rely on biological explanations and prioritize attention to bodies, procreative functions, and acts (Gagnon and Simon, 1973 as cited in Epstein, 1994). It can leave little room for change, ranges, or fluidity over time. For example, a positivist approach might position sex, gender, or sexual identities in discrete and static categories (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). In this regard, the difference between men and women is positioned as the result of distinct, “inevitable, biological traits”, also positioning gender as immutable (Konopka et al., 2019, p. 612). When biological or physiological facets of sexuality are treated as fixed, the role of structures and interpersonal dynamics that shape biological facets are overlooked. Positivist explanations also typically overlook what sexual facets mean to individuals, how meanings are established, and how they can change over time (Stein, 1989). For example, positivist sexual research minimizes social valuation assigned to bodily appearances, gender roles, and functions (Epstein, 1994; Konopka et al., 2019; Stein, 1989). To explore participants’ shifting understandings and expressions of sexuality as they move across cultural boundaries, I require a conceptualization of sexuality that accounts for the role of social structures and interpersonal dynamics.

1.2: Social Constructionist Conceptualizations of Sexuality

Sexuality research began to shift away from solely positivist explanations in the 1960s, taking influence from symbolic interactionism and labeling theory (DeLamater & Plante, 2015; Epstein, 1994; Weeks, 2010). This shift was part of a broader political movement of western sexual liberation and the beginnings of gay and lesbian studies. In contrast to positivist research, sociological social constructionism moved away from fixed, biological explanations of sexuality that prioritized sexual drives and behaviours (Stein, 1989; Epstein, 1994; Gamson & Moon, 2004). For instance, social constructionist approaches emphasize sexual attraction and desirability as a reflection of cultural norms, economic and social structures, and gender role constructions. By viewing sexuality as a social and historical product, social

constructionism holds that it cannot be reduced to a singular, physical, unchanging essence (Elia, 2016). According to social constructionism, social interactions, structural influences, and languages shape what sexuality means, how it is expressed, its mutable and dynamic nature, and how it is valued (Bywater, 2013; Cocks & Houlbrook, 2006; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Epstein, 1994; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Reissing & VanZuylen, 2015). For example, differences between men and women are not inherently biological but instead reflect “differences in gender socialization processes” (Konopka et al., 2019, p. 612). Sexual facets such as gender shift over time because of changing social meaning.

Still, a social constructionist approach to sexuality can downplay an underlying core reality and biological facets of sexuality (Reissing & VanZuylen, 2015; Stein, 1989). It can also overlook how “current arrangements of gender and sexuality are ‘real’” in the sense that they have real consequences in people’s lives (Brickell, 2006, p. 100). If sexuality is treated solely as a set of scripts, performances, and/or interactions, such an approach can ignore the “social relations of dominance and subordination” that are better reflected in a gender, race/ethnicity, or class-based analysis (Brickell 2006, p. 101; Collins, 2000; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Puri, 1999; Stein, 1989). For example, constructionism excludes “forms of labour, coercion, constraint or resistance that are not purely linguistic”, and overlooks how cultural factors arise from and maintain particular interests around sexuality (Brickell, 2006, p. 100). As a result, an approach to sexuality that centres participants’ daily realities must consider the interplay between the biological and the social, but also consider changing access to power based on participants’ locations.

1.3: The Conceptual Divide: Remaining Problems

The Positivist-Constructionist divide highlights the challenges of conceptualizing sexuality. A comparison of the two conceptualization frameworks demonstrates that treating sexuality as solely biological or entirely the result of social interactions leaves several dilemmas. Both emphasize singular dimensions of sexuality; both overlook how multiple dimensions influence each other, and both underplay how sexuality unfolds across the life course. Of course, there are a range of models within each position that do not treat positivist and constructionist approaches in rigid opposition. Still, a purely biological approach does not account for constraints, “change and sexual transformation” at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Stein, 1989, p. 2). A purely constructionist approach does not reconcile that for many

individuals, sexuality is a core reality and not simply a product of social influences and interactions (Stein, 1989). Positioning sexuality at either pole of the divide occludes critical aspects of sexuality and sexual well-being that I seek to explore in South Asian Canadian women's lives: individual locations, power dynamics, and change over time. I argue that the dilemmas of the Positivist-Constructionist divide are addressed by stepping outside of the "either/or" solution (Elia, 2016). In the next subsection, I define my conceptualization of sexuality according to a biopsychosocial approach. This approach to sexuality avoids the pitfalls of the Positivist-Constructionist divide by not prioritizing any single dimension of sexuality. Instead, it integrates the strengths of biological and constructionist perspectives of sexuality (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Reissing & VanZuylen, 2015).

1.4: Conceptualizing Biopsychosocial Sexuality

In this study, I apply a biopsychosocial model to conceptualize sexuality, which positions sexuality as multidimensional, interconnected, and dynamic. Sexuality is treated as a set of biological, psychological, and social dimensions, with overlapping facets within each (Bancroft, 2002; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Each of the three dimensions interact in a multidirectional manner, influencing one another to produce variation in the meaning, expression, and valuation of sexuality (Bywater, 2013; Chrisler & Sagrestano, 2020; Elia, 2016; Hillman, 2011; Lehmler, 2017; Southard & Keller, 2009). Drawing on work by Redman-MacLaren & Veukiso-Ulugia (2019), I view sexuality as "a broad spectrum of beliefs, motivations, values and actions" (p. 127). This biopsychosocial model includes, but is not limited to, facets such as reproductive processes and organs, identities, roles, desires, (non)attractions, emotions, and values (See Figure 1).

Figure 1.

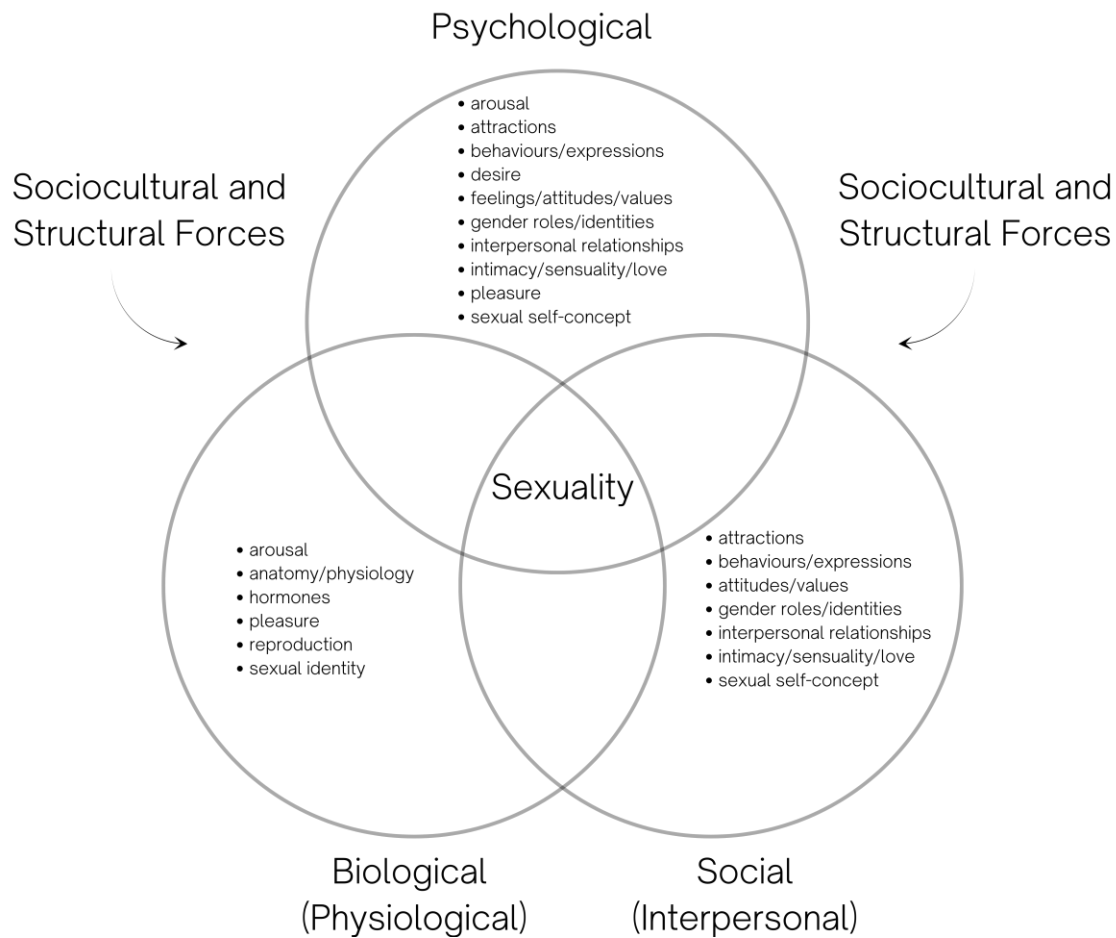


Figure 1 Dimensions of Sexuality

With this conceptualization, I acknowledge the role of biology but do not overemphasize or treat biological facets as immutable factors that reflect a sex/gender binary. Instead, I balance attention to biology with attention to individual agency and interpersonal relationships, which are captured within the psychological and social dimensions of sexuality. For example, a process like the menstrual cycle involves physiological factors that vary depending on an individual's age, biology, psychological states, and external forces (Chrisler & Sagrestano, 2020). Physiology is shaped by fluctuating health conditions, diet, socioeconomic status, access to sexual health care, mental and physical stressors, and/or emotional responses. These dimensions of sexuality are also shaped by external sociocultural forces. As a result, it is important that the biopsychosocial model also reflects processes of racialization, cultural norms, and religious traditions, which also impact access to resources, understandings, and experiences of menstruation. This reflection helps to de-centre the idea of a universal menstrual experience for women, which notably also acknowledges the absence of

menstruation (that is, not all women menstruate and menstruation is not solely a female experience). In this way, I maintain that biology is a key part of sexuality but varies over time. Through this model of sexuality, I assert that while women may share some biological facets, such conditions alone do not define sex or gender. Overall, the expression of sexuality and its facets are dependent on shifting interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors.

I assert that while sexualities contain physiological and psychological facets, sexualities also reflect access to social and economic resources, socialization, and the historical, political, cultural, or religious contexts in which individuals live (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008; World Health Organization, 2006). As a result, sexualities involve the interplay between individual needs, desires and abilities, the needs and rights of others, and broader social expectations and requirements (PHAC, 2008). With this as my conceptualization, my research can attend to the ways that sociocultural constructions of sexuality reflect and create sexual norms, expectations, or roles. My research also considers how women actively internalize, reject, or transform these constructions. I treat sexuality as actively negotiated and changing over time and place, which better accounts for the many possible ways sexuality unfolds across the life course. By recognizing that sexuality has multiple interconnected dimensions, sexuality becomes a flexible, but real construct in individual lives. This conception of sexuality is beneficial because it allows for the consideration of a wider range of determinants of sexual well-being that otherwise would be considered irrelevant.

1.5: Relevance of Biopsychosocial Sexuality

Understanding sexuality according to a biopsychosocial perspective aligns with the premises of life course and intersectional perspectives. It supports the idea that understandings, expressions, and experiences of sexuality constantly change across the life course. It also treats sexuality as varying by social locations and agency. These both help to make visible and prioritize a wider range of participant understandings and experiences of sexuality across the life course. Although I explore life course and intersectional positions around sexuality in the theoretical framework chapter, I note several important strengths in this subsection.

Sexuality develops and changes constantly across the life course, so a nuanced examination considers its progression as people age and considers life stage (Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

For example, sexuality is a changing characteristic of an individual's life from birth to death. Infancy to childhood might involve development of gender identity and early exploration of bodies and genital organs, while early adolescence may involve onset of sexual attraction and masturbation (DeLamater & Freidrich, 2002). Adolescence may involve puberty-related physical changes, further sexual exploration, and interpersonal sexual behaviours (Greydanus & Pratt, 2016). Puberty has been viewed as a "major landmark in the development of sexuality" (Kar et al., 2015, pp. 1). During this time, one may experience physiological and psychological changes, formation of sexual attitudes, and exploration of the body and sexual identities. Attention to adolescent experiences is important because of the continued influence on sexuality, sexual health outcomes, and relationships into adulthood (Impett et al., 2006; Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Finally, sexualities from early to later adulthood are not simply static and fully formed. Bodily functions, sexual exploration, and sexual attitudes change. For example, individuals can learn new aspects of their sexual identities or preferred ways of expressing intimacy throughout adulthood. While these life stages all overlap and blur, research often treats adolescent and adult sexuality as distinct phases (Fortenberry, 2016). Biopsychosocial and life course perspectives hold strength in acknowledging the ever-changing nature of the sexual self, where life stages are not clear or uniform, and involve malleable trajectories.

The biopsychosocial perspective also lends itself to the premises of intersectional research. By treating sexuality as the product of individual and social factors, it is possible to account for the underlying economic, cultural, raced, religious, and gendered contexts that shape sexuality. A biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexuality aligns with intersectional research by not privileging any sexual dimension or individual location. Instead, both emphasize a range of unique lived realities. For example, for some, sexuality can be a crucial aspect of one's identity, and it can be inseparable from forms of pleasure. For others it can be peripheral, a source of immorality, or something that fosters discomfort. Its meaning, expression, and value in an individual's life can also change over a lifetime, involving fluctuating qualities and emotions like sexual self-esteem or guilt (Russell, 2014). I use this approach to better represent participant understandings of their own sexualities, since not all dimensions of sexuality are valued, experienced, or expressed universally (Kismödi et al., 2017; WHO, 2006).

Applications of intersectionality maintain that sexuality is socially stratified across multiple hierarchies and reflects “intersecting systems of power” (Gkiouleka, 2018, p. 94). Both intersectional and biopsychosocial approaches to sexuality can attend to multiple levels of analysis, emphasizing both the role of the individual and interactions with their interpersonal networks and broader social contexts. For example, sexual attitudes and behaviours are influenced by access to resources, systematic barriers, and sociocultural belief systems (Kraut-Becher et al., 2008). With time, individuals also learn about their sexual selves and needs. They establish how to discuss and share facets of their sexuality with others, reformulate sexual values, and experience fluctuating states of sexual well-being. A biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexuality aligns with intersectional treatment of individual experiences as constrained and enabled by the resources and positions held in society. It does not view individuals, their sexualities, or the social forces involved as static and separate. This fluidity allows for exploration of shifts in power, including the ways individuals resist and transform sociocultural values about sexuality. A biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexuality is relevant because its construction as multifaceted and extending across many aspects of daily life supports the notion that sexuality is a key part of personhood. I will explore this second benefit in detail in the subsequent section of this chapter, where I explain how both sexuality and sexual well-being are universal, but unmet human rights.

1.6: Conclusion

The limitations and criticisms of both positivistic and social constructionist conceptualizations of sexuality warrant a new approach. I have turned to a biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexuality, which I argue, incorporates the strengths of those frameworks. It is appropriate because it maintains that sexuality is actively negotiated and fluid. It recognizes but does not reduce sexuality to biological facets. Simultaneously, it recognizes how sexuality, including its biological/physiological dimension, can transform over time because of the interplay between individual agency, interpersonal relationships, and broader social contexts. The psychological and social dimensions of sexuality are also addressed, which include individual locations, cognitive or affective aspects, and the interpersonal and broader social contexts in which individuals live. Each dimension has a potential role in the way sexuality is expressed and takes on meaning across individual lives and populations. A biopsychosocial conceptualization supports an intersectional life course research framework,

as it can account for changes across lives, and it can capture the power dynamics that shape and are shaped by individual standpoints and sociocultural contexts. It also supports my conceptualization of sexual well-being, which is a related but distinct concept. In the next section I will turn my attention to existing understandings of sexual well-being, how I conceptualize it, and why this is relevant to my research.

Conceptualizing Sexual Well-Being

Although there is growing interest in sexual well-being, few studies clearly and directly define this concept (Girouard et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2011; Lorimer et al., 2019; Martin & Woodgate, 2020; Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016). In a review of sexual well-being research, only 10 out of 162 studies conceptualized sexual well-being (Lorimer et al., 2019). Studies instead tend to provide measures as a proxy for its conceptualization, inferring that these measures provide insight into its meaning (Dune et al., 2018; Lorimer et al., 2019; Martin & Woodgate, 2020). Problematically, these measures vary from each other. As with the conceptualizations of sexuality, the meaning and operationalization of sexual well-being changes across study, time, context, individuals, and population (Condran, 2014; Bedree et al., 2020). For example, across studies, sexual well-being has been interpreted as sexual satisfaction, sexual function, agency, desire, behaviours, and sexual attitudes (Bancroft et al., 2011; Bedree et al., 2020; Gillen & Markey, 2019; Hellemans et al., 2015; Kaestle & Evans, 2018). Within this context, I evaluate existing research and identify key approaches that influence how I understand sexual well-being in the present study. I also explain the relevance of sexual well-being as a sexual right.

2.1: Existing Research

I first describe the way sexual well-being has been studied in the literature. I provide a short summary of physiological approaches to sexual well-being; psychological approaches to sexual well-being; and physiological, partnered approaches to sexual health. I include attention to sexual health because it is **sometimes** used interchangeably with sexual well-being in studies. I explore the gaps across these three approaches, created by the shared tendency to prioritize sexual function and intercourse. I conclude that sexual well-being research should consider multiple dimensions of sexuality and should consider the interaction between the individual and their broader contexts. Finally, I describe how I conceptualize sexual well-being in the present study.

2.2: Sexual Well-Being Assessed Through Physiological Facets of Sexuality

In existing research, sexual well-being tends to prioritize a biomedical lens. Studies assess physiological facets of sexuality such as organ function, frequency of sexual intercourse, absence of disease and unintended pregnancy, or breadth of protective sexual behaviours (Gillen & Markey, 2019; Hellemans et al., 2015; Higgins et al., 2011; Izquierdo, 2005; Martin & Woodgate, 2020; Štulhofer et al., 2016; Weaver & Byers, 2018). Exclusive attention to these facets and outcomes does not provide a comprehensive picture of sexuality nor the ways sexuality is used to maintain processes of difference and domination. This focus overlooks psychological and social sexual dimensions, the interaction of these dimensions, and facets within these dimensions (O'Connor et al., 2018; Van Hooff & Morris, 2020). For example, existing research finds that gynaecological cancer and treatment affects sexual well-being in ways that fall outside physiological facets. Cancer and its corresponding treatments can impact emotional states, body image, identity, and can also have interpersonal impacts such as changes to communication between two partners (Gilbert et al., 2011). Exclusive attention to physiological facets of sexuality prioritizes function and absence of risk within “a normative, essentialist framework on sexual response and performance” (Van Hooff & Morris, 2020, p. 6). This renders any sexual expression outside of these functional ideals as abnormal, irresponsible, and maintains “racialized narratives that demonize minority sexuality” (Lorenz, 2019, p. 340). In these ways, sexual well-being is not just expressed physiologically, and is shaped by individuals’ locations and the world around them.

2.3: Sexual Well-Being Assessed Through Psychological Facets of Sexuality

Other studies conceptualize and assess sexual well-being through self-perceptions of sexual facets (Laumann et al, 2006; Lee & Fenge, 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2010; Redman-MacLaren & Veukiso-Ulugia, 2019; Santos-Iglesias et al., 2016; Verschuren et al., 2013). Such studies explore subjective perceptions of facets of sexuality, such as sexual communication, attitudes, or knowledge (Laumann et al., 2006; Lorimer et al., 2019; Martin & Woodgate, 2020). The studies also explore evaluations about oneself through measures on sexual self-esteem and body image, self-efficacy, sexual subjectivity, or emotional states such as anxiety and shame (Lorimer et al, 2019; Muise et al., 2010; Weaver & Byers, 2013;

Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016). In general, this research frames and prioritizes subjective perceptions and evaluations around functional and partnered facets of sexuality (Martin & Woodgate, 2020). For example, Mastro & Zimmer-Gembeck (2015) assess perceptions of satisfaction, pleasure, self-esteem, and efficacy during sexual intercourse. While satisfaction-centred studies have begun to incorporate other relational aspects such as emotional intimacy, they still prioritize partnered intercourse to assess sexual well-being (Van Hooff & Morris, 2020). Furthermore, studies that examine how individuals feel about sexual intercourse may not adequately capture the role of external factors in shaping those assessments, warranting further research (Lorimer et al., 2019).

2.4: Existing Approaches to Sexual Health

I include existing research on sexual health in this review because of its implicit relationship to the concept of sexual well-being. Studies do not always offer distinct definitions of either, and the two concepts often appear identical and interchangeable (Bedree et al., 2020; Dune et al., 2018; Impett et al., 2006; Martin & Woodgate, 2020; Redman-MacLaren & Veukiso-Ulugia, 2019; Visser et al., 2007). The concepts of sexual well-being and sexual health are further complicated in research that treats sexual well-being as a component of sexual health (Condran, 2014; Kaestle & Evans, 2018), and in other research that assumes and asserts that sexual well-being includes sexual health (Bedree et al., 2020; Fortenberry, 2016; Lorimer et al., 2019; Martin & Woodgate, 2020). For example, according to the World Health Organization (2006) sexual health is:

“[a state of] ...of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.” (WHO, 2006)

The above biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexual health extends beyond physiological illness and dysfunction and incorporates notions of well-being (Huppert, 2014; Lorimer et al., 2019; Russell, 2014; Southern, 2018). However, like biomedical approaches to sexual well-being, this conceptualization of sexual health infers and idealizes sexual expression as partnered and intercourse-based (Fortenberry, 2016). Studies on sexual health tend to examine “symptom reduction; and their outcome measures usually do not even include assessment of positive feeling or positive functioning” (Huppert, 2014, p. 3). This is

problematic first because it risks maintaining social, religious, and political norms about sexual organ and hormone function, sexual activity, and psychological states, and second because ideologies about what healthy behaviours are, what health is, or who is healthy are reified as normal. As a result, needs and voices are potentially “muted in interactions with the dominant order” (Bottorff et al., 2001, p. 392; Coleman, 2010; Peel Public Health, 2012; Richters & Khoei, 2008). In this research, I argue that sexual well-being includes notions and dimensions of sexual health (Fortenberry, 2016; Martin & Woodgate, 2020). Since I approach sexual well-being as a multi-dimensional construct, I acknowledge that individuals may prioritize aspects of sexual health as part of their ideal sexual life.

2.5: Expanding Sexual Well-being

Existing research that focuses on physiological sexual well-being, psychological sexual well-being, and sexual health often prioritize sexuality as state of function or as a partnered act of intercourse. It tends to normalize sexual intercourse as always satisfying, enjoyable, or even preferred (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Martin & Woodgate, 2020; Muise et al., 2010). As a result, individuals whose ideal sexual trajectories do not involve, prioritize, or resemble normative ideas about function and sexual intercourse are pathologized. This includes those who are othered, aging, deemed risky, experiencing pain, trauma, and chronic mental and physical illness, or bodies that “threaten the idea of sexuality as a simply a route to pleasure and freedom” (Fahs and McClelland, 2016, p. 393). For example, Lee & Fenge (2016) argue that a “culture of risk avoidance sends the message that disabled people cannot and should not expect to lead full lives” (p. 2270). While physiological functions, intercourse, or avoidance of risk are important to well-being, these do not offer a complete picture of the ways sexuality unfolds in participants’ daily lives.

A well-rounded and more accurate approach to sexual well-being should also account for other experiences, expectations, and understandings of sexuality (Impett et al., 2006; Santos-Iglesias et al., 2016). As a result, bodies that fall out of normative bounds when exclusively assessing function and intercourse are instead treated as having sexually fulfilling lives or positive sexualities. A wider scope of sexual well-being would confront the ways that sexual bodies are encouraged to appear and act, or confront constructions of deviance (Lee et al., 2019). For example, in their review of sexual well-being literature, Lorimer et al. (2019) find that 11 out of 162 studies considered the sociocultural contexts that influence sexual well-being. Most tend to examine individual and interpersonal contexts, exploring perceptions and

experiences of sexual function, partnered intercourse, and risk-aversion. Sociocultural contexts are critical considerations because they shape how sexuality is understood, experienced, and what is valued or normalized, which all have impacts on sexual well-being (Gilbert et al., 2011). In sum, sexual well-being research should explore the opportunities and constraints that shape an individual's ability to express multiple sexual facets (Lorimer et al., 2019).

2.6: Conceptualizing Sexual Well-Being in the Present Study

In my research, I define sexual well-being as the ability to achieve a sexual life of personal meaning. I create this new definition based on two approaches in existing research. First, I draw on research that emphasizes a capability approach to general well-being, where well-being is “the ability of a person to live a life they have reason to value” (Lorimer et al., 2019, p. 844; Sen, 1993). A capability approach to well-being focuses on the freedom to assert the life individuals find meaning in (capabilities) and their actual achievements (functionings) (Sen, 1993). Sen (1993) argues that this approach offers a more complete picture of individuals' lives because it acknowledges that well-being involves being able to choose and value what their life can look like. At the same time, the broader conditions of an individual's life are still recognized and acknowledged (Bay-Cheng et al., 2022). For example, an individual may have access to material resources, but this does not guarantee well-being, freedom, or personal dignity when experiences such as intimate partner violence cut across locations like class or caste (Bay-Cheng et al., 2022; Sen, 1993). With this conceptualization of sexual well-being, I am able to capture the ways participants continue to experience wellness in their sexual lives, even throughout or in response to trauma, chronic disease, and sexually transmitted illness (Elliot, 2018; Huppert, 2014). Depending on the way participants view their sexual journey, navigate hardship, and engage with facets of their sexuality, they can still sexually flourish.

Second, studies that examine participants' cognitive and emotional evaluations of sexual well-being by expanding operationalization beyond function, intercourse, or avoidance of risk inform my approach to sexual well-being (Laumann et al., 2006). Existing research asserts that a comprehensive understanding of sexual well-being assesses “a wide range of biological, psychological, and social” dimensions of sexuality (Santos-Iglesias et al., 2016, p. 87; Dellenborg et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2018). Thus, I position sexual well-being as a

dynamic state that changes based on how individuals understand and value their sexuality at a given point in time (O'Connor et al., 2018; Lorimer et al., 2019). While it can include risk avoidance or pleasure in partnered expressions, sexual well-being is also “reflective of oneself as a sexual being” overall (Muisse et al., 2010, p. 917; Fortenberry, 2016).

Participants value feelings of love, normality, dignity, acceptance, confidence, desirability, or personal security within interpersonal relationships (Bedree et al., 2020; Condran, 2014; Lee & Fenge, 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Fortenberry, 2016; Redman-MacLaren & Veukiso-Ulugia, 2019; Santos-Iglesias et al., 2016; Verschuren et al., 2013). For example, O'Connor et al. (2018) find that Fijian young people (including Fijians of Indian Descent) define sexual well-being as not only subjective self-evaluations and positive feelings like love, but also as capabilities. This includes feeling in control of their sexuality and able to make “informed decisions and being free from sexual harassment”, feeling respected and supported by others, and able to access culturally relevant information and services (p. 1251). In this way, well-being captures avoidance of and response to adversity, as well as “affirmative rights” (Bay-Cheng et al., 2022, p. 328), which allow a person to express their sexual self safely and in its entirety.

Therefore, I explore how sexual well-being is complicated and aided by personal locations, which can serve as “social support, resilience, and identity based-pride” in buffering against sexual discrimination and bolstering sexual well-being (Santos et al., 2017, p. 1207).

Research increasingly confirms the need to incorporate social locations and individual contexts in sexual well-being research. For example, studies explore sexual well-being in relation to disability (Lee & Fenge, 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Verschuren et al., 2013), aging (Santos-Iglesias et al., 2016), sexual trauma (Hellemens et al., 2015), cross-cultural contexts (Laumann et al., 2006), and illness (Ussher et al., 2012). Additional research complements these studies by addressing the combined impacts of social locations, especially around race, ethnicity, and migration contexts. My conceptualization intentionally complicates dominant constructions of sexuality by including marginalized or under-examined sexual understandings, identities, and bodies (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). As a result, I pay attention to the shifting power dynamics that shape what sexuality means, how it is expected to unfold, and how individuals respond to these ideas.

Overall, I treat sexual well-being as an assessment of how well participants are able to live a desirable sexual life, shaped by the context of their personal and relational life, across

different points of their lives. By attending to capability and subjectivity, this research explores “not only... what people have and do, but what they are able to do and be” (Lorimer et al., 2019, p. 844). The meaning of sexuality and pathways to an ideal sexual life change depending on life transitions, changing economic, social, and health capital, or fluctuating power dynamics in interpersonal and sociocultural contexts (Lee et al., 2019). So, I explore how participants understand their sexualities and feel able to express their identities and desires over time (Lorimer et al., 2019). My conceptualization is relevant because it considers how people experience their sexual lives (Lee et al., 2019), and how “one’s sexual life contributes to satisfaction, positive feelings, and affirmative self-appraisals” (Kaestle & Evans, 2018, p. 33). Balanced attention to positive and negative experiences is crucial to countering research that tends to pathologize South Asian experiences.

2.7: Sexual Well-Being is a Right

My conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual well-being are relevant because they support a growing body of attention to sexual rights. The premises of sexual rights are upheld when sexuality and sexual well-being are treated as multi-dimensional and shaped by interactions between the individual and their broader contexts. Sexuality and sexual well-being are key components of human dignity and rights (Dellenborg et al., 2020). Despite variation in approaches, sexual rights represent ideals that treat sexuality as part of basic personhood. Though there is no universal definition or set of guiding principles, there is growing scholarly and global political attention to sexual rights (Chandiramani, 2010; Miller et al., 2015). Over time, this attention has shifted from establishing protections around reproductive health to establishing broader protections around one’s entire sexual life (Giarni, 2015). This shift accounts for the ways that sexual well-being is an integral part of daily life, interwoven with non-sexual life course trajectories. This positions sexuality as a fundamental part of personhood, and consequently, sexual rights as human rights (Chandiramani, 2010; Corrêa et al., 2008). Despite this, sexual rights continue to be unmet, and their importance is often challenged, warranting attention to how sexual rights can be protected.

Sexual rights are frequently based on ideals of bodily integrity, equity, and non-discrimination. Sexual rights advocates maintain that individuals should be able to make autonomous decisions around their body and sexuality. Individuals should be able to experience any desired facet of their sexuality without coercion, violence, or discrimination

(Chandiramani, 2010; Coleman, 2010; Giami, 2015; Kismödi et al., 2017; World Association for Sexual Health, 2014). While some approaches to sexual rights outline specific references to sexuality, most focus on protecting broader human rights that might be undermined in relation to sexuality. For instance, the International Planned Parenthood Federation Revised Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights (2008) asserts that sexual rights contribute to freedom, equality, and dignity of all people. The charter applies existing human rights principles to sexuality, “as an attribute of all persons, young and old, regardless of gender/gender identity and sexual orientation” (Miller et al., 2015, p. 17). For example, the existing right to recognition before the law and participation in public life also protects against sexual identity- and gender identity-based discrimination (Giami, 2015). Likewise, the 2011 iteration of the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) Declaration of Sexual Rights stipulated specific sexual rights including sexual privacy, comprehensive sexuality education, and sexual autonomy. Recent iterations focus on the relationship between sexuality and existing human rights law (Coleman, 2010). These hold that the everyday lives of all individuals warrant protection, and this includes sexual components. Both examples of sexual rights maintain the protection of diversity in sexual expressions, identities, and needs occurring in daily interactions.

My conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual well-being support attention to sexual rights, by dismantling a normalized idea of each and by acknowledging the power dynamics that shape both. First, a sexual rights focus follows a multidimensional understanding of sexuality: it is individual, biological, psychological, interpersonal, and socially constructed. Bodies and desires are both singular and “lived within, and dependent on, multiple relationships and social ties” (Petchesky et al, 2010, p. 408). As such, a sexual rights perspective disrupts the ways that sexuality can be normalized as a universal heterosexual construct. By asserting sexual equity and non-discrimination, sexual rights force us to examine “our standard of sexual legitimacy” (Chandiramani, 2010, p. 354). Protections around equity and non-discrimination serve as reminders that sexual variation should not be pathologized or rendered peripheral. Sexual rights offer universal, equitable, and inalienable protections that are mindful of individual and social circumstances (Corrêa et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2015). My conceptualizations of sexuality, sexual well-being, and sexual rights, recognize non-normative sexual orientations or identities, gender identities, and “bodily expressions” (WAS, 2014, p. 1); that which is desirable and erotic for one individual can be “unacceptable” for others (Chandiramani, 2010, p. 353). In this way, sexual rights take on

unique meanings and play out differently across contexts. For example, reproductive rights may protect the right to seek out abortions and simultaneously protect against coerced abortions (Chandiramani, 2010).

Second, my approach to both conceptualizing sexual well-being and sexual rights prioritizes power dynamics, exploring how external factors shape the capacity for autonomous sexual expression. I seek to examine personal understandings and experiences of sexuality within larger sociocultural contexts and to consider how sexual values and behaviours exist within changing social locations and power dynamics. Sexual rights models acknowledge the role of political, economic, religious, or sociocultural contexts as barriers to sexual integrity, equity, and non-discrimination. An individual's ability to protect and exert their sexual rights relies partially on external actors and institutions to provide positive messaging, adequate care services, and correct, in-depth sexual information to help make informed decisions (Barroso, 2010). Sexual agency is thus enabled and constrained by conditions like "healthcare access, affordable housing, adequate nutrition, safe environments and secure livelihoods" and how "bodies 'matter' and become materialised through the same regulatory norms and power relations that produce gender, class, race, ethnicity, and geography to begin with" (Petchesky et al, 2010, p. 407).

In summary, I position sexual well-being as a universal right that includes physiological, psychological, or social dimensions and facets of sexuality. I hold that individuals must be able to competently understand, express, discuss, explore, or decide not to engage facets of sexuality that they find valuable in their daily lives (Lee et al., 2019). Ensuring fulfilment of the right to sexual well-being involves prioritizing individual subjectivities as well as the material and social conditions that shape sexual agency (Bedree et al., 2020; Chandiramani, 2010; Dune et al., 2018).

2.8: Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I established how I define sexuality and sexual well-being. I explored the overarching theoretical debate over sexuality and argued that it is most effectively understood through a biopsychosocial perspective. A biopsychosocial conceptualization accounts for the interrelated nature of physiological, psychological, and social dimensions of sexuality that are shaped by the interaction of individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors. I established that sexuality unfolds very differently across social locations, where understandings, values,

and behaviours vary across time and place (Kraut-Becher et al, 2008). I also framed sexual well-being as the ability of individuals to live a sexual life in which they personally find meaning. I argued that simply examining ideal function, intercourse, and avoidance of risk to assess sexual well-being tells an incomplete story about sexual trajectories. Instead, I argued sexual well-being should reflect how individuals value sexuality in their daily lives and are able to assert control over their sexual trajectories (Klein et al., 2018). Studies do not always adequately capture how people overcome, manage, or renegotiate what sexuality means and how they respond to sexual hardships over time. I showed how my chosen conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual well-being complicate and dismantle heteronormative and restrictive assumptions embedded in research. I find it crucial to establish how women's subjectivities and social locations play a role in paths towards sexual well-being. The chosen conceptualizations highlight how we can protect sexual rights without reifying risk, by turning to subjective strategies of negotiation and resilience. In the next literature review chapter, I explore the existing body of sexuality-related research attending to South Asian immigrant or transnational populations and continue to examine how a sexual well-being conceptualization that considers women's subjectivities is a critical area of exploration.

Chapter 3: Literature Review 2

This chapter continues to establish the theoretical context and relevant existing research that guides my study. Here, I establish why the sexual well-being experiences of South Asian Canadian women are important to study. I explore how the following broader contexts, migration histories, family and community dynamics, and locations like religion, race, and ethnicity relate to women's sexualities. In so doing, I situate the ways South Asian Canadian women experience sexuality, and the ways they navigate, negotiate, and resist the material and social contexts involved in their pursuit of sexual well-being.

Section one explores the term South Asian as a shared identity and category, describes the major demographic traits of the South Asian Canadian community, and examines the types of messages about sexuality and gender that often circulate within South Asian cultures.

Section one highlights the shared, yet fluid nature of South Asian identities and cultures. In section two, I explain the relevance of studying South Asian Canadian women's sexual well-being. Given the wide range of focus in sexuality-related research on South Asian immigrant or transnational populations, I summarize existing research on sexual health and highlight lingering concerns. I then shift focus to studies which explore participant understandings and experiences of sexuality. These studies pay specific attention to the ways that individuals make sense of facets of their sexuality and respond to sexual hardships. These subjectivity studies set the foundation for the ways I will examine sexual well-being and participant subjectivities.

Situating South Asian Canadians

3.1: Understanding South Asian Identities

I begin by exploring who South Asian refers to and I explain how this is a fluctuating but useful term. South Asian populations are diverse and heterogenous, with long and varied migration histories (Ghosh, 2013). While there is no universal South Asian culture, there are shared norms, practices, and values across many subgroups (Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Zaidi et al., 2012; Zaidi et al., 2014). These shared cultural facets support examination of South Asian Canadian experiences as a collectivity in my study. Although deeper discussion of constructions of being South Asian, diaspora, and cultures of hybridity extend beyond the

scope of my research (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Bhabha, 1996; Hall, 1996), I draw on the following considerations about the constructed nature of South Asian identities.

The term South Asian is used to represent an identity and it is, at the same time, a relational category bound in the politics of difference and belonging (Dasgupta, 1998; Yadav & Yadav, 2015). It is influenced by narratives about how individuals view themselves, how individuals view non-members, and how the identity is imposed by others (Ghosh, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The categories of South Asia and South Asians have seen greater use since the Second World War, when these terms were used to categorize and differentiate non-white immigrants from white subjects of the British Empire (Ghosh, 2013). While the national boundaries perceived as falling within South Asia are debated, it typically is described as including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Ghosh, 2013; Hasan et al., 2015). Critical constructions position South Asians as individuals with origins in the Indian subcontinent, to better reflect a legacy of colonialism and migration across Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Southeast Asia, and the British Empire (George & Ramkissoon, 1998; Ghosh, 2013; Rangaswamy, 2005). These constructions are bound in broader ideas about place, race, and culture, pointing to the socially constructed and racialized nature of South Asian identity (Ghosh, 2013).

Undeniably, the South Asian population includes many nationalities, ethnicities, religions, languages, value systems, economic and political contexts, unique colonial histories, and settlement journeys (Agrawal, 2013; Ghosh, 2013; Lindsay, 2001; Rajiva, 2006; Rajiva, 2010; Rajiva & D'Sylva, 2014; Tran et al., 2005). It includes but is not limited to Buddhists, Catholics, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians (George & Ramkissoon, 1998). Cultural transformation and within-group tensions also complicate the idea of a shared South Asian identity and culture (Ghosh, 2013). The process of migration transforms identities, creating new hybrid understandings of what it means to be South Asian (Dwyer, 2000; Yadav & Yadav, 2015; Zaidi et al., 2014). During migration and settlement, individual perceptions of who they feel they are and who they can be in a local space also fluctuate. This fluctuation is impacted by connections to people and cultural products through a transnational network, and through connections to a lived and imagined construction of home (Ghosh, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Yadav & Yadav, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

As such, new hybrid identities are negotiated and re-negotiated in everyday, mundane contexts (Dwyer 2000; Samuel, 2010). Ghosh (2013) further understands the South Asian identity as “an identity of a place(s) in another place” and a shared sense of belonging which forms after migration (p. 38). The strength of an individual’s South Asian-ness can also depend on their commitment to cultural aspects and their connection to dominant groups (Dasgupta, 1998). Continued adherence to cultural values and traditions may reaffirm and maintain identity after migration (Dasgupta, 1998; Thamocharan et al., 2017). One’s sense of South Asian-ness may also not be apparent in all situations. For instance, an individual might shift between outwardly identifying oneself based on nationality, religion, caste, ethnicity, or the broader South Asian identifier based on context. Through these considerations, it is possible to understand one’s sense of South Asian-ness as temporally- and spatially- bound and experienced.

The use of South Asian identifiers captures interconnections between groups and is simultaneously inadequate (Rangaswamy, 2005). Although it is a practical category, there are power dynamics involved in defining who belongs, what it means to be South Asian, and how the use of the term ‘South Asian’ as an identifier changes depending on context. As a result, I do not assume that South Asian identity is a natural category, with a biologically determined or universally shared ethnicity and culture (Ghosh, 2013). Instead, I recognize that there are important “historical, linguistic, religious, and political diversities” and within-group tensions that exist inside the boundaries of being South Asian (p. 48). This recognition is possible through an intersectional framework, which complicates understandings of fixed identities (Mulholland, 2017). Still, the term South Asian has potential to serve “as a powerful form of diaspora identity that promotes connections across national and religious divides” (Ashutosh, 2008, p. 143). This warrants attention to the shared understandings and experiences of being South Asian in Canada. With these nuances in mind, I will next outline a general settlement trajectory of South Asian Canadian immigrants. I examine the migration history, current settlement patterns, and lastly, economic and sociocultural conditions of South Asian Canadians. This attention emphasizes variation in settlement origins and patterns. It also paints a picture of the South Asian non-sexual cultural values unfolding in Canadian contexts that impact sexual well-being.

3.2: A South Asian Canadian Profile

Historically, South Asian migrants were mainly permitted entry to Canada as temporary workers, and the slow extension of citizenship rights limited migration and settlement. Mostly Sikh men from Punjab, British India began arriving in the late 1890s to British Columbia, often working in resource industries such as logging (Das Gupta, 2021; Rangaswamy, 2005). Due to restrictive immigration policies, anti-Asian attitudes, and a preference for white immigrants, South Asian immigration slowed from 1908 to 1957 (Rangaswamy, 2005; Walton-Roberts, 2003). Throughout this period, South Asian Canadians were unable to vote, barred from bringing family to Canada, unable to become naturalized, and faced restrictive migration laws such as continuous journey requirements and taxes upon arrival (Rajiva & D'Sylva, 2014; Rangaswamy, 2005). These barriers stemmed from fears that South Asians would undermine the cultural and racial landscape of Canada (Rajiva, 2006). These restrictions began to change during the middle of the 20th century, which increased migration and family reunification. For instance, limited immigration resumed with the expansion of Skilled Worker and Family Class entry categories from non-European countries (Agrawal, 2013; Walton-Roberts, 2003). Although Canadian immigration policies have changed over time, they continue to reinforce restrictions on who is able to migrate (Das Gupta, 2021). For example, “gendered patriarchal norms of mobility [that] grant[ed] men the power to initiate the movement of women to Canada through marriage”, continue to impact the settlement experiences of South Asians (Walton-Roberts, 2003, p. 240). Subsequent immigration also diversified the demographic profile of Canadian South Asians, as individuals with a range of national and ethnic backgrounds entered as professional and “low”-skilled immigrants (Raza & Erfani, 2015). For example, immigrants often found employment in agriculture, manufacturing industries, and clerical services (Agrawal, 2013; Ghosh, 2013; Rangaswamy, 2005).

As of the 2016 Canadian Census, 1.96 million individuals and their relatives identified as South Asian. This represents 5.6% of the national population, with 30% of this population born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). South Asian Canadians are amongst the largest and fastest growing populations and make up one quarter of Canada’s visible minority population (Quay et al., 2017). Close to half of South Asians born in Canada report having at least one parent born outside of Canada. While South Asian migration to Canada now frequently involves economic migration through the Skilled Worker class, variation exists (Agrawal, 2013; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). For example, Sri Lankan Tamil professionals initially settled in Canada due to political dissatisfaction, though a greater proportion of

family-class immigrants and asylum seekers entered due to civil war and instability after 1983 (Agrawal, 2013). In recent years, there has been a shift from largely Punjabi-speaking immigrants to a growing number of immigrants who report speaking South Indian languages (Agrawal, 2013). In general, the majority of South Asian Canadians have settled in industrial centres (Raza & Erfani, 2015). Research suggests that members of South Asian religious communities tend to settle in particular regions across Canada, possibly due to existing settlement patterns and established religious institutions (Kataure & Walton-Roberts, 2013; Tran et al., 2005).

In this overview of the economic and sociocultural conditions of South Asian Canadians, I highlight a nuanced, yet overarching experience of settlement that contributes to a shared idea of being South Asian Canadian. South Asian Canadians report variations in their economic and labour market patterns, cross-nationally. Overall, they are more likely than other Canadians to hold university and post-graduate degrees. South Asian men are more likely to be employed compared to the overall Canadian population. Comparatively, South Asian immigrant women are less likely to be employed than other women and immigrant men (Raza & Erfani, 2015; Lindsay, 2001). Despite higher education rates, the average income of South Asian Canadians is lower than the Canadian average and South Asians are more likely to report incomes falling below the low-income cut-off (Lindsay, 2001). This discrepancy becomes more apparent when considering within-group differences. For instance, one third of Canadian Indians, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankans are employed in manufacturing industries, while Canadian Pakistanis are more often employed in wholesale (Agrawal, 2013). Walton-Roberts (2003) suggests that low conversion rates of income and savings from one's home country may complicate the transferral of economic capital to Canada. Additionally, education levels and knowledge of an official language do not equally assist in obtaining employment for all South Asian nationalities. This appears to be true for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, who often face greater difficulties in the labour market compared to Indian immigrants, who perform comparatively better (Agrawal, 2013). Such economic differences highlight unique experiences in racial and religious discrimination, variable recognition of credentials, and changing economic and social support from ethnic enclaves (Agrawal, 2013).

Still, there are overarching connections among subgroups that can warrant the use of a critical South Asian identifier in research. For example, South Asian immigrants tend to maintain collectivist orientations upon settlement with continued cultural practices and beliefs (Zaidi et

al., 2016). They often settle and reside collectively with extended family, such as elderly parents (Lindsay, 2001; Tran et al., 2005). When compared to other Canadians, they are less likely to live alone, less likely to live in a common-law relationship, less likely to be single parents, and more likely to be married (Lindsay, 2001). South Asian Canadians are also the least likely visible minority group to marry outside of their population group (Tran et al., 2005). Studies in the U.S. context find that Indian immigrants retain strong ties to their homeland through travel, prolonged commitment to culture after migration, and strong local religious and cultural communities (Dasgupta, 1998). These connections are critical as they can help buffer against some of the stressors and hardships of migration and settlement. While these attachments vary, South Asian Canadians often continue similar adherence to traditional values and practices. This includes language, religious practice, caste-bound or endogamous marriage, strong kinship links, transnational networks, and traditionally gendered roles in the home (Dasgupta, 1998; Das Gupta, 2021; Singh & Bhayana, 2015; Taylor, 2013; Zaidi et al., 2016). South Asians also report a strong sense of belonging to their respective ethno-cultural group, and a desire to maintain cultural ties and transfer social norms across generations (Hawa et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2005).

As I will discuss, immigrants and subsequent generations often experience tension in navigating being South Asian Canadian, while balancing norms from multiple social worlds (Dasgupta, 1998; Das Gupta, 2021). In relation to the present study, I examine participants' sexual journeys through the lenses of multiple identities and locations. The economic and social circumstances I have outlined begin to demonstrate the relevance in using a South Asian identifier in the present study. While there is a great deal of variation among those who identify as South Asian, the category of South Asian represents and captures a shared experience of migration, settlement, and cultural understandings. The similarities across South Asian cultures become more apparent in the following section, where I explore shared understandings and norms around gender and sexuality.

3.3: South Asian Cultural and Religious Constructions of Sexuality

Below I review the literature that explores how sexuality is experienced and defined by South Asians immigrant populations. From this research, I synthesized existing findings into five constructions. The research indicates there are overarching cultural norms which convey the

ways “good” South Asian women are expected to behave, and I explain how these expectations are reinforced. While the five constructions are distinct, they are simultaneously deeply interrelated. To summarize: first, South Asian cultural constructions of sexuality are conveyed through marital expectations and self-sacrificing duty to the family. Second, sexuality is associated with heteronormative partnerships that are procreative in nature. Third, constructions of sexuality are maintained through concern for *izzat* and *sharam*, or honour and shame related to family social status. Fourth, these constructions are reinforced through expectations and management of sexualized, gendered bodies. Finally, ideal sexuality is maintained through identity and boundary-making processes that connect sexual purity to the preservation of South Asian cultures. Collectively, these tell a story about how sexuality is framed, socially reinforcing what hegemonic South Asian femininity ideally looks like and what expressions or facets of sexuality are stigmatized and abnormal. Unpacking these constructions validates the need for attention to experiences of South Asian Canadian women. These constructions set up the purpose of my research. They also help frame how participants understand and experience sexuality and sexual well-being in relation to their religious and ethnic locations, given broader sociocultural pressures and expectations.

3.4: Marriage and Duty

The existing body of literature identifies South Asian ideals about femininity which prescribe chastity or sexual purity, duty to family, and marriage. Cultural and religious constructions of traditional femininity emphasize honour through self-sacrificing duty to, and unquestioning care of one’s family, before self-expression (Takhar, 2013). Girls and women are expected to defer to male and senior members of the extended family unit (Puri, 1999; Samuel, 2010; Singh, 2009; Zaidi et al., 2016). In addition to self-sacrifice and deference, Ussher et al. (2017) report that ideal femininity is constructed around an expected absence of sexual embodiment, lack of “sexual knowledge and experience prior to marriage, and passiv[ity] and receptiv[ity] in relation to heterosexual marital sex” (p. 1915). There are often taboos around discussing sexuality and sexual behaviour, cultural scripts of abstinence until marriage, and repercussions around inappropriate sexual engagement (Chakraborty, 2013; Frost et al., 2016; Hawa et al., 2019; Weston, 2003).

Sexual taboos, scripts, and repercussions are often more constraining for women than men (Bacchus, 2017; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). Since the status and social worth of women are

often tied to expectations to marry and have children, traditional gender scripts prepare women for future marital and parental duties (Bottoroff et al., 2001; Madan-Bahel, 2008; Mehrotra, 2016; Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Singh, 2009). Women are encouraged to be psychologically and physically sexually avoidant, distant from their own sexual desires, experimentation, and avoidant of any discussion of topics related to their sexuality (Wray et al., 2014). For instance, participants in existing research recall control over interactions with the opposite sex and prohibitions on sexually explicit content (Beck et al., 2005; Hawa et al., 2019).

Sexuality is also tied to adulthood, where according to participants in existing studies, “you become a woman when you lose your virginity” (Wray et al., 2014, p. 80). Prior to this point, parents may delay access to sexual information and imagery, believing that early access may lead to sexual corruption (Patel-Kanwal, 2004). Direct sexual discussions are only deemed appropriate when adult children are ready for marriage (Griffiths et al., 2008). Instead, parental sexual communication often occurs indirectly, through gossip, restrictions around behaviours and dress, and emphasis of gender roles and marriage (Gravel et al., 2016). Additionally, since traditional child-rearing is collective, extended family members residing in the same home such as grandmothers, aunts, or sisters-in-law are traditionally tasked with providing sexual information to young women when nearing marriage (Beck et al., 2005; Griffiths et al., 2008). Since families may lack these extended family ties upon migration, the addition of new monitoring, silencing and control tactics via community networks have emerged and complicate the dynamics of child-rearing (Griffiths et al., 2008; Khera & Ahluwalia, 2021).

Performing femininity involves sexual avoidance because a perceived failure to maintain sexual purity can render young women unmarriageable (Gravel et al., 2016). Appropriate conduct can maintain public standing and help ensure that one’s family is deemed respectable in marriage markets. Families may enforce strict measures so that their daughters maintain an appropriate performance of femininity and avoid compromising their chances of fulfilling marital expectations. Once in these roles, women are expected to be sexually available wives, while also asexual daughters and mothers (Mirza, 2009). These ideals of passivity, duty, and virtue are more clearly understood in the following four themes that explore what acceptable women’s sexuality looks like and how it is maintained.

3.5: Heteronormative Sexualities

Dominant understandings of sexuality in South Asian cultures are heteronormative (Lum, 2016; Takhar, 2013). They encourage intra-religious, -ethnic, -caste, and -class based relationships and sexual intercourse exclusively between married men and women.

Heteronormativity is “central to producing (hegemonic) South Asian womanhood” through expectations of marriage, marriageability, and parenthood (Mehrotra, 2016, p. 368). Non-heteronormative sexual trajectories, orientations, and identities are consequently rendered invisible. While there are historical and contemporary instances of non-heteronormative sexuality, they tend to be treated with “selective amnesia” and framed as a product of the west (Takhar, 2013, p. 83; Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Menon, 2007). Religious interpretations or traditional values also shape what is deemed appropriate sexual behaviour and identify when sexual behavior should occur (Loue & Sajatovic, 2012). For example, due to a reluctance to come out and violate family relationships and community standing, homosexuality may remain an invisible reality. Men who have sexual intercourse with male partners may be silently tolerated if they are able to publicly maintain heterosexual marriages and families (Jaspal, 2015, p. 35; Hasan et al., 2015). Studies on queer South Asian men and women emphasize a sense of double exclusion from religious/ethnic and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities for being gay and not white, respectively (Jaspal, 2015; Patel, 2019). Fear of further rejection gives rise to unique coming out processes, with concern that disclosing sexuality will lead to stigmatization from their families, ethnic or religious communities, or from their religious identity (Adur & Purkayastha, 2017; Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Patel, 2019).

Sexuality is also often culturally and religiously framed as heteronormative because of expectations around intercourse. Existing studies suggest that premarital intercourse is prohibited because of the risk to future marital choices (Bacchus, 2017; Gravel et al., 2016; Hahm et al., 2008; Okazaki, 2002; Wray et al., 2014). Further, premarital sex is subject to differing religious values (Zaidi et al, 2014). For example, it may be *haram* [forbidden] according to Islamic perspectives, and while not explicitly taboo in Hinduism, a complex colonial history complicates its relationship with premarital sex (Okazaki, 2002; Sen, 2002). There is often a strong expectation to avoid romantic and physical relationships until ready for marriage, due to fears around pregnancy and compromised family honour (Bacchus, 2017). As a result of high pressure to avoid sexual engagement, young South Asians may keep romantic relationships hidden from their community and parents (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021;

Bacchus, 2017; Wray et al., 2014; Griffiths et al., 2008). Once individuals reach an age when marriage is expected, dating to find an appropriate partner may be accepted. This pressure tends to be more severe for women (Bacchus, 2017).

The institution of marriage reflects and maintains patriarchal structures, preserves caste systems, and serves as a site where honour, respect, and traditional gender roles are further reproduced (Samuel, 2010). As Franco et al. (2007) state, ideals around caste purity and women's sexual purity work in conjunction to maintain social order through marriages that preserve caste distinctions. Additionally, there is a cultural expectation to have (male) children once marriage occurs. Those who do not may be marked as inauspicious and face "pressure from family in the form of intrusive questioning" (Patel-Kanwal, 2004, p. 130; Franco et al., 2007). This expectation is arguably also a tool to downplay "women as sexual beings and exalts them as child-bearers and child-rearers" (Franco et al., 2007, p. 141).

3.6: Izzat: Familial Honour and Gender

South Asian values about family honour are strongly tied to ideal sexuality. Many South Asian cultures and religions maintain a collective orientation, where tight-knit interdependent family units are a central social structure (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Hawa et al., 2017; Khera & Alhuwalia, 2021; Samuel, 2010; Thamocharan et al., 2017). Within collectivist cultures, the family unit is integral to the self, where the needs and public reputation of the family are prioritized before personal interests (Zaidi et al., 2016). Public reputation is also a strong concern because of the strong community structures in many South Asian cultures. Existing research finds that South Asian cultures subscribe to *izzat* [honour] and *sharam* [shame]. These are broad concepts that include prescriptions around protecting the family reputation from the community and protecting community reputation from outsiders (Dwyer, 2000; Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Durham, 2004; Jaspal, 2015; Griffiths et al., 2008). Religious or ethnic communities act as key forms of social control in the reinforcement of honour and shame. Since family members represent one another, each member is expected to behave in ways that maintain positive, honourable family reputation in public and avoid social exclusion. This occurs by enacting religious and social notions of appropriate, moral behaviour (Abraham, 2000 as cited in Singh, 2009; Weston, 2003; Griffiths et al., 2008; Zaidi et al., 2012). Strong community surveillance, gossip, and public embarrassment of the family can

also unintentionally encourage “shameful private behaviour with a public veneer of conformity” (Weston, 2003, p. 112; Patel-Kanwal, 2004, Werbner, 2005; Bacchus, 2017).

While all family members are expected to prioritize the family, expectations around preserving family honour unfold differently for women and men. Appropriate behaviour differs for men and women based on traditional gender roles, which are uniquely crucial to the well-being of the family (Weston, 2003; Loue & Sajatovic, 2012; Nakamura & Chan, 2013). Men may be pressured to preserve family honour through economic success and the ability to provide for one’s family (Lum, 2016). Their behaviours outside of the economic realm are often overlooked, unquestioned, and unconnected from family reputation. Men are also afforded behavioural leeway through typically higher positions and power in traditional family hierarchies (Ghuman, 2003; Kim, 2009; Singh 2009; Samuel, 2010; Taylor, 2013; Zaidi et al., 2014).

Comparatively, women are expected to monitor how their daily actions and appearances might be religious or social violations. This expectation is especially strong for young, unmarried women, whose behaviours are often connected to sexual expectations, and heavily impact family honour and broader community reputation (Bacchus, 2017; Wray et al., 2014). In some ways, *izzat* and *sharam* are gendered cultural prescriptions because women often experience a heavier burden in maintaining honour compared to men. They encompass expectations of femininity, and assign social status based on commitment to traditional femininity. As mentioned, ideals about femininity are tied to modesty and respect, often conveyed as sexual behaviours and marital duties that women must fulfill. Appropriate femininity typically revolves around traditional gender roles that emphasize denial of self-expression, self-sacrifice, deference to elders, modest appearance that indicates respect for self and others, and sexual restrictiveness (Werbner, 2005; Takhar, 2013). Gender relations within collective cultures often “are highly influenced by community norms and values, and the community is a strong predictor of women’s empowerment” (Samari, 2017, p. 563).

3.7: Managing Sexualized Bodies

The body is a site of power negotiation, and ideal femininity is often maintained through the control of sexualized bodies (Fingerson, 2005). As Franco et al. (2007) find in South Asian contexts, “pre-pubertal virginity has a special ritual value, and pubescent girls are secluded and monitored through emphasis on female modesty, and a glorification of the married state

and motherhood” (p. 171). In addition to bearing the burden of family honour, girls and women may be treated as cultural carriers, whose bodies become symbols of sexuality (Dasgupta, 2002). This responsibility can result in self-, family-, and community-surveillance, through ideas of purity. First, sexualized bodies are managed through values around menstruation, which is a social marker of entrance into adult femininity and its accompanied sexualization (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996). Second, sexualized bodies are managed through expectations of sexual purity, which is indicated through dress and interactions with men.

Puberty and menstruation can be defined as either negative or positive transformations, and, in both instances, contain messages about femininity (Stubbs & Costos, 2004; White, 2013). For example, celebratory messages through prayers, rituals, announcements, and parties can accompany the onset of menstruation, or menarche, while other messages may silence and individualize menstruation (Puri, 1999). According to existing immigrant studies, secrecy and sexual stigma can begin with menarche (Ussher et al., 2017). Cross-culturally, puberty and menarche can be a transitional point when “girls start to produce themselves as women in compliance with, and in resistance to, contemporary messages about gender” (Lee, 2009, p. 615; Marvan et al., 2006; Schooler et al., 2005). These messages connect menstruation with broader ideals about sexuality. For example, messages may mark girls’ physically maturing bodies as dangerous and sexual. These messages can also maintain ideals about the inferiority of women’s bodies and assert that discretion and concealment are the responsibility of girls and women (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Stubbs & Costos, 2004; Uskul 2004; Schooler et al., 2005).

Other messages can also relegate menstruation to a hygienic crisis by viewing bleeding bodies as contaminated. These messages are perpetuated in subtle but pervasive ways, across South Asian and western cultural contexts (Goldenberg et al., 2014). According to Abraham (2004), menstruation embodies values about women’s sexualities: “the female body as polluting, the body as the signifier of family honour, shame attached to the female body, female sexuality as dangerous and in danger and the linking of fertility with sexuality” (p. 241). Religious values may exacerbate ideas of pollution, shame, and danger. Islamic law holds that while women are not impure, menstrual blood is ritually impure, while Hindu practices can hold that the menstruating woman is polluted (Abraham, 2004; Dunnavant & Roberts, 2013). Menarche may be accompanied by the onset of sexual restrictions and

prescriptions around femininity as young girls move between states of “pollution and purity” (Puri, 1999, p. 56). The onset of menstruation can be followed by warnings about sexual risk and vulnerability, sexual intercourse, and appropriate behaviour and appearance (Johnston-Robeldo & Chrisler, 2013; Tietelman, 2004). Menstruation may be further stigmatized through silence and a lack of parent-child engagement. For example, discussion may be overlooked if in-depth information about menstruation is deemed irrelevant or dangerously enticing before marriage and parenthood, further solidifying the sexualization of women’s bodies (Abraham, 2004).

Management of sexualized bodies also occurs through expectations around how women’s bodies appear in public, and where and with whom women interact. Given the cultural values that emphasize virtue and family honour, women are expected to manage their appearance and ensure that it conveys sexual purity. While parents may have expectations for sons to avoid sexual activity, they restrict and more strictly monitor the appearance and movement of daughters, especially when they are perceived to be sexually mature, and hence, perceived to be sexually vulnerable (Espín, 2012). Correspondingly, men are treated as thieves of sexual purity (Wray et al., 2014). As mentioned, research describes parents “as owning their daughters’ virginity, reflecting the centrality of sexuality in the control of women” (Wray et al., 2014, p. 82). After puberty begins, the behaviours and appearances of girls are closely monitored to protect against pregnancy and ensure purity, honour, and future marital chances (Abraham, 2004). This occurs through expectations around dress and appearance, where modesty conveys respectability and morality (Gravel et al., 2016; Kim, 2009). Additionally, family and community surveillance deter young women from non-marital sexual activity (Das Gupta & Das Gupta, 2002). This includes avoiding non-romantic interactions, since these can convey immoral behaviour and imply sexual interaction, even if there is none.

3.8: Sexuality and Boundary-Making

Identity maintenance and boundary-making often occur through the regulation of women’s sexualities and the delegitimization of homosexuality. These processes function as macro-level social control mechanisms, though they are not exclusively South Asian nation-building processes (Espin, 2013; Espiritu, 2001; Menon, 2007). Sexuality has often “been deployed to mark racial difference”, and women of colour “have been sexually marked in ways that

contribute to their denigration and difference in western societies” (Durham, 2004, p. 144). South Asian women are simultaneously cast as hypersexualized and undesirable objects, with “erotic desire and racist contempt” (Durham, 2004, p. 144). This has roots in the historical positioning of racialized women in colonial contexts, where sexuality was used to justify processes of colonialism, nationalism, and racism (Espiritu, 2001). For example, constructions of South Asian masculinity and femininity under British rule continue to impact the framing of women’s bodies and sexualities, woven into present-day cultural norms (Handa, 2003). It defined a “native” sexuality that positioned South Asian colonized bodies as “unruly”, “untamed”, mysterious, violent, androgynous, warranting simultaneous “dread and desire” (Alexander, 1994, p. 12). Colonial socialization attempted “to turn the savage into the civilized”; to turn South Asian women into respectable subjects who followed British social norms about sexuality and domesticity (p. 12). Early Indian nationalists responded to this inferior framing and pressure to adopt British cultural practices with a new identity that balanced the duality of modernization and of traditional Indian cultures. This occurred largely through the control of Indian women, who, under the guise of protecting their innocence, became a symbol of this duality. The Indian woman was framed as modest and desexualized through the process of nation-building, which was “disguised under the notion of cultural preservation”. This served to differentiate the “upper” caste (*e.g., Brahmin*) Indian woman from the idea of a sexually corrupt modern western woman (Espin, 2013; Espiritu, 2001; Heinemann et al., 2016; Madan-Bahel, 2008, p. 36). These cultural delineations continue today, as women’s bodies are treated like “repositories of tradition and weapons of defense against cultural violations” and cultural change (Durham, 2004, p. 144).

Contemporary contexts can and do echo early nationalist strategies of cultural preservation. Traditions often centre around gender constructions and control of femininity, which are used to maintain cultural and ethnic boundaries (Bacchus, 2017; Bhopal, 2009). Immigrants respond to the challenges and hardships of settlement processes by preserving traditional practices. Immigrants may mourn the loss of their homeland, experience settlement stressors, fear cultural erasure, and fear the loss of their children to an unfamiliar world (Dasgupta, 1998; Espin, 1999; Espiritu, 2001; Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Yadav & Yadav, 2015). This fear can motivate preservation of traditions and memories of home by teaching them to the younger generations. In this regard, South Asian women are largely tasked with keeping South Asian identities and traditions alive and transmitting them to future generations

(Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Dasgupta, 1998; Espiritu, 2001; Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Zaidi et al., 2014).

Ideals of traditional femininity can specifically be used to maintain boundaries and cultural preservation. Notions of home are applied to young South Asian transnational women, who are framed as “pure” in a western “place of impurity” (Handa, 2003, p. 113). These boundaries reinforce a sexual binary between South Asian and white settler western women, which can be unquestioningly accepted and maintained (Alexander, 1994; Espiritu, 2001; Rajiva, 2010). Supposed “good” South Asian women are expected to avoid sexual acts and remain sexually pure, which conveys retention of cultural and religious values. In comparison, women who engage in sexual relationships are labelled too western, promiscuous, “corrupt, loose, fallen women, lacking control” (Wray et al., 2014, p. 80; Bacchus, 2017; Espin, 2013; Heinemann et al., 2016; Puri, 1999; Samuel, 2010). Engaging in sexual behaviours is perceived as a sign of moral decay and a breakdown of ethnic culture (Espiritu, 2001). This is a gendered standard that restricts “the autonomy, mobility and personal decision making” of daughters more than sons (Espin, 2013, p. 431). These boundaries are also externally maintained through western denouncement and critiques of marital processes, which emphasize honour killings, forced marriages, and which depict South Asian women as victims constrained by their cultures (Bhopal, 2009). These processes further delineate who belongs to western and non-western cultures. As Bhopal (2009) states, “the notion of belonging is generated through experiences of exclusion rather than inclusion” (p. 30).

3.9: Variation in Constructions

Before concluding, I make three distinctions to challenge how South Asian Canadian women are described as passively existing between sexual and cultural binaries. First, while the constructions represent South Asian hegemonic views of sexuality, they are not universal. As discussed, South Asian populations, values, and identities are not monolithic, unchanging, or resistant to challenge (Ahmed et al., 2009; Mulholland, 2017; Narayan, 2000; Rajiva, 2006; Wong et al., 2017). Adherence to sexual values varies amongst individuals, according to generational status and age (Dasgupta, 1998). Values around women’s sexualities are not entirely collective, heteronormative, or restrictive. For example, while South Asian cultures are still collectivist and patriarchal, there are gradual shifts in the perception of marriage as a

union of two families to a union of two people, and an increase in dual-earning partnerships that shift power dynamics within the home (Singh & Bhayana, 2015).

Takhar (2013) points out that heteronormative constructions are resisted, for example, through the existence of South Asian lesbian identities. Menon (2007) further complicates heteronormative constructions by stating that a western lens of sexuality does not adequately capture nuance in South Asian lives. For example, translation of the term homosexuality may not entirely capture or represent the lives of individuals with non-heteronormative sexual trajectories. Although I present dominant ideas of femininity, these do not negate the presence of other crucial individual and cultural constructions. While non-heteronormative narratives are less highlighted, they exist and point to the resistance, resilience, and sexual agency that exists within South Asian cultures and communities.

Second, the constructions draw on historical contexts that highlight how individual sexuality is embedded in broader cultural contexts. Historical context is important because the legacy and trauma of colonial and nationalist policing of femininity linger in “post-colonial” spaces. Even in transnational or contemporary contexts, historic ideals linger in policies and understandings of sexuality. As Atluri (2016) states, “sexual politics are still caught within neocolonial temporalities” (p. 150). Social stigmas around marital practices, family and property arrangements, sexual behaviours, and gender identity are complicated by colonial and nationalist moral framing and policing of deviancy and danger (Menon, 2007; Hinchy, 2014). For instance, South Asian understandings of gender reflect religious and social values and national policies that do not neatly align with western understandings of gender. *Hijras*, which includes castrated persons or those born with “ambiguous genitals”, have a long history of rejecting gender binaries through the performance of femininity. *Hijra* individuals challenge and transform expectations through dress, names, and supposed “lewd” behaviours that are not “expected of women in the public realm” (Lal, 1999, p. 119 & 129). However, criminalization and harassment that developed under British colonial rule and continued after independence still stoke social stigma around gender and towards *Hijra* individuals (Menon, 2007; Atluri, 2016). These nuances are important to consider when examining cultural constructions of sexuality.

Attending to historical contexts also complicates South Asian cultural understandings as entirely heteronormative. There are historic and contemporary instances where sexuality in South Asia is not taboo or restrictive, instead celebrated, open, and fluid (Takhar, 2013).

Sexuality is religiously and culturally constructed as sacred, for example, “treasured and respected” within marriage in Islam (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Adur & Purkayastha, 2017). Sexual fluidity in pre-colonial and contemporary contexts is evident across religion, folklore, theatre, and dance. By taking a longer look at South Asian understandings of sexuality, I offer a more nuanced picture of women’s sexual trajectories and instances of sexual agency, particularly as my research participants understand their sexualities embedded in historical contexts.

Finally, it is critical that research unpacks the sexual binaries between western and South Asian cultures that tend to associate sexual liberty with western ideals. Since I acknowledge that South Asian cultures are not a monolith, I also emphasize that western cultures are not either. Stigmatizing, patriarchal, and heteronormative sexual norms are taken-for-granted, hegemonic ideologies are cross-cultural; present in western cultures (Collins, 2000). For example, existing sexual socialization research finds that sexuality is uncomfortable and infrequently communicated across U.S. “Black, White, and Latino families” (Kim, 2009, p. 346). Sexually passive and deferential femininity is a dominant ideal, for example through “white, middle- and upper-class norms which dictate that “good” women engage in self-policing to contain and control their sexual desires” (Ussher et al., 2017, p. 1902; Shoveller et al., 2007). An artificial binary can unquestioningly maintain the idea that sexual freedom is achieved through western sexual ideals, and that “idealized western capitalist subjects” are unwaveringly “sexually free” (Atluri, 2016, p. 150). Instead, there are no clean packages of South Asian and western cultures, nor do they remain statically opposed in the maintenance of sexual constructions (Narayan, 2000). However, while restrictive, heteronormative, or patriarchal constructions of sexuality may be widespread, they unfold in culturally specific ways that I consider in this study.

I highlight these three distinctions as part of a broader effort to manage my power as a researcher in this study. The ways I choose to present South Asian cultures have potential impacts on the ways we understand South Asian Canadian women. While research that overemphasizes sameness between cultures can obscure important nuances in participant lives, overemphasizing difference can also marginalize, stereotype, and further position South Asian Canadian women as Others (Sinha et al., 2007). Overemphasizing difference can also uphold fixed ideas of culture and biological determinism and treat South Asian women as victims of their cultures (Sinha et al., 2007). I consequently explore the relationship between

South Asian cultures and sexuality with caution, attempting to demonstrate the complexity and find balance between sameness and difference.

3.10: Conclusion

In this section, I briefly profiled the South Asian Canadian population. I asserted that despite complex religious and ethnic identities, multifaceted migration histories, and unique economic and social profiles, there are shared components that connect the various South Asian cultures. In order to understand participant's sexual understandings and experiences in this study, I also explored existing research on sexual health and sexuality. This research reflects a common cultural expectation of appropriate sexual behaviours for girls and women and common consequences for sexual violations. I demonstrated that these gender norms are rooted in migration and colonial histories and play out through family and community dynamics.

Handa (2003) critically points out that “the outrage of the community centers not on the safety of young women, but rather on an erosion of their moral (read traditional) values and conduct” (p. 115). Young women who explore and engage with their sexuality, through dating or premarital sexual intercourse, are frequently marked as compromising their marriageability and family honour. Engaging in sexual activities is interpreted as forgetting or forsaking one's ethnic or religious roots (Griffiths et al., 2008). Young women are also pressured to be sexually conservative to ensure their family standing and cultural legacy. While these expectations are not universally reflected at the individual level, they serve as a starting point for my research. Taking into consideration the profile of South Asian Canadians and the commonly held values about sexuality and femininity, I will now explore how interpersonal and broader social contexts shape and reflect women's understandings and experiences of sexuality.

South Asian Transnationals in Sexuality Research

In this section, I explore research on sexuality to establish why I focus on the sexual well-being of South Asian Canadian women. First, I present studies that explore the sexual health determinants and outcomes of South Asian transnational men and women. These studies establish barriers to sexual health, often assessing sexual function, risk, attitudes, communication, and service-use. I secondly present a small body of research that examines

South Asian transnational women's sexual subjectivities. These studies explore constraints on sexual facets, impacts, and how women respond. Overall, I find that existing research leaves room for further attention to sexual well-being: how women feel capable of asserting a sexual life that they find meaningful.

3.11: Sexual Health Profile

The sexuality and sexual health of South Asian Canadian populations are under researched, especially with respect to generational, religious, or ethnic differences (Ali-Faisal, 2016; Rajiva, 2006). This may in part be because South Asians have not long been considered at risk for sexual problems. "Individual and collective vulnerabilities" exist, but have been largely overlooked (Wong et al., 2019, p. 28). This gap in research may arise from perceptions of South Asian immigrants as a model minority group: as entirely "economically successful, naturally hardworking, intellectually talented and free of social problems" (Puri, 2005, p 421; Thamocharan et al., 2017). Contributions to this belief may include reported low sexual intercourse rates during adolescence, delayed sexual debut, and fewer sexual partners compared to other groups (Gravel et al., 2016; Hahm et al., 2008). The perception that South Asians are wealthy, healthy, and less sexually active has led researchers to neglect general and sexual health concerns and to ignore the need for unique services and supports. This view has obscured more complicated sexual realities (Nagaraj et al., 2017).

Within the past two decades, growing attention to the sexual health of transnational South Asians has offered a more detailed picture. Much of the research has been conducted in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and only to a lesser extent in Canada. Studies that have paid attention to sexual health demonstrate that after sexual debut, South Asians have equal or higher rates of sexual risks as other ethnic groups (Hahm et al., 2008). Additionally, while men report more activity than women, both are becoming more sexually active at younger ages and outside of marriage (Griffiths et al., 2008). Overall, South Asian transnational populations report lower health-seeking behaviours and increased risky behaviours compared to white counterparts (Coleman & Testa, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2008; Thamocharan et al., 2017). For example, research finds that, compared to their white counterparts, South Asian women report lower sexuality-related screening rates. Specifically, pap-test and breast cancer screening rates are lower amongst Asian Canadian women compared to other Canadian women (Ahmad et al., 2012; Brotto et al., 2008;

Dasgupta, 2002; Islam et al., 2006). Sexual health disparities are compounded for Muslim women, who report even lower rates of mammography than other South Asians (Islam et al., 2006).

South Asians also report low sexuality-related service access and use (Bottorff et al., 2001; Frost et al., 2016; Salehi et al., 2014, Shoveller et al., 2007; Wray et al., 2014), low sexual health information, particularly with greater religious affiliation (Wong et al., 2017), and high STI rates (Griffiths et al., 2008b). South Asians are also at a risk of not using contraception and they report lower usage compared to white counterparts (Griffiths et al., 2008). Further, young Muslim men and women receive even “less sexual health information, especially in the areas of intimate relationships and pleasure” from parent-child communication than other South Asian groups (Wong et al., 2017, p. 49). Depending on religiosity, Muslims tend to report more sexually conservative attitudes towards premarital sex, sexual guilt and anxiety, and less premarital sexual activity (de Visser et al, 2007; Griffiths et al, 2008; Griffiths et al., 2011; Ali-Faisal, 2016; Ali-Faisal, 2018). Additionally, broader Islamophobic narratives about Muslims as “conservative, traditional, and ultra-religious” complicate the ways individuals access services and experience sexuality (Wong et al., 2017, p. 49). Collectively, the research depicts a more complicated picture of South Asian transnational sexual health rates, risky and health-seeking behaviours, and attitudes than the model minority myth permits.

The literature tends to focus on the role of interpersonal and social factors on sexual health. It focuses primarily on the sexual health outcomes of intimate partner violence, HIV risk amongst MSM, and other sexually risky behaviours (Hasan et al., 2015; Thamocharan et al., 2017). In addition to reflecting economic and social inequalities, cultural and religious factors impact sexual behaviours and access to sexual health care (Beck et al., 2005; Meherali et al., 2021; Wray et al., 2014). For instance, differences in understandings and experiences of menopause support the position that sexual health is not only a reflection of biological factors, but also cultural factors (Brotto et al., 2008). Cultural factors shape attitudes and sexual behaviours, such as the use of face-saving strategies “to preserve family honour” by avoiding open sexual expression (Zaidi et al., 2012, p. 177). Women face sexual stigma for owning, purchasing, and using contraception (Hawa et al., 2019), which then undermines assertiveness and control in sexual relationships. Cultural norms can stigmatize parent-child sexual communication, impeding the provision of information on contraception and

preventative measures (Peel Public Health, 2012; Griffith, 2011; Wray et al., 2014; Frost et al., 2016; Gravel et al., 2016). Stigma and silence decrease safe and effective contraceptive use and increase risk of other vulnerabilities such as sexual violence, incorrect information, and unattended sexual health needs (Madan-Bahel, 2008; Wray et al., 2014).

Research also explores sociocultural factors on sexual health services. According to this research, resources and services are often inadequate and “culturally insensitive and antagonistic towards community values” (Beck et al 2005, p. 161). Individuals fear judgement from service providers or fear being found out by their ethnic or religious communities as it may induce family dishonouring (Meherali et al., 2021). Judgement and feelings of shame increase pressure to maintain silence over sexual concerns, limiting use of services (Beck et al., 2005, Bottoroff et al., 2001; Griffiths et al., 2015; Frost et al., 2016; Salehi et al., 2014; Singh, 2009; Shoveller et al 2007; Wong et al., 2019). In redressing such concerns, studies find that young South Asian transnationals often desire culturally and religiously aware sexual information and call for community representation and participation in establishing and providing sexual health services (Patel-Kanwal, 2004; Griffiths et al., 2008).

Overall, attention to research on sexual health highlights the need for continued research on South Asian transnational populations (Quay et al., 2017). In addition to attention to sexual health inequalities and barriers, there is a need to examine how women embody and find meaning in their sexuality. There is also a need to better understand how individuals respond to and transform multiple interpersonal and sociocultural pressures and expectations. This information is relevant to developing policy and programming that can bolster sexual well-being in South Asian communities. Attention only to sexual hardship excludes how individuals negotiate constraints and sexual scripts, mobilize resources to enjoy sexual expression, or make meaning of sexuality across all spaces of their life.

Accordingly, I now synthesize a group of studies that explore transnational South Asian women’s understandings and experiences of sexuality. Though this research does not explicitly attend to sexual well-being, it does reveal glimpses of how women make meaning of their sociocultural spaces and exert control over their sexual trajectories. This body of literature is crucial to my research because it demonstrates how women navigate power dynamics and sociocultural constructions that impede sexual expression. It considers how

individuals can live safe and fulfilling lives that extend beyond simply avoiding sexual risk, and it considers how they respond to hardship.

3.12: Sexual Subjectivities

In this section, I synthesize studies that explore participant understandings and experiences of sexuality. I turn to research on sexual subjectivities because, to my knowledge, only one existing study examines the sexual well-being of South Asians. As I briefly discussed in my conceptualization of sexual well-being, O'Connor et al. (2018) include Fijians of Indian Descent (FID) in their study of sexual and reproductive well-being amongst Fijian young people, age 15-19. They conclude that participants' understandings of "sexual and reproductive well-being" are multi-faceted and include subjective evaluations and capabilities, such as feelings of love, being in control, and able to make sexually informed decisions. At the same time, they explain that participants' evaluations of themselves are shaped by interpersonal relationships. For example, participants' sexual decisions are shaped by the fear of shame that might befall their family and some feel constrained by community monitoring. The study also finds that participants discuss sexual and reproductive well-being in relation to performance of heteronormative, traditionally gendered, and sexually avoidant behaviours. While this study examines meanings of sexual well-being, it leaves room to explore how individuals respond to constraints and manage their sexual well-being over time (O'Connor et al., 2018).

While other studies do not explore sexual well-being directly, some research complements my work as it presents a detailed look at transnational South Asian women's sexual lives. These studies explore sexual subjectivities, including how participants make meaning in their lives and how they employ strategies of resistance and resilience (Pande, 2015; Singh, 2009; Singh et al., 2010). The sexual subjectivities studies pertain to a wider range of sexual facets than studies in the previous section: dating and marriage, sexual identity, and experiences of sexual trauma. The studies I will discuss explore how women respond to external influences on facets of their sexuality, and how they respond to sexual challenges and negative outcomes. The attention to women's responses is relevant because such research dismantles culture clash models and account for power dynamics, which is an important goal of my research (see Chapter 1). Power dynamics become visible by exploring nuance within cultures, countering the strict association of South Asian cultures and religions with

conservatism. Instead, South Asian understandings of sexuality are presented as complex: helpful, desirable, harmful, confusing, and changing. Culture is not treated solely as a barrier, and instead is treated as a complex, meaningful part of their lives and identities. The studies I will discuss also explore participant relationships with their locations, spaces, and sexualities, often from an intersectional framework. Here, the focus shifts to the negotiation of power and considers how individuals exercise control over their sexual lives to legitimize their needs and identities (Pande, 2015; Twamley, 2014). The power dynamics and heterogeneity within South Asian cultures are addressed, avoiding a tendency to reinforce a cultural binary where individuals are passive bodies between tradition and modernity (Majumdar, 2007). They tend to de-centre a focus on risky behaviour and risk-prevention, and instead prioritize how participants actively respond to sexual hardship through a strength-based approach (Twamley, 2014). Consequently, I present how a small number of studies that do attend to women's experiences, which examine how cultural discourses shape understandings of love, dating, and marriage.

According to Mehrotra (2016), studies increasingly explore gender and family, but few studies examine the lived experiences of South Asian women. A small number present a complicated relationship where traditional South Asian values can inhibit sexual freedom, but are not entirely oppressive to women (Pande, 2015; Twamley, 2014). Traditional values can and do maintain patriarchal structures, leading to pressure around dating or marital needs and decisions. For instance, exclusion from western society and fear of isolation from ethnic community can encourage adherence to cultural practices such as abstaining from dating or participating in arranged marriage. These are strategies aimed at avoiding avoid judgment and maintaining ethnic or religious identity (Bacchus, 2017; Samuel, 2010). Here, participants identify limited choice around marital expectations like mate selection, and experience difficulties in reconciling personal with parental desires.

Still, South Asian women actively push back against "unequal gender practices" in their daily lives (Samuel, 2010, p 107). They are not passive transmitters of culture and instead "active agents and participants in broader processes of social and historical change" (Alexander, 1994, p. 348). These highlight how women navigate their cultural dating and marital practices without complete rejection of South Asian values (Twamley, 2014). Cultural practices are reformed to "suit their life's hopes and ambitions and what reliance they seek from their religious and cultural heritages" (Pande, 2015, p. 174). For instance, women are

actively involved in their marriage arrangements and value their families as crucial to this process. According to Pande (2015), cultural understandings remain a crucial part of South Asian women's lives.

This literature acknowledges both the beneficial and challenging aspects of cultural constructions and expectations, finding that collective orientations and duty to family guide participants' relationship behaviours (Bacchus, 2017; Twamley, 2014). In relation to marriage, gender roles are negotiated through their own understandings of agency and femininity, while remaining "committed to [cultural] ideals about family" (Pande, 2015, p. 181). This work is important in making visible a range of sexual behaviours, levels of parental control, intimate relationships that complicate the idea of a static, uniformly oppressive South Asian culture.

These sexual subjectivities studies, which focus on women's understandings of sexual identities, explore tension between family, cultural, or religious obligations and coming out, and stress the importance of family relationships on sexuality (Adur & Purkayastha, 2017; Alvi & Zaidi, 2021). Here, South Asian cultures serve as a protective and freeing space (Adur & Purkayastha, 2017; Rahman & Valliani, 2016). In this research, histories of sexual fluidity and conservative colonial measures are described as crucial to unpacking sexual hardship. The findings revealed that religious identity is highly valued by participants, who are able to reclaim religious scripture to make space for their identities (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Rahman & Valliani, 2016). For instance, participants turned to new readings of the Quran or pointed out queerness and gender fluidity in Hindu texts and South Asian legends (Adur & Purkayastha, 2017). These acts of reclamation help manage tension around sexual identities and reshape participant relationships with their ethnic and religious identities. These studies also complicate the binary between repressive South Asian and liberating western cultures. Participants share that there are challenges 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals face within South Asian communities and push back against the idea of western society as a beacon of sexual freedom, free of homophobia. Instead, participants continuously navigate tensions across spaces, including compounded experience of racism, homophobia, and exclusion related to western normative constructions of queer identities (Adur & Purkayastha, 2017; Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Patel, 2019; Rahman & Valliani, 2016).

Finally, studies on experiences of sexual abuse, violence, and trauma experienced by women similarly hold that South Asian cultures can be key sites and sources of both oppression and

resistance (Bacchus, 2017; Singh 2009; Singh et al., 2010). Singh (2009, 2010) avoids pathologizing South Asian women by focusing on the wellness-based strategies participants employ in their lives after experiences of abuse. Her studies are critical “to building a strength-based perspective of South Asian women” (Singh et al., 2010, p. 366). These studies present participants as survivors who “are resilient to sexual trauma” (Singh 2009, p. 372; Couture-Carron, 2020). The studies highlight how resistance strategies are embedded in their social locations and show how this complicates understandings of the impact of culture on sexual trajectories. For example, participants cope with trauma by finding pride in ethnic identity and making use of traditional healing practices, family and community structures, and role models (Ahmed et al., 2009; Singh, 2009; Singh et al., 2010). They also identify instances of transforming cultural stigmas to suit their personal needs. For example, women respond to cultural stigma by using the silence to develop and validate their thoughts around abuse, establish boundaries, and decide how and when to break silence (Singh et al., 2010).

The research discussed above stresses the importance of South Asian sexual subjectivities (Majumdar, 2007). The findings influence my research because they point to the dynamic role of culture in shaping gender roles, sexual attitudes, and experiences, while considering how South Asian women exert agency in response to the sexual stigma and constraints that shape their lives. First, while traditional constructions of sexuality and femininity are pervasive in transnational South Asian contexts, the studies do not paint South Asian cultures with one brush. As discussed, broader sexual health research on South Asian transnational populations risks upholding culture clash or culture conflict understandings. This positions individuals as passive subjects in between the hegemonic cultures of their ancestral and current homelands (Burr, 2002; Singh et al., 2010). The traditional, collectivist value systems featured in South Asian cultures are pathologized and assessed against western understandings of sexuality. Western constructions are presented as individualistic, “more post-modern, secular, egalitarian, and fluid” (Zaidi et al., 2014, p. 28; Botoroff, et al., 2001; Burr, 2002; Puri, 2005; Majumdar, 2007). This places both cultures in a superior-inferior relationship and masks the oppressive and coercive power dynamics that exist across time and place. Culture clash approaches can also imply that acculturation towards western culture is necessary and desirable for optimal sexual expression and sexual health (Ahmed et al., 2009). In comparison, the smaller body of studies on sexual subjectivities counters this pitfall by offering a more complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory picture of individual lives, families, communities, and cultures they interact with. These studies

represent participants and their families as holding a range of sexual values and knowledges, while engaging in varying levels of sexual communication and support (Dasgupta, 1998; Gravel et al, 2016; Griffiths 2008; Patel-Kanwal, 2004).

Secondly, the studies pay close attention to the agency of women in responding to pressures and challenges. For instance, they acknowledge challenges resulting from traditional gender roles but do not pathologize culture. Instead, women's lived realities are discussed with more nuance and capture how young women are located at the intersection of multiple identities (Ahmed et al., 2009; Samuel, 2010). These studies demonstrate that women do not see themselves as passive victims of oppressive systems but actively assert sexual agency in daily contexts (Puri, 2005). Women are instead presented as making sexual decisions in response to their locations and family dynamics. The studies attend to fluctuations and individuals' efforts to rework multiple sets of cultural constructions and values to meet their own needs and beliefs. Further, individuals in these studies actively challenge and reframe identities and cultural belief systems as they age (Sinha et al., 2007). Sexuality is part of a broader process of identity construction and negotiation that South Asian women engage in, figuring out how they wish to engage in facets of sexuality, how they are actually able to express these facets, and what their relationship to their ethnicity and religions will be. I follow these studies in the present study to engage a more dynamic understanding of women's sexualities, by similarly countering culture clash approaches and offering a closer look at individual agency.

3.13: New Directions

To my knowledge, only one existing study explores South Asian experiences of sexual well-being as a broad construct (O'Connor et al., 2018), which warrants further attention to South Asians in Canada as they progress through adolescence and into adulthood. As I have discussed, facets of sexuality and sexual well-being are studied separately across existing research, such as women's lived experiences of dating, marriage, sexual identity, or intimate partner violence (Handa, 2003; Samuel, 2010). This leaves room for research to explore multiple dimensions of sexuality, especially interconnected facets that individuals find meaningful in their daily lives and unfold in relation to other facets. I will also explore nuances in their everyday lives that shape how they are able to express these facets, the progression of their sexual attitudes and behaviours, and the ways individuals navigate

hardship in relation to their identities and social locations (Nagaraj et al., 2017; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000).

The existing body of research also separates experiences during adolescence and adulthood. This provides clarity around how facets of sexuality are experienced within age groups or generational statuses (Frost et al., 2016; Griffiths et al., 2008; Gravel et al 2016; Mehrotra, 2016; Wray et al., 2014; Zaidi et al., 2016, Zaidi et al., 2014). However, this approach can overlook the connections and fluidity between these life stages. As a result, my research considers how participants fluctuate in their understandings of sexuality and in their control of their sexual trajectories over time.

Finally, while existing literature attends to some sexual experiences and the sexual health in South Asians in Australia, Britain and the United States (Beck et al., 2005; Griffiths et al., 2008; Hahm et al., 2008; Jaspal, 2015; Kuo & St. Lawrence, 2006; Puri, 2005; Wray et al., 2014), less is established about Canadian contexts (Zaidi et al., 2016; Zaidi et al., 2014; Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Patel, 2019; Rahman & Valliani, 2016). Canada has a unique immigrant history, social, political, and economic climate that give rise to differences that are not entirely accountable in other contexts. For example, research has found that the age of sexual debut differs across populations in Canada and the United States (Maticka-Tyndale, 2001). As a result, I focus my research on the experiences of South Asian women residing in Canada, native born or settled in Canada during early childhood.

Overall, I investigate how women learn to assert a sexual life that they personally value. I explore how South Asian Canadian women interact with broader power dynamics around the construction of sexuality in interpersonal and sociocultural contexts. I explore how these constructions change and impact women's sexuality across stages of their lives, in relation to their identities, needs, and interpersonal connections. The sexual trajectories of South Asian Canadian women are multidimensional, bound in "moral, cultural, religious, and political terrain", and warrant further exploration (Takhar, 2013, p. 78). My work focuses on how the individual is best able "to feel sexually informed, competent, attractive and acceptable...by acknowledging their sexual identity and ...find[ing] ways to express their sexual self" (Lee et al., 2019, p. 306). This helps to understand how they wish to be supported as they push back against sexual hardship and oppression.

3.14 Chapter Conclusion

Above, I identified the gaps in the literature that led me to this work. In this study, I ask “*what are the predominant sociocultural constructions of sexuality as experienced by South Asian Canadian women throughout their life course?*”. Second, I ask “*how do women navigate these sociocultural constructions of sexuality in their pursuit of sexual well-being?*”. Across both literature review chapters, I found that sexuality is framed in relation to ideas about function and risk, and while useful, how women navigate other pressures around facets such as identity, gender roles, desires, or self-concept is ignored. I found that South Asian women’s sexual well-being, which I conceptualize as their ability to live a personally meaningful sexual life, remains largely unexamined. I showed the need to incorporate a sexual rights perspective, and I stressed the need for a person-centred approach to the ways that sexuality unfolds. This is especially necessary given South Asian persons’ identities, social locations, and their interpersonal and sociocultural contexts. I argued that attaining sexual well-being is a sexual right, and I showed that this is supported by studies that locate women’s subjectivities “within their wider social context[s]” (Lee & Fenge, 2016, p. 2271). I showed that sexual well-being is best examined through a dynamic, subjective definition of sexuality, and I argued that a focus on sexual well-being prioritizes the positions and needs of South Asian Canadian women as they move through their daily lives over time. In the next chapter, I will explore how an intersectional life course research framework can facilitate this work.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework that informs my research. I use an intersectional life course framework, which relies on a combination of premises from an intersectional framework and life course perspective (Ferrer et al., 2017). In broad strokes, an intersectional approach focuses on the interactions of social locations that unfold “within a context of connected systems and structures of power” (Hankivsky, 2014, p. 2; Anthias, 2012). It is appropriate for examining social relations and (dis)advantage. Life course offers a complementary perspective as an analysis of change, viewing lives in flux and shaped by their broader interpersonal, historical, and sociocultural contexts (Corna, 2013). I incorporate both intersectional and life course frameworks and perspectives because of the combined attention to power, locations, and change over time. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the historical context, overarching views, relevance, and limitations that intersectional and life course frameworks each provide. I will then explain the benefits of a combined intersectional life course framework, show how I will apply it in my research, and explain why it is useful in the examination of sexuality and sexual well-being of South Asian Canadian women.

4.1 Intersectionality Framework

Intersectionality is a framework founded on the work of Black feminists from the early 1970s, who sought to address anti-racist, anti-sexist, homophobic, and socialist concerns. In particular, the Combahee River Collective was an American Black lesbian and feminist socialist support and action organization that met from 1974 to 1980 (Berger & Hobson, 2020; Thuma, 2019). The Collective mobilized around the previously ignored fact “that black women are inherently valuable” and they demanded to be treated humanely (The Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 3; Berger & Hobson, 2020). In this way, these leading Black feminists pushed back against the existing movements and theories that side-lined and obscured the efforts and needs of Black women (Guittar & Guittar, 2015). While participating in the American civil rights and feminist movements, they identified and critiqued power structures within each. For instance, they identified in the former how patriarchal power structures were upheld and made visible the fact that the latter prioritized the concerns of white middle-class women. The Collective provided retreats for “political study and theory development” and responded to critical issues surrounding Black women’s lives such as the racialization, sexualization, and inadequate response to the Roxbury, Boston

murders during the 1970s (Thuma, 2019, p. 119). During this time, the Combahee River Collective Statement was released and summarized the premises and aims of intersectionality (Guittar & Guittar, 2015).

The Combahee River Collective Statement was written in 1977; it emphasized self-love, consciousness-raising, and protection of bodily rights (Bowen, 2004). This statement identified racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism as major, interlocking “systems of oppression”, arguing these fostered the oppressive life conditions of Black women and other “Third World women” (The Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 1; Thuma, 2019, p. 120). It emphasized the challenges inherent in parsing out sexual politics from class and racial politics, especially as they are simultaneously experienced and weaponised in Black women’s daily lives (Bowen, 2004). The statement also promoted solidarity with Black men, in unique ways that did not previously occur in white feminist spaces. The statement indicated that Black women share experiences of racism with Black men, while also struggling “with black men about sexism” (The Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 4-5). Diverse conceptions of intersectionality have since developed from this work, and each emphasize the experiences of people with multiple marginalized social locations (Anthias, 2012).

An intersectional framework does not privilege any single axis of inequality. This is an important contribution because individuals locate themselves at the intersection of multiple social locations (Hankivsky, 2012). Changing locations, mental health, kinship patterns, class, or the ways that individuals interact with social structures based on their locations impact how sexuality and sexual well-being are experienced. Consequently, intersectionality offers a lens through which more robust solutions to sexuality-related challenges are made visible. For instance, it considers micro-level solutions such as promoting healthy behaviour. An intersectional framework also facilitates attention to deeply rooted social and structural dynamics such as how neighbourhoods and communities can be restructured “to ensure health spaces and places” for individuals (Haque, 2011, p. 18). This might occur by unpacking the ways colonial and patriarchal values influence women and their bodies across cultural contexts and how these values can be countered at multiple levels (The Combahee River Collective, 1977; Haque, 2011 p. 18). By attending to power dynamics at multiple levels, intersectionality helps explore how individuals (re)define the self, helps contest broader group boundaries, and counters racist and sexist hegemonic constructions of femininity within broader contexts (Collins, 2000). As a result, research can avoid treating

women as passive victims who need to “be educated...protected...provided for... and supported” (Jordan & Edwards, 2016, p. 434).

Intersectionality frameworks focus on the multiplicity of social locations and identities and provide attention to power. An intersectionality framework is premised on the inseparability and multiplicity of identity. It posits that individuals have multiple social locations, statuses, and identities that interact with one another to shape experience (Parent et al., 2013). This interconnectedness of social locations and identity is not simply the sum of the impact of each. Social locations and identities do not exist separately in social realities (Guittar & Guittar, 2015). For example, this premise reveals that class position needs to be understood as both gendered and racialized, and similarly, ethnic identity is gendered and influenced by socioeconomic status (Anthias, 2012; Hankivsky, 2012). While the framework can provide a detailed understanding of experiences of disadvantaged groups, it also frames all lives as impacted by “social organization” through attention to changing power, privilege, and agency (Hankivsky, 2012, p. 1713; Anthias, 2012). It does not hold that researchers should undertake all possible social factors but instead, should be thoughtful and clear about what locations are included and excluded in research and how lives are bound in the multiplicity of locations.

An intersectional framework consider how power and privilege are differently accessed and constructed by individuals, within relationships and groups, and across social contexts (Grant & Zwier, 2012; Parent et al., 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It seeks to understand systems, such as institutions, spaces, structures, and policies that serve to maintain hegemonic ideology (Grant & Zwier, 2012). Power is constantly reshaped in form and access through social interaction; power is not a capacity held in reserve by a select group (John Allen, 2003, as cited in Pande, 2015). It can be accessed in different forms, such as “domination, authority, seduction, manipulation, coercion, negotiation and persuasion” (Pande, 2015, p. 182). According to Collins (1990; 2000) differential access to power can be conceptualized through the idea of a matrix of domination, which is a system that encompasses the intersections of all social locations. Rather than occupying static roles as the oppressor or oppressed, power circulates within systems, “to which individuals stand in varying relationships” (Collins, 2000, p 274). Collins refers to four interrelated domains of power that undermine individual lives. The domains of power include the structural or large-scale social institutions; the disciplinary or organizational practices of such institutions; the hegemonic or dominant

system of ideas; and the interpersonal domain of power or interactions at the individual level. Each of these domains serves to maintain the status quo but can also serve as sites for resistance and empowerment (Collins, 2000).

In short, intersectional research offers a balanced look at shifting access to power in relation to individual locations. By drawing on an intersectionality framework, I attend to power dynamics and the role of individual-, interpersonal-, and sociocultural-level factors in the regulation and expression of sexuality (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). I pay attention to barriers and constraints that inhibit agency. My goal is to emphasize both the role of the individual, and structural influences in appropriate balance. Existing research warns that overemphasizing the role of the individual can maintain neoliberal ideals and risks individualizing and depoliticizing sexuality (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Overemphasizing the role of the individual detracts from broader power dynamics and structural influences that impede or complicate the ability to express sexuality. It can render women entirely responsible for, and therefore blame them for, all possible sexual outcomes while masking the role of broader, intersecting systems in sexual oppression (Bey-Cheng, 2015). Conversely, overemphasizing structural influences can portray individuals as passive bodies with no control over their sexual lives. By incorporating an intersectionality framework, I must consider sexual subjectivities while also considering structural factors and power dynamics (Samari, 2017). This also involves paying close attention to the sociocultural values and norms that shape, constrain, and enable individuals' sexual lives, such as strong collectivist orientations (Samari, 2017).

Despite these contributions, applications of intersectionality can overlook how certain temporal and spatial contexts are involved in structuring individual lives. Critics argue that applications of intersectionality can reflect social locations in western contexts while overlooking transnational, global, and historical contexts (Purkayastha, 2012; Smets et al., 2020). For instance, applications of intersectional framework may underplay historical contexts like colonialism and neo-colonialism which have long-term impacts on the psychologies, political and social lives of South Asians. Alternatively, it can overlook non-western systems of power such as caste hierarchies (Beasley, 2005). Therefore, more attention is required to examine how lives are constructed across place, including across borders and in virtual spaces (Purkayastha, 2012).

This attention can be helpful in exploring how cultural products and sexual understandings move beyond national boundaries and ease the process of maintaining ethnic or religious identities and value systems upon migration. Attention to place might also account for the ways that social locations hold different implications across spaces, including the ways that transnational spaces create opportunity to be part of a “racial majority and minority simultaneously” in Canadian and South Asian contexts (Purkayastha, 2012, p. 60; Anthias, 2012). An intersectional framework can be strengthened by attending to temporal and spatial nuances that show how “the differences that exist socially within migrant populations and their descendants may be linked to stages in the life cycle and age” (Anthias, 2012; p. 104). As a result, I consider a life course perspective to complement an intersectionality framework to better explore the role of temporal and spatial contexts.

4.2 Life Course Perspective

Western research during the 1960s attended to the ways historical, geographic, and temporal contexts shaped lives over longer periods of time (Elder et al., 2003; Crosnoe & Elder, 2015). The availability of new longitudinal data sets that followed individuals from childhood to adulthood allowed researchers to consider movement and change across life stages or phases. For instance, Leonard Cain first described life course as a concept and asserted that age is a key feature in the ways that social systems and individual lives play out (Dannefer & Phillipson, 2010). Early attention also highlighted how life trajectories vary across individuals and groups. This emphasized the importance of social and cultural differences, and the ways lives are shaped by dynamic “historical and biological context[s]” (Elder et al., 2003, p. 7). These contributions are evident in the first major study to use a life course perspective, where Glen Elder examined children’s experiences of the Great Depression (Elder, 1998). He explored how different age cohorts understood and responded to financial hardship and maintained emotional stability. Elder demonstrated how these capacities changed based on gender and age (DeLamater & Carpenter, 2012).

The life course perspective attends to the continuities and divergences in individuals’ lives through the progression of time, including the events and roles that are experienced (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015). It focuses on the interactions between individual biography, the structural context, and historical time (Corna, 2013). Life course perspective asserts that biological, psychological, and social development occurs from infancy throughout adulthood, and this

development is constantly shaped by structural constraints and opportunities (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015; Pavalko & Caputo, 2013). The life course perspective finds that access to individual and contextual resources, such as individual knowledge or affluent neighbourhood residence, can be mobilized and used in different settings and across historical time (Link & Phelan, 1995; Phelan et al., 2010). The perspective is also relevant to explore how events and hardships experienced during infancy and childhood continue to impact resources and outcomes in later stages of the life course (Pavalko & Caputo, 2013).

This perspective asserts that the life course consists of multiple socially structured sequences of trajectories or paths individuals take over time (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015; Elder et al, 2003; Kok, 2007). A crucial way of examining the impact of the life course occurs through attention to trajectories, transitions, and turning points (Corna, 2013). Trajectories occur concurrently across different domains of life, including marriage, family, education, work, and health pathways (George, 2003). The nature of trajectories is impacted by one's age, the timing of an event occurrence, and by the other social roles and locations one occupies (George, 2003). Trajectories also contain transitions, or short-term changes in states, roles, and statuses, such as the decision to begin dating (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012; Corna, 2013). Transitions may be considered turning points when changes are significant enough to alter the direction of a trajectory, reshape how one views their position within their social world, or reshape how they consequently respond in situations (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2015). Five life course principles, established by Glen Elder, are fundamental to this framework. Briefly, these hold that: development spans across the life course; life course transitions are shaped by timing; lives are interdependent; the life course is embedded and influenced by history and place; and life courses are shaped by the choices and actions an individual can make within constraints and opportunities (Elder et al., 2003; George, 2003; Pavalko & Wilson, 2011).

While detailed exploration of these life course principles falls outside of the scope of this study, they are relevant because of the emphasis that each provides on temporality and interconnectedness in trajectories (Elder et al., 2013). For instance, the principles can be used to examine how historical changes in economic, social, and political contexts impact behaviours and events across contemporary individual life courses and across broader cohorts (Elder et al., 2003; Wiggins et al., 2011). Individual trajectories do not occur in a vacuum, since social and historical worlds uniquely shape how individuals in different cohorts are

constrained, how they understand their realities, or access their resources. Further, the point of time in which an event occurs can shape its meaning, impact existing or subsequent roles, or violate social expectations of when the event should normally occur (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015; Elder et al, 2003; Hutchison, 2015). For instance, aging takes on meaning across time and place, and the impact of social influences on one's life can also differ according to age and life stage (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015; Dannefer & Settersten, 2010). These life course principles demonstrate that aging and life course trajectories are not universal or static experiences. Instead, the progression of the life course is an “experientially contingent reality” impacted by a range of interactions between the individual and temporally bound social factors (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, p. 5).

Interconnectedness between individuals, groups, and social structures is addressed through several principles. First, the principle of linked lives holds that events in an individual's life can have profound impacts on the lives around them, and vice versa, leading to joint decisions and collective experiences of events (Elder et al, 2003). For example, individual trajectories and social roles are intertwined with those of families, workplace colleagues, and social networks to create social pathways (Corna, 2013). These social relationships also have a huge role in the lives of individuals, shaping their political, cultural, and religious beliefs, and their access to individual and contextual resources (George, 2003). Interconnectedness to social structures is demonstrated through attention to individual agency. Life course principles hold that the potential to exert agency in shaping one's own life trajectory exists within broader systems of constraints and opportunities (Pavalko & Wilson, 2011). Since lives are linked to social structures and systems of power and oppression, the ability to assert control over one's life is impacted by their relationship to these systems, and to the individual and contextual resources that these relationships can provide (Elder et al., 2003; Wingens et al., 2011; Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). This can include one's socioeconomic position, level of education, and access to social resources. Life course principles demonstrate that individual lives are situated within broader social, cultural, political, or economic contexts. Together, attention to temporality and interconnectedness provides a more complicated look at the life course, potentially capturing considerable diversity in trajectories and the dynamic nature of lives (Crosnoe & Elder, 2015).

A life course framework is important to my study because it considers patterns of stability/instability, variation/commonalities, and inequality/power dynamics, with respect to

influences and outcomes related to sexual well-being across an individual's life (O'Rand & Hamil-Luker, 2005). Drawing on this framework complements the strengths of intersectionality, by paying closer attention to temporality, age, and life course stage. It provides a longer view of the life course, offers the concept of sexual trajectories, and highlights the importance of changing dynamics. As such, the life course framework also challenges a deterministic view of participants' sexual well-being. This framework has merit because it draws attention to interpersonal and intergenerational linkages, and it acknowledges that lives are bound in historical and structural contexts (McLeod & Pavalko, 2008). While previous applications of life course perspective to studies of sexuality often follow a biomedical approach and conflate aging with sexual dysfunction and decline, there are important divergences (Miller, 2018). For instance, the Gendered Sexuality over the Life Course conceptual model aligns with my present focus by approaching sexuality as a biopsychosocial process, noting its constantly changing forms and influences (DeLamater & Carpenter, 2012).

Still, it is possible that applications of life course principles may miss out on the role of some spatial contexts on the life course, particularly in relation to migration and global contexts (Kok, 2007). I argue that, through its attention to timing and interconnections, life course perspective is well-suited to understanding migration. Little is known about the ways migration impacts other life course transitions and trajectories (Kok, 2007). However, a critical application of life course to migration should avoid framing it as a linear, temporary process. Migration has continued cultural, social, economic, and political linkages that extend far beyond settlement. These linkages also vary over time, place, and across generations. Instead of viewing participant lives within contained geographic locations, I consider life course in relation to transnational spaces (Anthias, 2012). Additionally, while attention to linked lives can capture this widespread impact of migration across families, it arguably can overlook the power dynamics that exist within families, according to gender, generation, or age (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012).

Despite its strengths, some applications of the life course perspective maintain static views of individual lives. For instance, gender is often treated as a fixed primary status while other personal locations may be overlooked (Carpenter, 2015; Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). There is also a tendency to treat childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as discrete stages. This does not reflect individual reality nor differing cultural understandings of these stages.

Examining participant experiences as discrete stages can also mask subtle changes that unfold across multiple life stages (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). There is a tendency for sexuality-related research to focus on adolescent and emerging adulthood rather than later stages of adulthood (Miller, 2018), and a tendency within this to attend to risk and risk aversion (Halpern, 2010; Kok, 2007). This leaves room for attention to diverse and changing strategies used to express desired facets of sexuality. While attention to variation can complicate the ability to synthesize and draw out meaningful patterns, I believe there is merit in paying attention to participants' subjectivities (Kok, 2007). I argue that a life course theoretical framework may be strengthened by paying attention to the fluidity of individuals' social locations, identities, life course trajectories, and the spatial contexts that participants move through.

4.3 Present Framework: Intersectional Life Course Perspective

To resolve some of the limitations described within intersectional and life course research perspectives and frameworks, I draw on the work of Ferrer et al. (2017) who combine the two and refer to the outcome as an intersectional life course perspective. They argue that the intersectional life course perspective effectively captures the experiences and perspectives of the individual, locates the individual within structural contexts, and acknowledges the role of place and temporality. According to Ferrer et al. (2017), the intersectional life course perspective offers an integrated approach to the identities and locations, life events, institutions and systems, and broader histories that shape a life course (Ferrer et al., 2017). This bridges "the structural forces that impinge on the individual with personal trajectories of aging" (Ferrer et al., 2017, p. 11).

Ferrer et al. (2017) draw out four steps in a guiding frame for analysis but advise that these should be reworked to suit particular study needs. I apply these steps to address my research questions, which ask how participants understand and navigate sexual constructions in order to maintain sexual well-being across their life course. I use these steps to analyse participant narratives, for instance, considering how settlement processes and other major life events shape sexual trajectories, and how individuals respond to hardship and changes to their sexualities.

4.4: Step 1: Life Events, Timing, & Structural Forces

Step one involves the identification of significant life events such as migration, their timing, and how these might be shaped by structural forces (Ferrer et al., 2017). Applying this step to my research, I will explore how participants' sexual trajectories unfold over time especially in relation to earlier life events. I will explore how sexual- and non-sexual events and transitions impact subsequent sexual desires, relationships, behaviours, or attitudes across the life course (Carpenter, 2015; DeLamater & Carpenter, 2012; Miller, 2018). I am interested in how sexual milestones such as dating, intercourse, and marriage are shaped by external factors, such as sexual communication, family structures, or broader gender norms. This step includes life course attention to timing but extends past the individual level by including the role of structure and how individuals are embedded in these structures (Carpenter, 2015). This approach is crucial in capturing the patterns of similarity and variation within and between lives, for example, allowing attention to differences in the ability to express sexual needs or make sexual decisions, based on context and age.

4.5: Step 2: Locally and Globally Linked Lives

This step involves attention to locally and globally linked lives. The purpose is to account for the ways that individual trajectories are shaped and experienced in conjunction with the lives of others (Ferrer et al., 2017). Since South Asian transnational lives are often entrenched in broad kinship structures, I will apply this step to explore how participants interact with immediate family, extended family, across generations, and within different communities. Attention to linked lives is especially useful in considering how participant identities, understandings, and experiences of sexuality are shaped, constrained, and enabled by their interactions across different social worlds (Carpenter, 2015; Ferrer et al., 2017b). It is also helpful because individual identities are often formed around interpersonal relationships (Ferrer et al., 2017).

I will expand this step to pay further attention to time and place. As discussed in the literature review, research on transnational South Asians can maintain a western or localized lens. Consequently, I turn to postcolonial feminist research and situate participant lives and sexual trajectories within contemporary local and transnational spaces, and historical contexts. I consider how participants' lives are shaped by historical experiences and norms influenced by colonialism that continue to shape contemporary sociocultural understandings of sexuality. This ensures that I avoid prioritizing western cultural constructions as a

barometer for modernity and ideal femininity, which can position non-western women and cultures as passive and oppressive (Narayan, 2000). In this way I am able to recognize the fluidity of participant lives and consider how their identities and sexual lives shift across place and time. Attention to local, global, and historical linkages reflects how participant sexual trajectories may be intertwined with non-western understandings of family and sexuality or impacted by the legacy of colonialism in South Asia.

The expansion of this step also helps highlight the role of linked lives in sexual trajectories. For example, I treat migration as a long-term process where settlement continues to unfold in different ways across the life course. We know that families and communities continue to maintain ties to their homeland, and the settlement process can have intergenerational impacts, traumas, and stressors that bleed into the lives of descendants of immigrants (Espin, 1999). Understandings and experiences of sexuality are often tied to migration and settlement processes (Espin, 1999). These processes can shape sexual beliefs, access to sexual resources, norms around sexual trajectories, and boundary-making processes. Attention to linked lives across place and time can capture how immigrant families and communities access transnational spaces, maintain ethnic or religious identities, and demonstrate how they are impacted by historical sociopolitical contexts from their homelands. Specifically, I will consider generational differences and changes in access to sexual resources, and in cultural and religious notions of moral femininity (Durham, 2004). Existing research finds that intergenerational conflict over sexuality is not only a parent-child private matter but “a social, historical, and transnational affair that exposes, defies, contradicts, and advances multiple and overlapping forces of power relations” (Espiritu, 2012, p. 179). Attention to historical and community linkages can help position the control over women’s sexuality within broader systems of colonialism, nationalism, and racialization (Espiritu, 2012). As Brotman et al. (2019) state, greater attention is needed to connect “stories of aging with the structural barriers, realities, and histories that have shaped racialized communities” (p. 3). Expanding this step to consider linkages across place and time may also help account for strategies of resistance and resilience that are not legitimized within a western perspective, as I will explore in step four (Wallaschek, 2015).

4.6: Step 3: Identities, Social Locations, and Processes of Difference

Step three involves attention to participant identities such as their sexual or religious identity, and the processes of difference that they experience such as gendering and racialization processes (Ferrer et al., 2017). Identities that are formed in conjunction with relationships and surrounding contexts are difficult to disentangle from one another, and change over place and time (Hankivsky, 2012). Attention to processes of difference helps account for ways that social structures and institutions can shape identity and experience or limit the power and resources of marginalized groups (Ferrer et al., 2017). I expand this step to include social locations to accommodate the ways identities, locations, and processes of difference unfold in unique contexts. Social locations impact personal identities in different ways, so separating these concepts can account for the ways individuals may dis-identify or employ elective belonging with their social locations, such as rejection of class or religious identities (Anthias, 2012). It may also capture how social contexts can render particular locations more salient (Anthias, 2012). For instance, one's religious identity may be further complicated by caste location, which can become a more apparent source of power or oppression in contexts where caste is highly valued.

This step also offers flexibility in capturing shared experiences of oppression while avoiding homogenization (Kerner, 2017; Narayan, 2000). For example, this step acknowledges potential shared experiences based on gender or religion, while diverging across class, caste, age, or ability (Bhopal, 2009). This complicates how access to power is understood. For example, Raman (2020) highlights how processes of difference experienced by Dalit Hindu woman do not transfer to those experienced by Brahmin Hindu women, who experience caste privilege. In addition, the combined framework recognizes how locations are also subject to change, such as the ways gender roles and expressions change across the life course (Carpenter, 2015).

Attention to identity, social locations, and processes of difference provides a way to understand how participants' sexual trajectories are experienced. Intersectionality and life course approaches hold that sexuality is shaped by other life experiences (Campos & Benoit, 2019). For example, socioeconomic status and processes of racialization can impact sexual health statuses or access to care. Sexual orientation or identity can be uniquely experienced depending on time and place, both across societies and within an individual life course (Perales, 2015). This attention allows me to examine how participants describe sexual

trajectories and assert their desired sexual lives as impacted by identities, locations, or processes of difference.

4.7: Step 4: Domination, Agency, and Resistance

Step four attends to processes of domination, agency, and resistance. An intersectional life course framework helps contextualize individual agency, experiences, and locations within broader systems of domination. This includes patriarchal, colonial, neoliberal, or capitalist systems (Ferrer et al., 2017). As discussed earlier, power and domination are shifting constructs, and access to power can vary across time, place, or social world. I use this step to make sense of the ways that power circulates in dominant constructions of what sexuality means and how it is valued. I also consider how the valuation of participants, and their social locations or their possession of resources impacts how they navigate and express their ideals sexual lives.

This step also requires examining what agentic sexual trajectories look like according to participants and how participants can express a sexual life of meaning over time (Ferrer et al., 2017). I will explore the power struggles that unfold over the control of women's sexualities within the home, within ethnic or religious communities, or institutional contexts that can impede individual sexual agency. I will pay attention to participant strategies of resistance in response to sexual oppression and hardship. An intersectional life course framework holds that power structures are differently accessed depending on context and timing, leaving room to explore how women uniquely respond depending on their locations, resources, time, and place. For example, postcolonial feminist and Black feminist researchers assert that experiences of hyper sexualization and exploitation can lead to restrictive stances towards gender and sexuality. Racialized communities may push back against oppression through adherence to ideals of morality or hegemonic standards of appropriate behaviour (Espiritu, 2012). These sentiments can bolster "national and ethnic self-respect in light of the pervasive sexualization" and racialization (Espiritu, 2012, p. 179; Narayan, 2000). While they help redistribute power back to racialized communities, a more nuanced examination of these dynamics demonstrates how these tactics might also silence and monitor women's sexualities, and non-heterosexualities (Campos & Benoit, 2019; Kerner, 2017). I use this step to reposition attention back to the experiences and subjectivities of women. This includes highlighting how personal strategies align, deviate, and reform dominant

constructions of sexuality. Lastly, I explore how participants evaluate their sexual needs and establish personal strategies that reflect their daily realities and ensure their sexual well-being.

4.8: Relevance of an Intersectional Life Course Theoretical Framework

An intersectional life course theoretical framework best supports my research aims and research questions. It offers concepts, theoretical direction, and tools to make sense of participant data. First, it provides a lens to examine individual trajectories of agency within broader social structures. By focusing on participant sexual subjectivities, I hope to produce research that does not privilege functional or physiological facets of sexuality and sexual well-being. The premises of life course and intersectional research hold that I explore how participants experience sexual well-being across a range of sexual facets throughout place and time, with attention to the role of seemingly non-sexual factors like mental health and settlement processes.

Second, the framework helps illuminate how experiences of sexual hardships are connected to and exacerbated by characteristics of social worlds, and how sexual well-being can arise from these worlds. This minimizes the risk of reducing participants' cultural contexts to a dichotomy of sexual conservatism versus sexual liberality, as problematized in existing culture clash approaches to South Asian populations. By focusing on domination and sexual agency, cultural sexual values are treated as less static and constantly subject to revision. The idea that western cultures only provide avenues for sexual expression is complicated and the boundaries between cultures are blurred, reflecting a more complicated relationship between patriarchal values and South Asian cultural and religious constructions.

Third, the framework recognizes the need to challenge the idea of South Asian cultures and peoples as a monolith. By attending to the interpersonal connections of one's sexual trajectories, I will be able to explore how families do not simply withhold or acculturate to western values in their settlement processes. For example, it may highlight how families push back and reframe cultural constructions of sexuality. Since the literature review established South Asian families as collectively organized, it is relevant to explore how pathways to sexual well-being are also intertwined with the lives around individuals. Additionally, by treating sexual power dynamics and strategies of resistance as fluid and

context dependent, I may be able to find balance between individual agency and structural constraint. This helps address the limited attention to strength-building in existing research and avoids positioning South Asian Canadian women's sexual trajectories as passively structured.

The tools that the combined framework provides can deepen my response to my research questions. These questions are best addressed with attention to change over time and to systems of power and domination. For example, the combination of perspectives highlights how participants understand and experience life events which are bound in historical and contemporary contexts, such processes of "relocation, settlement, acculturation, and/discrimination" (Brotman et al., 2019, p. 4). Since aging through the life course is not simply an individual experience, drawing on interpersonal relationships across generations and borders helps highlight how sexual trajectories unfold over time. The framework also helps position sexuality as both a site of oppression and resistance. By attending to the individual's connections to interpersonal and structural contexts, I will explore how participants reconcile what kind of women they are expected to be with who they wish to be. Attending to their subjectivities, I explore how they engage broader cultural values about traditional femininity. This includes how their sexualities are related to feelings of being South Asian and Canadian and how they reconcile potential tension.

Finally, an intersectional life course framework aligns with my ontological and epistemological approaches to participants' lives and their sexualities. I follow participants' narratives as truth and centre their subjectivities in my discussion. I attempt to rebalance my power as a researcher by giving weight to the ways participants describe or define their social locations and identities, rather than attempt to fit them into preconceived categories. The framework supports my biopsychosocial conceptualization of sexuality, where it exists in the individual but is also shaped by relations with social factors. I support this through attention to dynamism over the life course and interaction between the individual and broader contexts, such as relationships with family, religious community, across place, and based on individual social locations. Similarly, I value participant constructions of, and pathways, to a meaningful sexual life. I also acknowledge how these change across contexts.

While sexuality can be viewed as a system of oppression itself, I also recognize it as a site where intersecting systems of oppression such as class, nation, race, and gender can shape or exploit sexual trajectories (Carpenter 2015; Collins, 2000). For example, Collins (2000)

argues that Black women's bodies and sexualities are assigned meaning and subject to social practices that are "justified by sexual ideologies" which arise "across seemingly separate systems of oppression" (p. 128). I use an intersectional life course framework to uncover these intersecting systems of oppression and their links to non-sexual areas of participant lives, to complicate understandings of how participants express a sexual life of personal meaning. I also continue to apply this framework as I develop and explain my research methodology in the following chapter. It also facilitates my reflection of power in my position as a researcher in analyzing participant data.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the development and strengths of intersectionality and life course principles and described my application of an intersectional life course framework. Since my study explores the relationship between personal experiences of sexual well-being and broader sexual constructions over time, I incorporated principles from both perspectives in my data analysis. In this way, I explored how personal locations and relationships impact women's sexual expressions and shift over time. Doing so also ensures my previously described goals to present South Asian Canadian women as agentic and South Asian cultural and religious contexts as dynamic (See Chapter 1).

Chapter 5: Methodology

In this chapter, I present the methodological approach and my methodology, which address women's lived realities in relation to sexuality and sexual well-being (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). I use a qualitative methodology, specifically in-depth semi-structured life course interviews with South Asian women in southwestern Ontario, to answer my research questions. I employ a thematic analysis to the data, and I create narrative composites to present the findings.

5.1 Thematic Analysis

There is no single way of conducting qualitative research, and best practices depend on the study, researcher, and available resources (Belotto, 2018). Qualitative research provides a detailed look into the viewpoints, life histories, and worlds of participants, “generat[ing] knowledge grounded in human experience” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 1; Flick, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby; Vaismoradi et al.; 2013). It is used to understand, represent, and explain the way participants personally understand and experience their worlds (Flick, 2018; Weaver & Byers, 2018). Qualitative research provides a close-up view of a phenomenon through the position of a small number of participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Rather than seek to generalize to other populations, settings, or to establish a single universal truth, qualitative research is ideal for detailing and becoming more sensitive to participants' worlds (Rosen & Bachmann, 2008; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I chose a qualitative design that offers flexibility, addresses my research questions, details how participants understand broader expectations of sexuality, and details the ways they assert control over their sexual lives. This design also supports my conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual well-being, which warrant attention to nuance within and between narratives.

Thematic analysis helps identify, organize, and interpret patterns within participant narratives, especially as they relate to the study research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). It is positioned as an accessible method because it does not require the same degree of “detailed theoretical and technical knowledge” as other qualitative methodologies (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Majumdar, 2019). It can provide a structured analysis by translating dense data sets into coherent, accessible forms (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Data are reduced and transformed using codes or categories that eventually are recombined into meaningful themes

or concepts (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The themes categorize patterned responses of meaning across all responses and are key to addressing a study's research questions (Ayres, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). Themes can be quite abstract and do not always require numerical significance. Further, abnormalities in the data are critical details that can contribute to a well-rounded story (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis can be applied to a range of data set sizes, types, and can reflect multiple levels of analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Majumdar, 2019). It is an iterative, cyclical process, as researchers often move back and forth between stages of data collection, analysis, and writing (Braun & Clarke; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Despite widespread use, there is little consensus or documentation of how thematic analysis should be conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). Due to the lack of guidance around procedures, research using thematic analysis can be especially challenging and inconsistent for new researchers (Nowell et al., 2017). Critics of thematic analysis also assert that it offers overly descriptive, surface-level analysis that lacks interpretation and validity (Ayres, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). For example, other methodologies may examine how discourse maintains a status quo around dominant sexual values such as the association between "Canadian" sexual ideals and whiteness. Critics also hold that thematic analysis is not a separate methodology, but a method or tool used to support a range of more rigorous qualitative methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) counter critiques and assert that a reflexive thematic analysis is an underestimated, rich, and foundational method (Majumdar, 2019). While it can produce descriptive research, its flexibility allows for critical investigation of the social meanings and implications of a research topic (Braun et al., 2015; Clarke & Braun, 2017). A rigorous thematic analysis can be trustworthy, detailed, and informed by theory (Nowell et al., 2017). This is because researchers hold power in determining the level and depth of analysis and the kinds of interpretations that can be made (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Since thematic analysis is not bound to a particular theory, I applied it using the intersectional life course theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2015; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

My theoretical framework was especially relevant as I began my final stage of coding. To recall, Ferrer et al., (2017) provide four stages of analysis that apply key guiding principles

from intersectional and life course perspectives. These stages emphasize attention to the timing and structure of life events, to the spatially and temporally linked nature of lives, to identities, locations, and processes of difference, and to processes of domination and agency. Applying each stage, I generated interpretive codes and themes that addressed each research question. In drawing out themes, I considered questions like: how do major pubertal events and kinship structures shape participant relationships with their sexuality?; how does the relationship change over time?; how do they describe meaningful ways of expressing sexuality?; and how have they learned to face resistance to their desired expressions? The framework fostered questions that helped me restructure my focus beyond entirely sexual challenges and oppression. These questions helped me centre how sexual trajectories are shaped by individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors over time. As I applied it to my first research question, the range of themes I constructed became less descriptive, especially as I shifted from prioritizing culture to considering a broader set of intertwined locations and fluctuating power dynamics. This was also feasible in the later stages of analysis as I shifted towards a latent thematic analysis, focusing more on the underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies within participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Majumdar 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis informed by intersectional life course framework helped explore how individual sexual understandings were shaped by interpersonal relationships and broader sociocultural contexts. I applied thematic analysis as a contextualist method, to reflect a core reality while also unravelling the surface of what participants understand as reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This combines both essentialist and constructionist applications of thematic analysis (Majumdar, 2019). For example, my analysis examines participants' motivations and experiences, and recognizes how sexuality is also a social phenomenon shaped by broader processes of difference and domination (Majumdar, 2019; Braun et al., 2015). So, my reporting must reflect participants' realities as they perceive them to be while balancing a critical perspective that uncovers "the hidden assumptions about how narrative accounts are constructed, read and interpreted" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). As I later describe in my data analysis section, I followed the six thematic analysis phases of the procedural outline provided by Braun & Clarke (2006) to ensure I conducted a rigorous study (Majumdar, 2019). Since there are concerns with reliability because of the range of interpretations possible with thematic analyses, I attempted to circumvent this through measures of trustworthiness and reflexivity (see section 5).

5.2 Instrumentation and Ethics

5.3: Instrumentation

I conducted semi-structured interviews that used a series of open-ended questions and probes relating to puberty, dating and marriage, sexual intercourse, and sexual health (Ayres, 2008). Semi-structured interviews typically “describe the meanings of central themes in the life world” of participants (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 3). These interviews allowed me to focus on participant understandings, feelings, and experiences of major sexual facets (Roulston & Choi, 2018). I was also able to explore what types of sexual barriers and successes participants experienced, how they navigated them, and what they felt about these experiences. By creating a list of questions, I ensured that participant dialogue included major components and events along sexual trajectories. However, the questions and probes covered “domains of experience” to facilitate discussion of sexual facets outside of relationships, intercourse, and health (Cook, 2008, p. 423). The structure provided room for participants to navigate conversation and components that they deemed important (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008; Roulston, 2008). The combination of pre-planned questions and probes allowed for back-and-forth movement across topics, follow-ups for issues raised earlier or needing clarification, and exploration of topics I had not accounted for in the planning stages (Roulston, 2008). This process helped shift my position from leading to uncovering data production (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

After completing a preliminary literature review and research proposal, I formulated my research and interview guide. The interview guide prompted recollections from participants about their adolescence to their present stage of adulthood, in order to explore how participant relationships with sexuality are intertwined with social locations and identities. It was crucial to create open-ended questions that could spark discussion over a range of sexuality-related experiences and positions. I used probes to further elicit responses when questions felt too broad (Roulston & Choi, 2018). An open-ended guide was the most appropriate approach for inclusivity of sexual trajectories, genders, non-sexuality related experiences, and health states (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Participants were able to spend time answering questions they were interested in, through a manner that afforded them the most comfort (Shaheen et al., 2019, p 38). Open-ended questions also reduced assumptions about identity, partnerships, or sexual in/experience. Instead, discussion of sexual facets arose organically with participants who felt differing levels of comfort in sharing these (Maticka-

Tyndale, 2012). For example, participants were able to decide if and when to share their sexual identities and experiences during the interview.

I began the interview guide with questions about participants' childhood and family contexts, including their family migration journey and the presence of connections to religious or ethnic communities (See Appendix) (Mehrotra, 2016). In this way, I was better able to understand the social worlds that shaped their sexual trajectories. I then asked questions about puberty, such as discussion or silence around menstruation and bodies, and how these compared with peer experiences. I included questions about dating, leaving room to discuss personal experience or general dating processes, gendered expectations, and impacts of broader dating values. I asked about attitudes around sexual intercourse, such as participants' perceptions of parental attitudes to premarital sex, and how these shaped their sexual trajectories. Moving to marriage, I asked about conversations, experiences, and impacts of broader expectations. I also asked how they felt the marriage market generally worked. Next, I explored sexual health, asking about their care practices, sources of information, and interactions with sexual health care providers. Lastly, I focused on their present understandings of sexuality, bodily autonomy, and sexual health. These questions reflected major sexual milestones and existing research. After creating the interview guide, I conducted a pilot test of the questions, to see how future interviews might flow. This test underscored the need for a range of probes and time for participants to think through the questions or establish their comfort levels. At this point, I also sought to establish my own boundaries of what I would share with participants as a community member if asked about my positionality during interviews.

5.4: Ethics

After creating the interview guide, I moved onto the ethics process established by the Western University Research Ethics Board (REB). The process ensured that research avoids exploitation and instead protects the rights and well-being of participants (Mertens, 2018). Respect for the privacy, dignity, values, autonomy of individuals and groups typically guide ethical considerations (Carpenter, 2015). Sexuality and sexual health are sensitive topics that can pose a threat to participants, communities the participant belongs to, or the researcher during or because of the study (Ogden, 2008a; Ogden, 2008b). While it can be challenging to account for all possible risks, the ethics approval process helps ensure a study can clearly

identify and manage the potential risks that participants might experience. Clearly explaining the study helps ensure participant consent is fully informed and that participants trust in the researcher (Ogden, 2008b).

To obtain REB approval, I completed an ethics form, created, and provided all documents needed for data collection, and responded to all feedback and revision requests. This included a letter of information, consent form, and debriefing form. These forms explained the aims of the research, data collection processes, participant rights, and risk-mitigating strategies I employ. The letter of information was also available to anyone interested in participating but who required more information. The ethics approval process involved several iterations of feedback, adjustment, and revisions of these documents. A copy of the approval is included in the Appendix.

5.5: Recruitment and Data Collection

5.6: Recruitment

The purpose and nature of my research drove the recruitment styles and sample size needed in the study. The goal of my research was not to generate a theory, but to highlight narratives not often captured in risk-focused sexuality-related research (Schreier, 2018). I used purposive sampling to intentionally select a sample of “instances that are information rich with a view to answer the research question” (Schreier, 2018, p. 88). Criterion sampling was used to refine the study based on a subsection of the population I chose to explore. As described next, this involved a list of predetermined inclusion criteria that slowly changed as the dynamics of my study morphed. I also employed snowball sampling so that community members and participants could identify others who might be a good fit for the study (Schreier, 2018). Through both techniques, participants yielded a range of sexual trajectories, values, ethnicities and religions (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

I used theoretically driven inclusion criteria to obtain the most appropriate subsection of the population I sought to understand. I established criteria around citizenship, identity, and age. Individuals who are Canadian-born or who immigrated to Canada before the age of four, with any gender identity, with at least one South Asian parent, and between the ages of twenty and forty were included. These participants could legally consent for themselves, rather than adolescents who would need to explain and obtain permission from a guardian. The age

range was ideal as participants could reflect on adolescence and speak about transitions into adulthood. I also sought to separate participant experiences from those of newcomer South Asian Canadian adults, which warrant additional attention to unique settlement challenges. I included any gender identity to offer comparisons and included a range of ages to account for cohort differences. While interviews with 2 men and 18 women were conducted, my study focuses only on women. I encountered challenges recruiting enough male participants to make comparisons with the larger group of female participants. While several participants indicated discomfort with aspects of their sexuality or in speaking about sexuality with family and friends, none seemed opposed to interview discussion. Still, the study may not have captured the experiences of individuals for whom sexuality is an extremely uncomfortable, taboo, inappropriate, or undesired topic that they cannot or do not wish to discuss.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, recruitment was challenging at points. For example, I experienced recruitment lulls without any interest, and periods where interest did not result in interviews. While I reached out to several South Asian organizations with health and non-health focuses, a potential lack of existing rapport and concern with the study focus limited these connections. For example, a campaign attending to gender-based issues and a religious/ethnic association felt the study did not align with their focuses. However, SOCH Mental Health, a mental health and illness initiative, conducted poster advertisement across their social media platforms. Most recruitment occurred through posters advertised virtually, in-person, and through social networks. Qualitative research requires sample sizes ample enough to address the research questions (Majumdar, 2019; Saumure & Given, 2008). In the present study, a small sample of one to twenty participants is consistent with qualitative attention to “in-depth description of participants’ perspectives and contexts” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 17; Saumure & Given, 2008; Schreier, 2018; Shaheen et al., 2019).

5.7: Data Collection

Scheduled, in-person interviews were conducted at times and places that were most convenient for participants. Interviews were conducted in several forms: through telephone and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls, and in-person. Depending on location and participant agreement, in-person interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in empty classrooms, offices, or coffee shops across Southern Ontario. Each interview was scheduled to last approximately an hour, though many extended longer. After the interviews were

completed, I debriefed participants with relevant sexuality resources. In pertinent cases, we discussed how I might be contacted if they had peers who may want to participate in the study.

5.8: Participant Contextual Information

To contextualize the findings, I provide key demographic information about participants, including age, religious upbringing, and approximate timing of their parents' migration to Canada (Table 1). These latter two aspects arose at varying stages of each interview and were explained or recalled with varying level of detail by participants. For example, not all participants knew the exact years of their parents' migration trajectories. These details showed the instances of commonality and variation across participants and highlight what I and participants perceived as important factors in their lives.

Participant ID	Age Range	Religious Upbringing	Parents' Settlement in Canada (approximate)
P1	35-40	Sikh	1970s
P2	35-40	Sikh	1970s
P3	35-40	Hindu	1970s
P4	35-40	Hindu	1970s
P5	35-40	Hindu	1970s
P6	30-34	Sikh	1970s
P7	30-34	Sikh	1980s
P8	30-34	Hindu	1980s
P9	25-29	Sikh	1980s
P10	25-29	Sikh	1980s
P11	25-29	Hindu	1980s
P12	25-29	Hindu	1980s
P13	20-24	Hindu	1980s
P14	20-24	Catholic	1980s
P15	20-24	Hindu	1980s
P16	20-24	Muslim	1980s
P17	20-24	Hindu	1980s
P18	20-24	Hindu	1990s

Table 1 Key Participant Demographic Information

5.9: Data Analysis

In this section, I explain the six steps I used after data collection to address the research questions. These steps were drawn from the thematic analysis stages described earlier by Braun and Clark (2006).

5.10: Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

The first phase involved organizing and cleaning the data, which helped determine basic meaningful features of the data set. I began by listening to each audio file recorded during the interview process. These files were stored on an encrypted, password protected device to ensure their protection. I transcribed each interview, which was a long and tedious process that helped me get to know the data (Majumdar, 2019). This immersion into the data contributed to prolonged engagement, which bolstered study credibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Nowell et al., 2017). The total length of the audio of the data set was 29 hours and 58 minutes. The average length of interview was 1 hour and 40 minutes (Belotto, 2018). I transcribed each interview, including major utterances, pauses, laughter, while excluding more granular aspects such as gestures or tones. I also excluded personal identifiers such as names and locations. Through transcription and initial readings, I began taking note of feelings and experiences that reiterated and countered findings in existing literature. After transcribing the data, I entered it into the qualitative software NVivo for analysis. This required me to learn features of the program that would assist in the sorting and coding of data. It was an effective program for dense transcripts as it allowed me to apply multiple codes to data extracts, showed all chosen extracts organized under a code heading, and allowed for stratified sets of codes and sub-codes (Elliot, 2018).

5.11: Phase 2: Generating Codes

I coded across two stages or iterations, changing the coding process and further transforming the data as I moved through stages (Creswell 2013; Elliot, 2018). For example, I applied more inclusive coding to avoid loss of data in the earlier stage and refined existing codes in the last stage (Braun et al., 2015; Majumdar, 2019;). It was helpful to treat coding like a decision-making process, rather than adhere to a rigid set of rules (Elliot, 2018). I also took memos throughout the coding and writing process when relevant, which helped me write out my insights and struggles as I completed the research.

5.12: Coding Stage 1

The first stage was comprised of several small steps that were used in the “initial production of codes”, providing mainly descriptive codes (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 5). Early stages typically provide descriptive coding with low levels of inference (Elliot, 2018). I began with an initial or open coding of four transcripts, examining and labelling line-by-line. Line-by-line coding was used to split the data into smaller segments and begin uncovering critical ideas or experiences (Benaquisto, 2008; Saldana, 2016). I looked for words and sentences across the four transcripts that constructed similar meanings or stories and labeled these. I then shared one of these coded transcripts with my supervisor for reviewing. As I coded the entire set, I looked for shared beliefs, experiences, and important phrases. My goal was to generate a set of codes by making note of patterns in the data, such as the way participants described responding to menstruation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Nowell et al., 2017).

After open coding, I combined and reworked themes in order to address some of my original research questions, such as the role of culture in experience and understandings of sexuality. At this point, I fell into a coding trap. These codes remained descriptive and were somewhat superficial. In taking a deductive approach, I overlooked the importance of instances in data that departed from other participant responses and from existing literature. I also underplayed fluidity or change within participant sexual trajectories, treating experiences during adolescence as largely negative (Braun & Clark, 2006). I also did not compare enough features of the whole data set to see how data extracts compared across the whole set (Majumdar, 2019). After struggling with presenting a nuanced range of themes from these codes, it became clear that I needed more guidance over the possible ways to generate more inductive codes (Belotto, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). While coding initially felt like an intuitive, simple process, it became overwhelming and confusing. Still, this stage provided time to familiarize myself with participant responses. I became immersed in their narratives and discovered both sexual hardships and other successes and celebratory experiences, both of which needed to be conveyed in a balanced way.

5.13: Coding Stage 2

After taking a break from data analysis to return to writing the theoretical chapters, I completed a second stage of coding. My coding and interpretation changed based on my revisiting existing literature and expanding my theoretical framework. For example, one research question shifted to focus on inseparable social locations rather than examining

sexuality through the primary lens of culture. I also returned to my focus of time, change, and systems of domination. The addition of postcolonial and resistance- based research also complicated the story my themes were telling.

After reworking these aspects of the study, I returned to the analysis by refining existing codes around them. I used axial coding to inductively explore each new research question, following Saldana's (2016) approaches to second cycle coding. This helped address some of the earlier problems by focusing on the conceptual organization of first stage coding. In this stage and the next phase, I took the wide set of codes and reduced them by exploring the relationship between concepts such as actions or events (p. 149). I began asking focused questions of the data guided by my research framework. I also paid attention to the conditions of data within a category, offering thick descriptions. I did so through explanations of whether, where, when, or why events occurred, and through descriptions of related processes, responses, strategies, and outcomes (Benaquisto, 2008; Saldana, 2016). Since the data segments were decontextualized from their original source, this stage connected data by relating themes to one another and to the research questions (Ayres, 2008). I reduced these codes into more interpretive and abstract categories, and whenever possible, I grounded my codes within the data by generating labels based on participants' phrasing (Belotto, 2018; Elliot, 2018; Given & Saumure, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). Once the data were entirely coded, I moved onto sorting the data in order to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.14: Phase 3: Generating Themes

As I completed coding stages, I took a global view of all codes generated to see any patterns that might constitute themes about a sociocultural construction of sexuality and a strategy used to maintain sexual well-being. A theme is a construct that helps link data together and highlights meaning of recurrent experiences and its variations in relation to a research question. As discussed, I sorted, analyzed, and combined codes into meaningful themes for each research question (Majumdar, 2019). Rather than remove irrelevant codes, I sorted these into a "miscellaneous" category (Majumdar, 2019). Turning back to theory in between coding reshaped my approach to analysis, which helped generate more inductive themes that I could build on from my earlier deductively generated themes.

5.15: Phases 4 and 5: Verifying, Refining, and Defining Themes

While Braun and Clarke (2006) describe these as two distinct phases, I present them together because of their overlapping function in preparing themes. Both phases ensured that themes chosen for the final report were not simply meta-categories or ways of organizing data (Bazeley, 2009). I repeated the steps in both phases for each research question. I reviewed the extracts within each theme to confirm support and patterns (Majumdar, 2019). Themes that did not contain enough support were removed or reformulated with smaller, related themes (Majumdar, 2019). I also confirmed that themes were distinct enough to remain separate from one another (Nowell et al., 2017). After all themes were chosen, I evaluated how each theme connected to tell stories about the ways South Asian Canadian women's sexual trajectories unfold in relation to individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors (Braun & Clarke, 2015; Majumdar, 2019).

It was important to consider how themes represented shared narratives about navigating sexuality while balancing nuance and differing experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). I accomplished this by assessing contradictions in the data and considering alternate explanations that challenged my understanding of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As I alluded to in my first phase of coding and theme-generating, I initially overrepresented negative relationships between culture and sexuality during early life experiences. After re-examining the theory, I reframed how I treated contradictory data. For instance, I shifted away from viewing mothers who supported their daughters' sexual trajectories as anomalies. I also shifted away from overlooking mothers who did not meet ideal western constructions of what parent-child sexual dialogue should look like. Instead, I began to understand them as examples of a long history of pushback against heteronormativity and nationalist expectations of South Asian femininity. I concluded that it was important to represent them as individuals who found personally meaningful ways of resisting and transforming cultural pressures around sexuality, using their available resources to support their daughters in ways that fit their circumstances.

Once I had verified and explored the 'themes', here in described as constructions and strategies that best addressed both research questions, I defined each construction and strategy" with short identifiable labels. I briefly established the essence of each in a thematic map, noting what was interesting about the theme, and potential conclusions about how they related back to either research question (Braun et al., 2015; Kennedy & Thornberg, 2017; Majumdar, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). During the write up stage, where I created two

narrative composites, I also returned to this phase to verify the major details, sexual constructions, and strategies I included. I verified these details by creating a table that summarized critical participant descriptors: noteworthy childhood factors, puberty, gender roles, dating, intercourse, personal needs, interpersonal support, desirability/body values, notable shifts, and timing of shifts. I used this table to create both narrative composites and ensure I was accurately representing participants within each group (See Appendix for Table 2 and 3).

5.16: Phase 6: The Write Up

The final phase began once the constructions and strategies were established and verified (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Marshall & Ross, 1999). This phase involved reconnecting the decontextualized data back to the entire body of participant interviews, by discussing potential relationships across the constructions and strategies. I faced a dilemma in how to present a cohesive story that addressed my research questions: I wanted to balance the rich and interwoven nature of participants' sexual trajectories while preserving their anonymity (Willis, 2018; Willis, 2019). As a result, I compiled participants into narrative composites that told a coherent, concise, and representative story. Narrative composites use judgement to reflect the essence or emotional truth of participant lives. According to Orbach (2000), emotional truth is the "authentic representation of feeling states rather than a strict adherence to narrative truth" (p. 197). I employed narrative composites to synthesize participant experiences in a meaningful story, so that readers can better connect with research findings (Wertz et al., 2011).

The use of narrative composites addressed my concern that I was decontextualizing participant experiences into sanitized and static themes. Narrative composites enabled me to connect common threads in the ways participants understand sexuality and experience South Asian and Canadian ideals of femininity. By presenting my findings in this format, I connected the broader constructions of sexuality to individual instances of agency and resistance. This occurred all while recognizing participants' "complex web of influences, moralities, strategies, assumptions, and practicalities" (Willis, 2018, p. 481). The composites also protected anonymity by mixing details and accounts together, so that they are not identifiable (Willis, 2019). These composites are not exhaustive of participant lives, their

interviews, nor their pursuit of sexual well-being, but they help bring clarity to participant needs.

Since narrative composites can be created through a range of judgements and combinations of data, I describe how I created two narrative composites that address my research questions (Willis, 2018). I sought to avoid combinations of participants that might caricature or simplify them. To capture and illustrate the life course, I grouped participants based on age: “Nilani” is a composite of 10 participants between the ages of 20 and 29; “Ravnoor” is a composite of 8 participants aged 30 and 40 (See Appendix for Table 2 and 3). Each composite also reflects the participants’ predominant migration experiences, settlement patterns, frequency of sexual communication within families, career trajectories, and dating experiences.

The narrative composites serve as a tool to address my research questions while humanizing participants. Each narrative includes major constructions of sexuality, experiences, and responses that were common within each age or stage. However, to add more nuance to participants’ predominant experiences, the composites also centre around unique or noteworthy experiences that reflect narratives of resistance. By presenting the research findings as narratives, I recombine themes with the everyday contexts in which they exist. In this way, I present how sexual constructions unfold, why they matter to participants, and why they respond in particular ways to the constructions. They reveal how agency and constraint exist simultaneously and underscore the strength- and resilience-based focus of women (Singh et al., 2010). Furthermore, the narratives re-centre how participants frame and assert their own understandings of meaningful sexuality over time.

Aligning with my theoretical framework and methodology chapters, storytelling through narrative composites has three benefits: it highlights nuance, fluidity, and power. First, storytelling allows me to reflect nuance in how major sociocultural sexual constructions unfold against the realities of participant lives. Most notably, I include broad kinship structures that demonstrate the nature of locally and globally linked lives. I incorporate the continued impact of the migration process, the connections participants have to family and community, and the way participants move through South Asian and western spaces. This detail allows me to illustrate the impact of sexual constructions on the way participants understand sexuality, assess risks, and employ management strategies.

Second, storytelling provides a more fluid approach to both sets of themes, highlighting how constructions and strategies shift across participants' lives. I am better able to discuss the intersections of participants' locations without prioritizing any, and to discuss how they express sexuality in different spaces. The composites explore the ways participants feel exclusion and solace in the presence of different constructions at the same time. It is critical that we consider the ways that narrow expectations of gender and sexual performance are navigated over time, with fluctuating feelings of inadequacy, immorality, and (dis)connect and empowerment from one's identity, body, and important interpersonal relationships.

Third, storytelling also presents how form and access to power fluctuate over place and time. I find that sexuality is a site used to maintain western and South Asian identities. Sexuality is used to regulate what is valued as beautiful, desirable, respectable, and traditional enough as feminine in western and South Asian spaces. The composites present a complicated understanding of culture, for example indicating how South Asian ideals of femininity can restrict sexual wellbeing while also providing space to resist the western prioritization of whiteness. They describe the tension surrounding sexual constructions, and the agentic decisions made in response. Overall, the composites are an opportunity to humanize participant journeys with multiple facets of sexuality. This approach allowed me to examine how sexuality is the site of power, featuring simultaneous agency and constraint depending on the worlds participants move between.

5.17: Rigor

One way of ensuring a qualitative study is reliable and rigorous is to assess measures of trustworthiness. Highly rigorous studies tend to result "in more trustworthy findings" (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 1; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness can be conveyed by reflecting and being clear about the analysis practices and guiding assumptions (Nowell et al., 2017). This helps readers assess whether the research design effectively addresses the research questions and whether the study is replicable (Saumure & Given, 2008; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Essentially, it helps readers determine whether a study's findings are worth paying attention to. To convey trustworthiness, I ensured that my study was credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. I also engaged in reflexive thinking about my role as a community insider and as a researcher in shaping findings.

5.18: Trustworthiness

Credibility is maintained when the researcher has honestly represented participants and their experiences (Given & Saumure, 2008; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2012). If this occurs, the readers can place confidence in the truth of the interpretations and findings (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). Credibility also exists when the researcher's descriptions of a phenomenon are recognizable to people with the same experiences or narratives (Nowell et al., 2017; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I accurately represented participant narratives through prolonged engagement with the data during the transcription, multiple coding, and theme verification phases (Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Polit & Beck, 2012). For example, I spent time comparing each data extract and theorizing why certain narratives differed or were similar in order to evaluate themes (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). These phases and tasks helped ensure I was closely understanding and representing the data.

Transferability is the extent that a study's methods or findings can be applied to another group or context (Jensen, 2008; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2012; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This is complicated as the goal of qualitative research is not to provide generalizations for the "widest possible contexts" (Given & Saumure 2008, p 1; Cope 2014). The present study can seek to shed more light on an issue using participant narratives. By clearly outlining my research process, it is possible for readers to gauge how the relevant the findings or methods may be when applied to different contexts (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thick descriptions of participant experiences can help assess how transferable the study is for those wishing to replicate it (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Jensen, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). Thick descriptions provide "dense description[s]" of the conditions, participant narratives, "demographics and geographic boundaries of the study" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). My analysis contained actor-oriented explanations of data, which contextualized the circumstances of a theme. For example, I described school contexts when discussing adolescent experiences and the cultural significance of major events such as puberty (Jensen 2008; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2008; McGee and Warms, 2013).

Trustworthiness is also measured through dependability, which occurs when a study is detailed enough that recreating it with similar conditions would replicate similar data or findings (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). Like the previous measure, it can be assessed by readers through clear descriptions of the research process, so that they might conduct a new

study under similar conditions (Given & Saumure, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). For example, I made use of memos to help detail the data collection and analysis process. I described my logic behind study aspects such as recruitment changes, shifts in my research aims, or thoughts I had as I developed themes (Jensen, 2008). These helped contextualize my role in shaping the study directions, including the construction and reporting of themes.

Confirmability indicates that a study represents participants' perspectives and the meanings they assign to their experiences (Jensen, 2008). It indicates how well the researcher's interpretations align with the data, and how well analysis or claims are supported by the data (Given & Saumure, 2008). As I explore in the next section, I reworked my themes and reporting to ensure I was representing participant realities rather than my personal and academic biases (Polit & Beck, 2017). While the researcher inevitably incorporates their own understandings and perspectives, confirmability requires that these are clearly identified (Jensen, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2017). I took time to ensure I was representing the range and nuance in cultural constructions, experiences, and strategies I reported. I provided exemplary quotes as evidence that can be used to assess how well my interpretations align with participant narratives (Jensen, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2017).

5.19: Reflexivity

Proponents of reflexivity argue that researchers have prior theoretical knowledge, experiences, values, and assumptions that guide how research is conducted (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researchers exist within "historical, ideological, and socio-cultural context[s]" that influence how we understand a topic or community being examined (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2017, p. 51; Cope, 2014; Couture-Carron et al., 2012; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Reflexive thinking can highlight the knowledge a researcher holds about a topic, how this knowledge was attained, and/or what roles and power they had in the research process. While it is impossible to remove oneself or one's bias entirely from the research process, reflexivity about power, roles, and influences can enhance rigor and address methodological concerns (Saumure & Given, 2008). By unpacking how I have interpreted, represented, and influenced the data, readers can better assess how trustworthy my research is (May & Perry, 2014). Additionally, considering how I represent, protect, and keep participant data intact is an ethical commitment.

Scrutinizing my roles and relationship with knowledge production was an iterative process, continuing across each research phase (Couture-Carron et al., 2012; May & Perry, 2014; Roulston & Choi, 2018). I considered how my personal and professional positions impacted how I conducted the study, such as the questions I asked, the conclusions I made about participant narratives, and how my social locations impacted my relationship with participants (Couture-Carron et al., 2012; Hankivsky, 2012; May & Perry, 2014). As the primary researcher, I held power to represent participant narratives using my words, understandings, and decisions around what was meaningful to the study. As a result, I situated my positions to redress these imbalances (Bhopal, 2009).

I chose to study experiences of sexuality because of a discussion with a South Asian Canadian participant in my earlier research, who shared that she had no conversations about puberty before beginning menstruation. She recalled shock, embarrassment, and fear of bleeding without knowing what puberty was. She described managing the bleeding without seeking help from her family. Afterwards, I recalled a range of silence and sexual taboo experienced amongst peers, relatives, and myself. I believed these had long-term impacts on the relationships we had with our bodies, sexualities, and partnerships. So, I sought to explore whether sexual stigma was a common cultural experience, how it might impact our sexuality, and how such stigma might be addressed across South Asian communities. I began the study with personal familiarity as a community member, some academic understanding of South Asian Canadian settlement experiences, and little knowledge of sexuality research (May & Perry, 2014).

As a South Asian community member, I recalled early life experiences where sexuality felt completely removed or disconnected from daily life: it was something hidden away and not part of the expected plan. Sexuality felt sanitized, extending into views of the body, non-sexual feelings, (non-sexual) intimacy, and relationship-building. Until my early adult years, I witnessed and experienced the compartmentalizing impacts of sexual stigma. The disconnect from sexuality often meant navigating uncertainty alone or hiding away important parts of one's life and self, including masking pain and happiness. I also saw contradictions through messages about forbidden love, heteronormativity, classism, casteism, and through assumptions about race, and marriage.

I felt pervasive messaging that I believed depersonalized women's experiences, through fear of pregnancy and stigma of being unmarried or divorced. These messages often contained

the pervasive phrase “*loki ki kahogay/log kya kehenge*” [what will people think] rather than the needs and desires of individuals. I witnessed gendered messaging and anxieties around gender performance, where women were expected to be unyielding backbones of their families, while simultaneously soft and quiet. These anxieties extended to men, who had unique freedoms but were simultaneously expected to suppress parts of their self in order to conform to an ideal of manhood (where feminized qualities are weaknesses). The sexual and gendered messaging was also intertwined with other identity-based challenges. For example, sexual messaging was bound in ideas of racism, colourism, and whether one was South Asian enough or a good enough child. At times, the combined impacts of these messages invoked anger and resentment during a time when sexuality was already challenging. I felt tension between what was expected with figuring out who I wanted to be. At the same time, I witnessed how sexual stigmas were shared experiences amongst other immigrants and amongst white settler peers, though these unfolded in unique ways and to varying degrees.

As a researcher, I felt it critical to consider how my personal and professional positions related to the research topic and participants (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Couture-Carron et al., 2012; Toy-Cronin, 2018). The combination of my identities and social locations rendered me both an insider and outsider in different ways. I felt I was able to connect with participants because of a sense of empathy in broadly shared experiences as South Asian Canadian cis-gendered women, including broad “racialised identities and... racialised experiences” (Bhopal, 2009, p. 32). I may have also occupied an insider status with people who share the same locations as me, such as citizenship status and ethnicity. Some of my locations may have also been apparent, such as my caste location, as indicated through my last name. However, the full range of my locations also complicated this insider status (Toy-Cronin, 2018). Given status fluctuations, I was mindful of the types of conclusions and judgments I made about differing cultural conceptions and personal experiences. I sought to find balance between comfortable rapport and asking for clarifications that an outsider might ask (Bhopal, 2009; Couture-Carron et al., 2012).

I considered how my professional positions impacted the study outcomes and the potential impacts on the communities I was investigating (Mertens, 2018). For instance, my education in a western system rooted in colonialism may have created unintended biases (Mirza, 2009; Suh et al., 2009). These biases could shape the ideals about sexuality and sexual well-being that I reaffirm, such as the ways I normalize/stigmatize marital constructions and family

structures, or the language I use to define and categorize groups and participants. For example, my inclusion of a South Asian identifier is bound in colonial national boundaries, which have impacts on participant lives and their family histories. Further, my research does not contain the expertise found in non-English research.

I also countered concerns generated by my professional positions by increasing my cultural competency. I explored some of the historical traumas, collective orientations, valuation of “hierarchy and modesty”, and religious approaches to sexuality that exist across South Asian groups (Suh et al., 2009, p. 195). I examined how norms maintained within South Asian communities perpetuate unique forms of misogyny, casteism, and classism that reinforce ideals about women’s sexualities. However, I also explored instances of reformation and resistance that complicated these ideals. It was important to include South Asian academic voices and more postcolonial feminist research in the later phases of research, which were not large parts of my standard academic curriculum. These highlighted where I was centring western sexuality-related ideas and introduced South Asian narratives of resistance.

Considering the combined impacts of my personal and professional interests on my research also led me to reflect on the knowledge I might produce about participants and their communities (Hankivsky, 2012; Mertens, 2018). It was important to honour their stories and represent them as dimensional rather than as victims of culture. I hoped to produce research that could generate change by highlighting participant concerns and returning to our communities in some form. As a result, I weighed heavily how to report participants’ very real experiences of challenges and traumas, and how to confront problems experienced within South Asian Canadians communities. This was concerning because I feared pathologizing or problematizing cultures, religions, families, and identities.

Working with participant narratives, postcolonial-, and resilience-focused sources of research helped me confront early tensions I felt in conducting my study (Roulston and Choi, 2018). For example, I turned to Mehrotra (2016) and Majumdar (2007), who wrote about the risks of essentializing and reifying stereotypes about South Asians. These works emphasized South Asian cultures and its members as diverse and ever-changing. Both scholars acknowledged that South Asian meanings and experiences are informed by a complex intersection of locations, histories, and structural factors. They highlighted participant lived experiences and individual narratives in ways that treated them as agentic, “rather than objects in research” (Majumdar, 2007, p. 317). Both also offered analyses that were intended “to be local” rather

than generalized: these reminded me that I was representing a particular segment of South Asian women in a specific time and context, not a singular South Asian experience (Mehrotra, 2016, p. 351).

Turning my attention to existing research and participant narratives also helped me reflect on my earlier feelings and relationship with constructions of femininity and sexuality. My research also occurred during a broader movement of resistance. As I wrote, I consumed art from South Asians who pushed back against casteism, racism, and homophobia and re-centered their own narratives as valid and beautiful. Exploring these sources highlighted the complexity and fluid nature of sexual trajectories. They indicated that a non-essentialized representation of participant lives, cultures, or religions involves writing honestly about both the hardships and successes they have shared with me. Confronting the implications of my research meant I needed to acknowledge how barriers were multifaceted rather than solely cultural, and how participants actively negotiated sexual trajectories and reshaped cultural and religious constructions. Participants provided instances of trauma and resilience and reminded me of the possibility to dictate our relationships with our identities and reframe what our ethnicities, religions, and sense of femininity mean in daily interactions. Their stories held that women actively negotiate what sexuality means and looks like in ways that are not exclusively western. From these stories, I learned that sexual trajectories are complex and unending: navigating who and how we want to be is challenging. It can take years to find peace with multiple identities, and ongoing uncertainty is normal.

As a result of these reflections and the process of reflexivity, I believe I was able to better appreciate the challenges and sacrifices experienced by women around me. I was able to see how they resisted and pushed through dominant expectations of femininity and sexuality, and how these had lingering impacts on them as they raised their own children. Being reflexive provided me an opportunity to re-frame our histories and identities in a new light. I found new appreciation for the manifestations of love and care that were not presented in western representations. The existing research and participant narratives also complicated the static notion of cultures: sexuality and gender expectations are complicated regardless of cultural context. In this way, I sought to demonstrate that sexual stigma, control, or violence exist but are not caused by or exclusive to being South Asian, rather, being South Asian (and its related locations and identities) shapes the way sexuality unfolds.

5.20: Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined how I set up and executed the research process. This included how I collected data, analyzed it, and how I ensured the protection of participants' rights and general well-being. The ethical considerations of protecting participants' identities, minimizing risk, and honouring their narratives were constant guiding factors as I navigated collection and analysis. I also explained the trustworthiness of my study to a potential audience by outlining how I influenced the study and construction of findings. While qualitative research based on a thematic analysis appeared straight forward, it involved ongoing learning, reshaping approaches, and confronting my personal relationship to the research topic. Through the many phases of collection and analysis, I learned how to move past descriptive analysis and how to value my skills and flexibility as a qualitative researcher.

Chapter 6: Narrative Composites

In this chapter, I present my findings that address the research questions, “what are the predominant sociocultural constructions of sexuality as experienced by South Asian Canadian women throughout their life course?” and “how do women navigate these sociocultural constructions of sexuality in their pursuit of sexual well-being?”. As reiterated in the first literature review chapter, sexuality refers to a combined set of biological, psychological, and social facets, including anatomy, desire, self-concept, intimacy, gender roles and identities, and interpersonal relationships. Sexuality is expressed through fluctuating behaviours, values, roles, and needs. Sexual well-being refers to the capacity to live a sexual life of personal meaning. The strength of these two conceptualizations is that they allow for greater flexibility to understand how participants wish to (dis)engage with sexuality over time given their locations, resources, and in response to constraints and opportunities. To capture the dynamically constructed nature of sexuality and to examine its relationship to sexual well-being within the context of the life course, I first list the findings with respect to each question, and then I present the two narratives. Within these narratives, I weave the dominant constructions of sexuality found in my data, and the key management strategies that participants used in response to these sexual constructions to express meaningful facets of sexuality. To set the stage for understanding the narratives, I list below my findings of the five constructions of sexuality, and the five management strategies that are explored within the narratives.

Sexuality is constructed as:

1. Dangerous (*sexuality is dangerous for young unmarried South Asian women, because of the perceived risk of pregnancy and the risk of being framed as sexual promiscuous for failing to manage one’s body*)
2. A site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes; (*sexuality is a rejection of South Asian religious and cultural values and identities if it is expressed non-maritally and/or non-heteronormatively; it is also a failure to meet western performances of whiteness*)
3. Immoral outside of a narrow window of acceptability; (*sexuality before marriage is a sinful act of intercourse because it conveys a rejection of one’s cultural, religious, or*

*family teachings around what constitutes being a good women and daughter.
Unmarried sexual exploration precludes being a good woman and daughter)*

4. Heteronormative acts; (*sexuality is defined as an act of heteronormative intercourse, acceptable within the confines of marriage between a man and woman, for the purpose of having children*)
5. An essential part of daily reality (*sexuality is a celebrated, expected, and manageable part of growing up, where personal autonomy is centred*)

The following strategies facilitate participants' navigation of their sexuality within broader forces that maintain the above constructions, for example, facilitating participant exploration of facets of sexuality such as intimacy, attraction, or care for physical health.

1. Network building, particularly a diverse support network;
2. Compartmentalization;
3. Identity negotiation, including sense of self, ethnic, religious, and racial identities;
4. Rejection of internalized racism and de-centring whiteness; and
5. Prioritization of the interconnection between mental, physical, and sexual health

Drawing on my theoretical framework, I demonstrate that each of the constructions and strategies overlap, change over time, unfold across lives, each in connection to others. The constructions and strategies operate within participants' lived experiences. The constructions and strategies reflect changing power dynamics, the intersections of patriarchal, religious, cultural, and racialized understandings of sexuality. I capture this complicated reality through a storytelling technique that led to the construction of two narrative composites, Ravnoor (age 40) and Nilani (age 20). The narrative composites represent experiences of sexuality culminating at two periods of the life course, the beginnings of young adulthood and middle age. In both, I illustrate shifting ways that women experience sexual constraints and opportunities across time and place. For example, each narrative composite represents past and current tension with the construction of sexuality as a heteronormative act. Nilani's young adulthood composite reflects the experience of growing pressure to get married common among those in their twenties. In comparison, Ravnoor's composite reflects the

sense of guilt and exclusion experienced by participants in this study who fail to get married within an expected time frame.

By blending participants' responses into these two composites, I illustrate my findings in a wholistic and multidimensional context. Each narrative begins with a description of key settlement, childhood, and adolescent experiences. These descriptions provide relevant context within which the sexual constructions are experienced. Settlement, childhood, and adolescent experiences reveal why sexual well-being is challenging to maintain and why particular strategies that help negotiate constructions of sexuality are important. For example, participants make complicated sexual decisions in relation to their collective family and community orientations because of the impact of sexual violations on family honour and well-being. I emphasize key differences in these contexts based on ethnoracial factors. Ravnoor experiences childhood and adolescence in a largely white settler community, while Nilani experiences her family's divorce during adolescence in a largely South Asian settler community. Using quotations, I illustrate how the sexual constructions unfold at different points in the life course. The quotations range from single words, small sentences woven into the body of the narratives, and larger segments of text, each derived from interview transcriptions. I denote changes to transcriptions through brackets, altering tenses or maintaining anonymity in participants' quotes. I also illustrate strategies used to express and manage their sexuality, especially in response to sexual constructions that emphasize narrow ideals of femininity. The narratives also include key sexual experiences, such as puberty and dating, and life events such as divorce. These examples help reveal the impacts of the sexual constructions on participant' experiences, and therefore on women's lives and their sexual well-being.

I begin by presenting Ravnoor's narrative composite. The participants' realities reflected in her story focus on feeling caught between two cultural worlds. With few South Asian representations around her, Ravnoor's sexual journey focuses on feelings of isolation, racialization, and internalized racism. With little emotional support, communication, or sexual knowledge, Ravnoor attempts to overcome sexual stigma and feelings of failure resulting from pressure to perform ideal womanhood via the expected heteronormative path of marriage. Next, I present Nilani's narrative composite. The participants' realities reflected in her story reflect similar feelings of being caught and rejected across two worlds. However, Nilani's sexual journey is shaped by a strong South Asian community and stronger

emotional support, communication, and sexual knowledge at home. Still, she grapples with failure to perform ideal womanhood, which is reinforced through stigma around divorce and non-heterosexual identities.

Both composites convey the power of interpersonal relationships in reinforcing constructions of sexuality and in shaping sexual well-being. Ravnoor and Nilani find it critical but challenging to balance their desired sexual lives with the well-being of their families. Furthermore, each composite balances strong social constructions of sexuality with small yet important acts of resistance. Over time, Ravnoor and Nilani strategize to express sexuality in safe spaces, create support networks that help expand the meaning of sexuality, define their own ethnic and religious identities, confront racialization that leads to feelings of inadequacy, and eventually approach sexuality as a critical and interrelated part of their whole self. Ravnoor and Nilani carve out spaces where they can express partnered facets of sexuality, maintain sexual boundaries, find power in their bodies, and find happiness outside of expected ways of being feminine.

Ravnoor: A Journey from a Fragmented Self in a Fragmented World (age 40)

6.1: Childhood

Ravnoor's parents migrated with their families from South Asia to East Africa in the 1960s. As a young, single man, Ravnoor's father then moved to Canada on his own in the early 1970s. He found a job at a factory and then returned to his parents' home in Kenya to marry. By the 1980s and after their arranged marriage, Ravnoor's parents settled in a mid-sized Ontario CMA where they raised three children. The city was "predominantly white", with a very small and "close knit" South Asian community. At home, her family retained many pre-migration cultural practices, including cooking traditional meals daily and speaking their mother tongue. The family cultivated strong social bonds with relatives and with their local South Asian community. They maintained moderate religious bonds and incorporated religious values into their lives overall. For example, Ravnoor explains that they did not attend the local gurudwara for regular prayer but attended for "auspicious holidays" and major life events. She describes an example of the impact of moderate cultural and religious values on her sexuality when she explains that, while growing up, her parents expected that

she would eventually marry a Sikh partner but did not expect her to engage in an arranged marriage as they had (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes: see section 6.8). Overall, Ravnoor's formative childhood to adolescent years were shaped by the presence of cultural and religious norms at home and in South Asian spaces.

Whilst managing connection to her South Asian cultural and religious norms, Ravnoor also describes navigating largely white, western spaces. She reflects on her childhood as unfolding during "a time in society where there was a lot of white washing", which had a crucial impact on her sexual trajectory. By "white washing" she means that few people at school or on television looked like her, had names like hers, or ate the foods that she did, and instead largely represented white western realities. For instance, her mainly white settler peers' experiences became a norm which she compared her own to.

"You're always aware of the fact that you're different or South Asian. Your Canadian friends: their upbringing was really different, and that's something that I noticed. ... Their relationship [with parents], in talking about ["crushes on boys"] was a lot more open. There was always this feeling of kind of having your life at home and what that is, and then at school... I inwardly felt different just knowing that having different values, culture at home, and then coming to school and immersing into a more white society. I definitely felt that, and navigating that, what sort of things can you talk about at home, what sorts of things can't you talk about at home? So that was something that I think I recognized early on, grade 3, grade 4..."

Ravnoor's white settler peers' lives at home and school appeared to coexist, openly expressing sexual facets across spaces (sexuality as an essential part of daily reality). They spoke with their parents about puberty, romantic feelings, and interpersonal relationships like boyfriends. She felt that her white settler peers internalized dominant constructions of sexuality as an essential part of their daily reality, where sexual exploration was treated as an expected part of growing up. She describes understanding the fewer racialized immigrants and children of immigrants like herself as having more disconnection between home and school life. Ravnoor describes worrying that her interests, friends, and experiences could be inappropriate to acknowledge at home. For example, her parents reacted with suspicion towards any evidence or acts of befriending, getting phone calls from, or being seen with boys outside of school. As she got older, there were more controls placed on her actions that stood in contrast to her white settler peers.

"You could sort of always see the cultural differences. My Chinese friends had similar limitations in terms of who they could hang out with and parents being fairly suspicious of friend groups. A lot of my white and Jewish friends didn't have as many restrictions... It was

very clear amongst my group of friends how parents reacted to dating and boys and that sort of thing, and it was very clear that there were cultural markers in how every family reacted.”

During childhood, discussing sexuality outside of school was more complicated than her perception of her white settler friends’ experiences. For example, Ravnoor’s experience of menstruation as a child involved quiet responses at home. She feels that because she was very young (age 8), her parents communicated in a “very matter of fact” manner and responded pragmatically. Her parents took her for medical treatment for her abnormal menstrual symptoms and briefly explained how to manage the physiological changes she was experiencing. This discussion was “not detailed discussion”; it did not contain messaging about transitioning to adolescence and adulthood, and it did not connect puberty to other facets of sexuality. This concise and quiet approach continued during Ravnoor’s adolescence. She maintains that more thorough conversations likely did not occur because her parents “never sat down and talked to *their* parents about anything about puberty or sex.” In other words, they modelled behaviour that had been taught to them by their parents, and that reflected dominant South Asian constructions of sexuality. This occurred while Ravnoor observed the construction of sexuality as an essential part of her white settler peers’ daily realities and in mainstream western representations around her. That is, facets of sexuality appeared easier for her peers to talk about and engage in because exploring sexuality was treated as part of adolescence. Across Ravnoor’s adolescent experiences, sexuality continued to be minimally discussed even as it was increasingly treated as part of adulthood, and subject to restrictive regulation and compartmentalization.

6.2: Adolescence

As Ravnoor aged into adolescence, the topic of her sexuality became an uncomfortable, and difficult to avoid, taboo within her home. According to Ravnoor, there was a “code of silence...where you didn’t talk about sexuality,... attraction,...[or] sex”. This unfolded all while she was confronted with her emerging sexuality, the obviousness of sexual desires, and the presence of the opposite sex throughout her daily reality. At this time, she continued to consider and then navigate what parts of sexuality would be viewed as acceptable to share at home with her family (strategy: compartmentalization). For example, when they were with their family, Ravnoor and her siblings felt immense discomfort when confronted by scenes with sexual imagery in Western and South Asian media. She and her siblings responded to this discomfort by skipping the scenes. Yet the boundaries of inappropriate expressions of

sexuality were never clear for Ravnoor, who reflects on the fact that the Bollywood movies she grew up with also hid intimacy in plain sight: with “wet saris, the see-through blouses, and all of this rolling around in the grass but no one actually kisses, no one actually consummates a relationship”. As she moved through her teenage years, Ravnoor felt compelled to avoid and compartmentalize sexuality in South Asian spaces. The implicit pressure to perform compulsory chastity in order to convey the appearance of sexual naiveté and purity left her emotionally conflicted and isolated. This is because sexuality was mainly constructed as dangerous, as the site of ethnoracial boundaries, and as immoral.

6.3: Sexuality Constructed as Dangerous

Through restrictions around premarital dating and intercourse, sexuality was constructed as dangerous for young unmarried South Asian women. Abstaining from dating and intercourse was an “unsaid expectation” held across Ravnoor’s extended family and South Asian community. Ravnoor explains that the meaning of sexuality was tied to sexual intercourse, a heteronormative act which served the purpose of procreation (sexuality as a heteronormative act: see 6.8). In essence, the message was that young women needed to avoid this act because of the risk of getting pregnant before marriage, which was positioned as a life-shattering outcome (sexuality as dangerous). Pregnancy was “the horror of all horrors”. Ravnoor internalized the belief that becoming pregnant at a young age without being married was a critical risk and she took precautions to ensure relatives and community members did not know she was dating and considering sexual intercourse. This meant that she prioritized covertly managing her sexuality so that she would not be identified as exploring (strategy: compartmentalization). This extended to her family physician. For example, rather than ask for a contraceptive, she used hormonal birth control prescribed “for acne” “as a contraception” without any understanding of whether it would be effective.

“Instead of asking my doctor, can I use this for contraception, do I need to do anything differently? Because some days I would miss it. It’s for your face, so it’s okay to miss a day or two, whatever. I didn’t ask, “how am I supposed to take this?” I just used it. I don’t even know if it was the right one. I was uncomfortable to admit to an older adult... I could not imagine telling my Indian, male family doctor, “can I use this as contraception as well?” Would he tell [my family], what would he think of me?”

Ravnoor quietly managed sexual risks to maintain the expectation of compulsory chastity, in order to avoid judgement, reprimanding, and family rejection. She reflects that “the biggest fear was getting pregnant”, which she would not be able to conceal from family. She shared

that for many years, “birth control pills replaced actual protection because of the fear of not getting pregnant”. Ravnoor reflects that the preoccupation with pregnancy meant that “other things [like] STDs, HIV” were “so much less scary”. She felt distanced from other risks believing she did not “know anyone who has those” infections or illnesses. Ravnoor explains that she diminished the likelihood of risks outside of pregnancy because of her social locations, stating “I was somehow protected because of my class or education, because I was Indian, as long as I didn’t get pregnant, everything else would be fine”. Furthermore, she also believed the risk of pregnancy was a burden unequally carried by young South Asian women compared to men. For example, the prescription to abstain from premarital dating and intercourse was monitored and enforced more rigidly for South Asian daughters than for sons, resulting in greater constraints on Ravnoor’s desire to explore sexuality with partners. Ravnoor was permitted to socialize with friends outside of school but there were more questions about where she was going, who would be in attendance, why she was going, and when she would return. There was a strong expectation to avoid interactions with boys. Comparatively, she explained that male relatives moved with more flexibility. While not encouraged to, they were permitted to openly date and occasionally brought partners home overnight.

“I’m sure they never talked to their parents about sex, but a lot of stuff my parents just looked the other way... I don’t think they cared. That same stigma I don’t think was there. They were allowed to have girlfriends; they were allowed to do whatever they wanted. They brought girls to the house. My brother had a girlfriend in [high school] who was always over, and that was always fine. They could do whatever they wanted, there were no rules.”

Male relatives were “allowed liberties”, found by parents to be carrying condoms, and permitted to stay out all night. There was less concern that they “might impregnate” someone but strong concern that Ravnoor’s life could be “ruined” through non-marital relationships and risks of pregnancy. Ravnoor did not see “the same protection around men”. This indicated that sexuality was more dangerous for young women, or they were vulnerable to a unique set of sexual risks compared to young men (sexuality as dangerous). As a result, Ravnoor experienced a requirement for avoidant and constricted behaviours, guided by the belief that this would keep her safe from sexual risk.

“Whereas for women or for girls, a lot of the things discussed are, how to be protected and how to keep yourself away from boys. There’s sort of this circle of protection that exists, “don’t do this, don’t do that”, and a lot of it is implied, “don’t do bad things”. Whereas for boys, they’re not given that protective circle; they’re told, “go out, have fun”. I wouldn’t say

that premarital sex is ever explicitly mentioned, but I think you can tell from the level of protectiveness around girls versus it does not exist for boys.”

The increased monitoring of Ravnoor’s behaviours indicated that sexuality is dangerous and implied that sexual risk is gendered. Young women are positioned as needing protection from sexual urges that might arise during uncontrolled interactions with young men. They must be vigilant about their sexuality since their bodies are vulnerable to pregnancy. This is critical as it reaffirms heteronormative understandings of sexual intercourse and prioritizes avoidance of sexual exploration as the only way to manage sexual risk. Ravnoor also experienced further messaging that marked young women’s bodies as dangerous and hypersexual. She reflects on the sexual attention and scrutiny she received. She feels uncomfortable with her body being sexualized and treated as a marker of promiscuity by others, stating,

“I had big hips and back then nobody had those. I got, not made fun of, but I feel like there were passive aggressive comments towards my body type, and it made me feel super awkward. So, I would try to hide it but sometimes you couldn’t, because your jeans only fit a certain way and there’s only so much [you can do]... you can’t hide it... When I put the jeans on, they are not loose on me. They fit, so I always felt like there was unwanted attention when I didn’t want it and I kept getting it.”

This shift in how Ravnoor’s body was treated as it changed through adolescence indicates how feminized bodies are positioned as inherently sexual and dangerous. Everyday clothing that was more innocuous on other bodies instead elicited comments that Ravnoor “look[s] like a slut” because her body was curvy and difficult to conceal. She second-guessed wearing tight-fitting clothing or exposing too much skin in “short shorts”. Doing so would draw out community comments that she was inviting assault, “trying to get raped” or “putting [her]self out there” for sexual attention. She learned that her body’s appearance was conflated with sexual consent, and the way young women dress can (accurately or not) signify immorality and unrestrained sexual activity. Furthermore, within this messaging was the critical detail that Ravnoor was responsible for anticipating and controlling how other people consumed her body. Consequently, Ravnoor felt she did not have adequate “control over” her body and how people viewed it.

The construction of sexuality as dangerous for young South Asian women, either through risk of pregnancy or risk of failing to cover or manage their body, conveyed to Ravnoor that her body was an object to protect because of its perceived vulnerability as a site of danger. It also indicated that, as a result, it was difficult and unsafe to engage in sexuality. There was

“a sort of paranoia that was encouraged around sex” because of the emphasis on gendered risk of pregnancy. This “communicated very early on that it was this bad thing, or it was something to be scared of, or something that was for later”. In the meantime, Ravnoor felt compelled to manage her actions and appearance across spaces. As she aged through adolescence, this construction was also coupled with constructions of sexuality as a site of ethnic and racial boundary-making processes.

6.4: Sexuality Constructed as the Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making Processes

As Ravnoor moved across spaces in and outside of the home, she did so within a broader context where sexuality was constructed as a site of racial, ethnic, and religious boundary-making processes. This tied sexuality, particularly through desirability and body image, to identity and belongingness. Growing up between multiple social worlds, she felt her identities were fragmented and they existed in isolation; she explains “there’s Indian me, and there’s western me”, depending on the spaces she moved across. This fragmentation was complicated by feeling invalidated or rejected in South Asian and western spaces, because of physical ideals she felt unable to meet. For instance, Ravnoor felt pressure from South Asian and western beauty ideals, which demanded women “to be thin”, “have beautiful long straight hair”, have no body hair, and have “fair” skin. During adolescence, Ravnoor felt as if her body did not display the traits valued in dominant standards of South Asian or western femininity conveyed to her. She believed this cast her outside of the bounds of attraction to men. So, not only did she feel her identities were fragmented, but she also felt unable to find validation as a desirable South Asian or a western woman because she felt excluded by physical ideals.

Within South Asian spaces, there was “a certain image of what’s pretty” and what was appropriate for young women. Achieving ‘appropriate prettiness’ required “modesty” and adherence to a particular look, that is, the “body has to look a certain way”. She would “peripherally” hear from peers and community members, “you don’t really look like an Indian girl. You’re really curvaceous, you have curly hair,” and she would hear comments that maintained the perception that “fair [skin] is more pretty and darker is not.” So, Ravnoor recalls feeling that her body was often hypersexualized at the same time that it was socially rejected. Through this rejection of beauty, she felt that her South Asian identity was denied validation by other South Asian community members (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes). As she aged through adulthood, these colourist comments

about beauty became more prominent and linked marriageability to fairness of skin. Simultaneously, within predominantly white spaces Ravnoor also recalls feeling rejection in that she was sexually undesirable. She felt unable to perform sexuality or be attractive like white settler peers around her, though she longed to feel desired and to feel a sense of belongingness. Ravnoor felt positioned as a brown, South Asian woman within a ranking system of desirability that values whiteness and devalues other groups and traits not associated with whiteness. She describes her feeling as,

“Just being inferior. And so being undesirable, and not totally undesirable but certainly not in the top tier. Maybe not class a or class b, but class c, because of my brown skin, because of my features, because I didn’t have straight hair and I just felt like I was never right. I felt like I was too tall, too big, or too much of something and I always remember feeling, if I was just skinny and white and had delicate features and blue eyes. I remember thinking, I wonder what that would feel like, would life just be better because then you would just have all the right things?”

Ravnoor remembers feeling unable to meet ideals of whiteness and thinness, and that her appearance was not as socially valued when compared to dominant beauty ideals. As a result, Ravnoor did not “know how to integrate all the parts of [her]self and in some ways, to be desirable in this very narrow context of white, blonde, blue eyes, the flavour du jour of attractiveness”. Her self-worth was impacted by the perception that she could not embody ideals of western beauty, which would have allowed her to feel sexually desired and chosen by white men, who she perceived as holding higher value than herself. She “couldn’t be those things and so [she] kind of tried to erase the Indian part of [her]self, tried not to think about it, downplay it”. This occurred all while feeling as though her South Asian identity was discounted through colourist and fatphobic cultural beauty ideals. Overall, she felt caught between two worlds: tasked with performing sexuality as prescribed by both South Asian and western cultural norms, but not being able to fulfil the appearance of either. At this time, her identity and value of herself were shaped by a broader racial hierarchy. Sexuality constructed as a site of boundary-making processes continued in new ways during Ravnoor’s adulthood, when she navigated marital expectations.

6.5: Sexuality Constructed as Immoral

During adolescence, Ravnoor found that the pressure to maintain compulsory chastity served to reaffirm constructions of sexuality as immoral. Dominant messages indicated that premarital sexual exploration reflected young women’s poor character, rejection of their religious or cultural identity, and/or a failure of their familial duties as a daughter (sexuality

as immoral). Ravnoor describes internalizing these messages and as a result, a “part of [her] th[inks] that sex is bad especially if you are a woman or a girl... You’re to protect yourself against these sorts of... heathenistic desires”. She describes internalizing the message that violating expectations around premarital intercourse has negative consequences, “you do that, and you take the good out. You’re not good anymore. You’re spoiled now”. Ravnoor states that good religious practice entailed “wait[ing] until you’re married” to have sexual intercourse. She wondered if her desires to act on crushes, be in relationships, and to contemplate sexual intercourse meant that she had compromised her family and religious teachings because she would no longer be sexually innocent. She experienced a “really big sense of guilt” because of her desires, and “really struggle[ed] with [her] religiousness”. She carried guilt for violating sexual expectations “for a long time” and “drifted” from her religious identity “for a few years” as she placed more focus on exploring her sexuality (strategy: identity negotiation). Her decisions and behaviours were shaped by the dominant beliefs around sexual exploration as an immoral act for South Asian women.

Sexual behaviour was framed as immoral because of a range of perceived risks posed to Ravnoor and her family’s future. If Ravnoor made visible decisions that went against dominant sexual expectations, they were treated as if she was failing her duty to ensure her parent’s well-being. She also understood her decisions as reflecting her parents’ teachings and sacrifices. So, she struggled to balance behaviour expected by her family and community with her desire to form romantic relationships. For example, Ravnoor hesitated to ask for sexual knowledge and emotional support, believing her parents might reject or invalidate her sexual needs, and therefore her, because she was expected to remain chaste. Since Ravnoor’s mother was “never exposed” to conversations about sexuality before marriage, her mother did not understand or agree that these conversations might be useful and relevant for Ravnoor. Like her mother, Ravnoor was expected to focus on school until adulthood. Sexual knowledge and discussion were treated as irrelevant until Ravnoor was ready for marriage. Ravnoor also felt that her parents’ attitude arose from the fear that sexuality could undermine her future well-being, by distracting her from higher education, career, and economic stability. Though they did not explicitly communicate this concern, her parents strongly emphasized education and a stable career. As she explains in her words,

“I think the reason why [I was not permitted to date] was because [my] parents worked really hard to come here, and it was your education that’s going to get you far, if you don’t work

hard, I don't want you to suffer and be in a job where you're not being paid enough or being respected, it's because you don't have an education".

Ravnoor appreciated her family as "very protective of [her]", wanting to ensure her well-being by protecting against sexual risk, and ensuring her financial independence. However, their protectiveness did not minimize or eliminate the fact that sexuality was a central focus in Ravnoor's adolescent life. She continued to want "to be [her] own person" and have space to explore sexuality. These desires to express autonomy elicited a fear of rejection, because Ravnoor was simultaneously concerned that her parents would not be "proud", or "see [her] as a good person, making good choices" if they knew she was dating when they did not want her to. Ravnoor was concerned that her sexual decisions might undermine their sacrifices or fracture their relationship with her. Ravnoor summarizes the fear of her actions potentially "hurt[ing] your parents", or "this idea of letting your parents down... or something that's not going to make them happy". As a result, she hesitated to bring up with them significant sexual problems that she experienced. Instead, she actively considered the impacts of her sexual decisions on her family's well-being, which led her to frame her desire for personal happiness against their experience as immigrants. When Ravnoor reflects on her parents' sacrifice in "immigrating here and giving up a lot", she worries "that if [they] discussed this anymore, any [significant sexual] issues, that they would regret coming here. And [she feels] it was the best decision of [their] lives". Ravnoor's parents were also "prominent in the community", so the weight and negative consequences of her sexual exploration before it was acceptable could be amplified. Ravnoor carefully balanced her sexual decisions alongside her family's well-being, noting the pressure on parents to ensure children keep rank because their deviations looked poorly on them. She believed her parents were at risk of questions and judgement from community members, eliciting questions of "how did you raise her?" if she did not present herself as chaste. So, not only was sexuality constructed as dangerous for South Asian unmarried women, but it was also constructed as immoral to engage in. Her actions would reflect a rejection of one's family, their membership and standing in the community, and her South Asian identities. During Ravnoor's adolescence, she wondered whether she was failing her religious principles and her parents' well-being in the pursuit of her own desire for autonomy and curiosity in sexuality.

6.6: Managing through Compartmentalizing

Ravnoor found navigating broader sexual constructions and expectations costly to her sexual well-being. To preserve her sexual well-being, Ravnoor initially compartmentalized her

sexuality by withholding exploration and conversation around sexuality when she was around her family and South Asian community (strategy: compartmentalization). This was problematic because, as she states, “I wanted to be myself and share all the parts of myself” with family and partners. However, she did not feel safe to be her complete authentic and vulnerable self in all spaces, so Ravnoor’s early sexual exploration occurred in secrecy. This allowed her to maintain her relationship with her parents while still validating romantic relationships outside of the home. Compartmentalizing also involved establishing spaces where it was safe to explore her sexuality. For example, managing physiological sexual facets through health services was dangerous because she worried family and friends would find out about her sexual behaviours, and consequently judge or punish her. Ravnoor describes an experience when she became sexually active during the end of adolescence. She did not speak to her family physician about sexual health because she did not trust that her concerns would remain confidential.

“There’s no way I could see my physician. He would tell my mom for sure. There ain’t no patient confidentiality going on here. I remember being at the doctors once with my [sibling]. ... Again, I had [an infection], and I think I asked the doctor something about it, and [the doctor] said something like, “are you changing your sexual partners a lot?” My [sibling] doesn’t know I’m having sex! So, I just sat there, and I was like, I don’t think [these infections] are brought on by intercourse... I just didn’t answer. Because first of all, I wasn’t [changing partners frequently], and second of all, you just blew my cover in front of my [sibling].”

Her hesitation to disclose her sexual needs and sexual health practices, enacted in secrecy, occurred for several reasons. Family members who were unaware of her behaviours would sometimes remain in the examination room during appointments. Adding to her hesitation was the fact that her doctor interacted with her parents in their ethnic community outside of their patient-doctor dynamic. Ravnoor anticipated judgement and discomfort from older South Asian doctors, whom she believed held traditional sexual values and would question why she was sexually active outside of marriage. She also found it difficult to use services where community members might recognize her and relay her service use to her parents. She describes an instance of covertly using health services as a last resort, despite being reprimanded for misusing resources.

“I thought I had [an infection]. The first few times I would go to the pharmacy and get the treatment, but I remember once it was really bad and I got really scared. This is something else, I don’t know what this is. I never told anyone, but I went to the emergency room at a really far hospital in [another town], so that no one would see me, no one would know me. The doctor was actually pissed, because I went to the ER, but it was dead, nobody was there.

She said, “this is a routine thing that you need to go to your family doctor for, why did you come to the emergency room”...[but] I thought I was going to die, and I didn’t know what to do.”

As she moved through postsecondary education towards the end of her adolescence, she eventually found welcoming and anonymous sexual health services where community members or relatives did not work or attend. These were often on campus, allowing her to continue compartmentalizing her sexual life in order to preserve her sexual well-being.

Compartmentalizing her sexual life from her family and community also involved performing compulsory chastity in South Asian spaces. For example, she codeswitched by avoiding laughing at sexual jokes, avoided discussion of crushes and dates, and learned when it was appropriate to speak about sexuality. In this way, she presented herself as sexually naïve and disengaged from exploration. This allowed her to remain presentable as a moral and chaste young woman.

“I just think that with the South Asian community, and I’m a prime example of it, we’re very good at compartmentalizing the values. So yes, I know the values of the South Asian community when it comes to sex, I can know it, I can act it in front of the right audience, I will turn around and do the exact opposite ... I can live two completely different lives... I think there’s a lot of us that do that... They complete the images, the role that we play, because of where we are, and we’re damn good at it.”

Despite compartmentalizing and performing chastity, the pressure to conform to sexual constructions left Ravnoor feeling isolated and overly vigilant. By quietly exploring relationships with boys for the first time, she was not able to ask her parents for guidance on challenging emotions and decisions, though she desperately wanted to. Instead, since her “friends lost their virginity quite young, at 16”, she watched as they made “those decisions to have sex” and relied on them for guidance through her sexual decisions and health care.

Ravnoor felt her parents were separated from a huge part of her life, stating,

“You want to be desired; you want someone to like you and love you and pick you, and then when you do and you’re in the relationship, you also struggle. There’s so much stuff there that you need help and support with, and I just felt like I was alone. I had my friends. My friends were my teachers and my guides, not my parents.”

Ravnoor’s exploration during adolescence was strained by her concern about sexual inexperience and the preoccupation with sexual risk and immorality. She felt delayed and inexperienced with masturbation and partnered intimacy. It was “confusing” to date and express affection with partners, for instance, she did not “know how to kiss someone”. This

“limited the extent of the relationship [she] was willing to have with them, because [she] was embarrassed about saying [she] felt embarrassed about being physical”. When she decided to engage in sexual intercourse, the preoccupation with sexual risk undermined her sense of “freedom and pleasure... being able to be in the moment”. To explain this, she describes her discomfort with phone sex and masturbation. She was “confused” about her sexual organs, did not “feel comfortable” with the idea of “touch[ing her]self”, and was scared “to hurt [her]self”. So, she would “fake” it. Though she wanted to explore intimate sexual expressions she felt conflicted and unsure of how to do so for some time. Sexuality was also difficult for Ravnoor to completely embody, especially because it was constructed as a finite object she must preserve. At times, she questioned the nature of her partner’s intentions, concerned that her sexuality was at risk of being exploited.

“I think there’s always a part of me that’s always like, why is that person interested in me, are they using me? It’s almost like sex becomes a commodity and you become a commodity in some ways instead of being in control and having that as something you partake in. It’s almost like money. It’s a bank that you have to protect.”

Across adolescence, Ravnoor grappled with being seen simultaneously as dangerous, vulnerable, sexualized, and undesirable, in essence affirming that sexuality was to be avoided. Though she wanted to explore her sexuality, she felt alone and weary of engaging in sexual behaviours. While she was able to maintain sexual well-being by compartmentalizing sexuality and performing chastity, there were times when Ravnoor could not “see [her]self as a sexual being, see [her]self as attractive or desirable”. Her adolescent sexual journey thus focused on wanting love and acceptance from partners and family while navigating feelings of risk, impropriety, and inadequacy. Her experiences demonstrate the power and influence of sexual constructions that position sexuality as dangerous, immoral, a heteronormative act, and a site of enthoracial boundary-making processes. These sexual constructions impact how individuals view themselves and the choices they feel they can make about their sexuality, such as who they share intimate parts of their life with and how they connect to their own body. Ravnoor balanced her own needs, desires, and identities with the constraints of seeking approval from her family and community. For many years, Ravnoor experienced parts of who she was incongruently, as if she could not be her authentic self in all areas of her life. Her perception and expression of sexuality that more aligned with her own needs as distinct from dominant messages around appropriate sexual conduct began to fluctuate during adulthood as she developed new understandings of sexuality and navigated interpersonal relationships accordingly.

6.7: Adulthood

As Ravnoor transitioned into her twenties and moved through postsecondary education, she learned more about her sexuality and how she wanted to express sexual facets. In this stage, we see how dominant views of sexuality were less constraining as the result of having classes away from home and community. With space away from home and her childhood community, she was free to incorporate new care strategies that were validated in this environment. She took courses and learned more about physiological facets of sexuality. Indeed, later creating a career where she disseminated sexual and general health knowledge in racialized communities. Ravnoor found that her campus made it “fairly easy to get access to sexual health information” and testing that was anonymous and removed from her family and community. Ravnoor also diversified her peer network; friends with different upbringings, locations, and sexual identities “played a significant role” in developing “positive messaging”. She found comfort and support in being part of their sexual journeys and learned about the “regular testing” that they employed (strategy: network building). Ravnoor recalls building confidence to centre and assert her sexual needs in partnered contexts. For example, she learned to navigate the complicated nature of building confidence to assert boundaries without fearing rejection from partners.

“we’ve all made mistakes in terms of not using protection or having pregnancy scares. Things happen, but learning from those experiences, and sexual relationships are so complex. Even the act of having sex for women. For some women, it’s so hard to even just ask a guy to be like, do you have a condom? As a woman, to say that to someone, it shouldn’t be hard, but it is sometimes. There are times when you think if you say that, he’s not going to want to... Those things, feeling like you can’t say no to certain things, asking for things you feel like you should be able to ask for in a relationship, and having the confidence to do that in those moments when you’re having sex.”

Ravnoor also actively engaged in her sexual well-being by reclaiming her sexual identity in connection with her appearance and her ethnoracial and religious identities (strategy: identity negotiation). First, she recalls “a period of time in [her] early twenties” when she received consensual “attention” from men, which reaffirmed “that people found [her] attractive, and they wanted to date [her]”. This was in part due to the distance from the constraining sexual constructions she grew up with, the proximity to a diverse group of peers, and the growing privacy she now had to explore her sexuality away from her family and community. The attention “helped shift [her] thinking” that being South Asian was valued despite continuing to experience moments of “self-consciousness and anxiety about [her] body, [her] looks, [her]

desirability”. At this point, her “self-work” on her self-esteem was limited because she believed “that power lay in someone else’s choice to choose [her]”.

Second, Ravnoor’s identity reclamation also occurred outside of being chosen and validated by others. By her mid-twenties Ravnoor began to build self-esteem by taking control over her appearance, rejecting the expectations once placed on her to manage her body. This could also be due to broader changes in western media, as Ravnoor recalls an increase in South Asian representation. This representation began to de-centre whiteness, where “South and East Asian women... became profiled for being beautiful and sensual and ... that really had an impact on [her]” (strategy: rejection of internalized racism and de-centring whiteness; identity negotiation). This helped to normalize being South Asian in western spaces. For example, Ravnoor experimented with her appearance, and reclaimed religious and cultural South Asian dress without feeling shame. These actions helped her to feel confident and connected to her South Asian identities across spaces. She found power in being able to resist existing standards of beauty, defining a new hybrid representation of the worlds she grew up in. This helped to dissolve what she had thought when growing up, were impermeable boundaries between two worlds.

Ravnoor also reclaimed South Asian identities through the guidance of peers and relatives, who embodied “the best of both worlds” (strategy: identity negotiation). For instance, she watched as her sibling found a “really nice balance” of being “cultured through the [South Asian] community as well as through the western community”, particularly maintaining the “respect” and “flexibility” that each culture respectively emphasized. Ravnoor also made space to connect with her religious identity on her own terms. She “makes a conscious effort to do *paat*” [prayer] during her “daily life”, by listening to scripture and religious music during the day. She reminds herself that while she cannot express her religion the way others may ideally expect of her, she feels “a great sense of loyalty towards [her] religion” and expresses the principles that she feels align with her reality.

“It doesn’t mean that I don’t respect the religion or that I don’t want to follow it. It’s just that I’m not ready to live my life in that way, but I still recognize every part of it. I’ve learned to focus my attention to the parts of religion that are more [focused on] serving others... I know the things that are said, are done to lead us down a certain path, and I eventually do want to get there, but for now, I’m focusing on the principles that I can.”

As she aged and built a sense of independence outside of her family and community, Ravnoor felt empowered to “live in [her] culture, both of [her] cultures” without needing “to hide

[her]self away anymore and that was freeing”. She began to see the “integration part [of her identities that] was missing” previously. This occurred through complicating the constructions and expressions of sexuality she was exposed to through network building and expressing parts of her religion and culture that aligned with her current needs.

6.8: Sexuality Constructed as Heteronormative Acts and as a Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making

At the end of her postsecondary education, Ravnoor increasingly felt “a sense of obligation” to get married and subsequently have biological children. She felt there was an unquestioned checklist of life milestones that she was expected to meet: “school, check that off; marriage, check that off; have a baby, check that off. Now there’s nothing left for me to do” (sexuality as a heteronormative act). In this way, Ravnoor experienced the positioning of sexuality as a series of heteronormative acts: heterosexual marriage and parenthood within a strict timeline and form. Ravnoor found that previously enforced expectations to avoid premarital dating and intercourse were replaced by a pressing “duty” to get married, with little time for this duty to unfold, or space for reflection.

“When I completed my university, [my parents] were like, “okay well you’re going to go for marriage”, and I was like, “whoa what?! Why? I don’t understand, I want my independence”. And they’re just like, “now that you’ve done school, marriage is really important”. And I’m like, “yea, but when I talked about dating, you weren’t open to it, and now you’re pushing me into marriage”. I’ll have aunties and uncles come up to me and say, “you should have found a boy in school”, and I’m like, “I’m going to kick you because when I brought it up, you’d be like, no boys for you, so ... what do you expect us to do?”

The pressure to conform to dominant marital expectations reflects the intersecting constructions of sexuality as a series of heteronormative acts and as the site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes. Not only was there an obligation to marry, but there was an expectation that the marriage process unfolds traditionally as it occurred for Ravnoor’s parents. These marital decisions are treated as indicative of how South Asian culture or identities are maintained over time. To reject Ravnoor’s parents’ “type of marriage” would be a rejection of their culture.

“There was tension, and I think that we were exposed to westernized or Canadian culture and they were still focused on... they still wanted us to embrace the Indian culture. Which I fully expect, but they wanted us to embrace it through their way of dating and following their type of marriage. Embracing it through their values of what marriage looked like. And what dating looked like, and the timelines that they had for us, which was to be married before 30 and have a child before 30.”

Her parents encouraged a short dating period without emotional and physical intimacy, especially concerned Ravnoor was running out of time to get married. Ravnoor felt pressure to find a partner all while her white settler peers more openly experienced relationships, sexual intercourse, multiple partners, and casual relationships. Ravnoor's parents' "type of marriage" also included endogamous marriage, with caste-, religious-, and race-specific expectations which were quietly conveyed (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes). For example, Ravnoor witnessed community gossip and estrangement between parents and children when the latter married outside of their caste or religion. These stories became "engrained or filtered", internalized as expectations of who to marry and who was valued or marriageable.

"Neither one of my parents has sat down and said to me, "... don't ever date a Black guy, don't ever date a Muslim guy". They've never said that, but in actions and growing up, you pick up on certain things... I remember one of my dad's friends calling and hesitating to tell my dad that his son was going to marry a girl of a different caste... Another family friend's daughter married a Muslim guy, and the dad didn't show up to the wedding and stopped talking to her. There are so many of those stories. So, all of that stuff, somewhere in your brain gets engrained or filtered, and you hold it there".

Ravnoor held onto these instances as she quietly dated, believing that marriage to a community member was an obligation that would protect her family's reputation and well-being. Finding the right spouse "is what you have to do for your family, you have to marry the right person". The pressure to marry as her parents had done during their twenties provided little room for Ravnoor's sexual exploration and identity formation. Ravnoor recalls feeling rushed after completing her education, and ill-equipped to find a partner and create a new life with them. Ravnoor felt expected to move from her role as a daughter to a wife, with little conception of who she was independently nor "what [she] wanted" in life.

When Ravnoor's parents were aware of her romantic relationships, there was strong concern that Ravnoor's decisions might compromise her marital chances. She recalls a major life event that placed her personal safety and happiness in opposition to the duty to marry. Ravnoor shared with her parents that she was in a long-term relationship that had recently ended. Her parents' reaction indicated that she was responsible for the functioning of her relationships. Ravnoor recalls being asked, "what did you do to drive him away? What did you do to ruin things?" This reflected "a very common sensation or attitude where a woman has to do things to keep a man." Her parents also responded with fear and sadness when they learned about her decision to become sexually active with her ex-partner. The cost of

violating compulsory chastity, they believed, was that “[she] wouldn’t meet someone else, because [she] had now been tainted and been with this person”. After she disclosed that her ex-partner was abusive and had sexually assaulted her, her parents slowly came to terms with the ‘failed’ relationship, and they “began to speak again.” But she reports that she continued to “feel a little bit separated from” her parents. This disclosure to her parents constituted a major event where she disagreed with them on the expected performance of her sexuality. This event reinforced the construction of sexuality as a heteronormative act that she had not successfully managed. According to her parents’ ideals, Ravnoor violated compulsory chastity and failed to meet the role of a dotting partner, responsible for the health of her relationships. The attention paid to Ravnoor’s perceived failures also masked the underlying power dynamics involved in her experience of abuse.

After this major event, she remained wary of sharing parts of her sexuality with her family. Accordingly, she continued to compartmentalize her sexuality. For example, she decided she would not engage in conversation about casual relationships with those who would not understand how they benefit Ravnoor’s life or those who were inclined to impose judgement. This also allowed her to be protective of her parents, especially when they moved to “a good place” in their relationship. This pressure continued across Ravnoor’s thirties, as she established her career and continued to quietly date. Though she recognized a shift where her parents became “more receptive to dating now because [they] just want [her] to get married”, she felt the pressure for partnerships to lead to marriage. In fact, Ravnoor felt others around her treated her like “it [wa]s too late for her” to have a fulfilling sexual life because of her age. By her thirties, Ravnoor passed the idealized age of marriage and “past the age of having [biological] children”. She believed men and their families would treat her as having diminishing value in the marriage market; “why would she be useful to anyone? ... how could she be attractive to anyone?”. Whispers and questions from community members on dating and marriage implied that her desirability and deservingness of a marriage is contingent upon her ability to become a mother. In this way, Ravnoor continued to experience pressure resulting from the construction of sexuality as a heteronormative act, since sexuality is treated as unfolding for the purpose of marriage and raising biological children. In response to marital pressure, Ravnoor felt and continues to feel like a failure, and she explains this is a difficult position to be in. As a result, she often withdrew from social situations to avoid scrutiny, continuing to compartmentalize her sexuality from other parts of her life. Over time, Ravnoor continued to navigate marital pressure and “places that

still hurt” in relation to her perceived value as a desirable woman. This ongoing tension points to the fluctuating nature of sexual well-being over time.

6.10: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Realities

In Ravnoor’s present stage of adulthood, Ravnoor redefines, for herself, the meaning of sexuality and she now engages in facets of sexuality that bring her fulfilment with greater ease than during her adolescence. Thus, Ravnoor has largely shifted her sexual journey away from prioritizing the perceptions of others, instead emphasizing her own needs and her own understanding of sexuality. The meaning of sexuality has shifted to be an essential and pleasurable part of her daily life. It has become a means of expressing her identities and building relationships with others. Ravnoor has come to understand sexuality as a “human experience”, “an extension or expression of who [she] is as a person”, and a way to “share a part of [her]self with others”. Sexual intercourse, rather than being an immoral, dangerous premarital act, is now “... one of many ways to find pleasure or comfort” with a partner. Through relationships, Ravnoor has learned “to be intimate” and connect with herself. She navigates the conditions and challenging conversations required to feel safe in partnerships. For instance, she describes supportive partners who “treat [her] equally” and “push” her outside of her comfort zone rather than “repress [her]”. Presently, she is in a meaningful relationship which she feels has provided her space to explore her sexuality without feeling guilt or pressure to compromise her boundaries. She describes her partner as,

“... comfortable in his sexuality, in offering to be intimate, in requesting intimacy. It’s never aggressive, it’s never judgemental. If I say no, he doesn’t hold it against me. I’ve learned so much from him. He’s comfortable with his body, and generous, and in his household, sex was just so normalized. When we were first dating, even in some ways, celebrated.

She now pushes back against traditional gender norms which hold that women should be self-sacrificing and responsible for the happiness and function of interpersonal relationships (strategy: identity negotiation). Nonetheless, she continues to be aware of the persistence of “expectations” of ideal femininity, where “if anything goes wrong... if he’s unhappy, it’s because she’s not doing enough” for her partner or her family. And it is her job as a partner to mould herself to the existing family structure and ensure its stability.

“...it almost always comes down to her fault. It always feels like the underlying cultural expectation is always that it’s on the woman, it’s always her situation, it’s what did she do, or why is she not doing enough, ... just for me seems uniquely South Asian, in the sense that I never hear those things communicated about other people in a way that relates the family structure as a whole – like how does she treat her mother-in-law, that’s not sort of the

question that gets asked in other people. It's always how the two people work within a relationship, whereas I find with all the South Asian families I know, it's all about how this person relates to twelve other people and the perfection, and the man always has to be taken care of.

Recognizing the influence of these normative pressures to perform heteronormative gender roles in interpersonal relationships, Ravnoor has cultivated and accesses diverse support network that help normalize a wider range of gender dynamics (strategy: network building). Ravnoor learns from partners and “a fairly diverse group of friends” to “see how they navigate things with their families”. From these relationships, she learns how to balance her individual needs within interpersonal dynamics. She is more equipped to say no and reject “those expectations” that make her responsible for the functioning of relationships by “assess[ing] it with regards to [her] own needs”. She speaks “more boldly and speak[s] with more confidence”, without feeling as though she is being “disrespectful” or rejecting her family and cultural or religious values.

Ravnoor is now able to reflect on the power that these interpersonal relationships and broader sexual constructions have on one's sexuality, such as self-worth and an internalized view of one's body. She maintains her sexual well-being by focusing on how she is a role model to others. So, her efforts to build a diverse support network also involve support for others' sexual well-being. She acts as an educator for relatives to counter the silence, isolation, and hurt she experienced. She prioritizes how she can help younger family members be “comfortable and confident in who [they are], in [their] body, [their] person”. For example, Ravnoor is “constantly reiterating especially to [her] niece what beautiful is” during her formative years, and how beauty exists outside of the two poles Ravnoor once felt stretched between. She believes it is critical to provide support for her niece beyond the “terms that she sees around her, i.e., the fair skin, your body being a certain shape, she has curly hair...”. She instead wishes to remind younger relatives that the traits they feel are inadequate when compared to broader beauty ideals, are worthy, valuable, and beautiful. Ravnoor also helps her siblings engage their sexuality; they talk through relationships and extend support to one another. She acknowledges that it can be uncomfortable but is necessary, stating it is “awkward too, but I need to be someone to say this to [them], because nobody said it to me. I wish somebody said that to me... [her sibling] has to know that there's someone that is paying attention to that.” Ravnoor shares that she wants her family members to have space “to feel love and ... to be loving”, as she has learned to express for herself and others.

6.11: Conclusion

As an adult, Ravnoor feels better equipped to manage her sexual well-being in connection to her family, slowly tempering the pressure she once felt to perform sexuality and gender according to their needs and beliefs. Now, she prioritizes boundaries around these sociocultural sexual constructions while also maintaining family bonds that serve her needs. She explores and defines her own sexuality without feeling as though she is rejecting her religious identity or feeling that her western and South Asian selves are disjointed. The fragmented identities she once experienced have blended and she now feels that there is no longer “Indian me and Canadian me, there’s just me”. The racial tension she felt beginning as a child, believing that her desirability was devalued in comparison to whiteness, has also been tempered by feeling able to celebrate her appearance and South Asian identity in Western spaces and by experiencing romantic relationships. She also works to ensure others feel beautiful, validated, and sexually informed, becoming part of a support system for younger relatives. Despite the continued pressure of constructions that emphasize a narrow set of sexual expressions, Ravnoor now experiences an “amazing feeling of freedom, being comfortable with your sexuality and with your body and who you are.”

Nilani: A Journey from Self-Rejection and Heteronormativity (age 20)

6.12: Childhood

Nilani’s mother left Sri Lanka in the late 1980s and moved to Canada with her family during a period of civil war, as asylum seekers. Her mother then completed school, travelled, and found a job in education. Soon after, Nilani’s grandparents arranged her mother’s marriage to Nilani’s father, and Nilani’s mother sponsored his migration to Canada. They raised two children together. During Nilani’s childhood, her family lived in a small town with few South Asians. As she grew up, Nilani found herself moving between two communities. During the day she occupied mostly white, western spaces in school. On the weekends, her family visited a close by mid-sized Ontario CMA with a large South Asian community. In the latter, her family found support in this community, attending events, and visiting friends often. Nilani’s family also maintained strong religious bonds. They did “[prayers] a lot at home,” attended religious service on a weekly basis, and visited it to celebrate major events

like first jobs, key religious and cultural holidays, or weddings. She “went to a language school, and [she] also joined a religious group” where she learned traditional dances, contributing to a strong presence of religious and cultural norms during childhood.

Nilani’s family was initially “very traditional”. They retained a collectivist or “community-based” orientation that stood in contrast to “western culture,” which she perceived as “very individualized.” This meant that Nilani’s immediate family maintained close ties to their extended family and its hierarchical power structure. For instance, her extended family lived in the same home during Nilani’s childhood. Her parents, aunts, and uncles all underwent arranged marriages, marriages that had a strong focus on “the joining of two families” rather than the joining of two individuals. Nilani notes that there was an expectation for deference towards the decisions and opinions of elders. Defying this by “speak[ing] back to elders” or violating their traditions was “disrespectful.” A person’s decisions were to be made with reference to the family structure, as the outcomes and implications were experienced by all family members. Nilani notes that this “hierarchical structure” was “very common in South Asian communities” and it impacted the way sexuality was expressed in her home (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes).

Nilani’s relatives and community conveyed that the family structure was contingent on ideal performances of femininity. Nilani describes an “expectation” that girls and women comply with and perform dutiful, passive gender roles. These roles include the prescription to act “demure”, and to “be more quiet, and subdued, and humble” by not speaking “out of turn”. In fact, restraint and deference were positioned as vital for the marriageability of women. Nilani recalls regular comments made within her ethnic community that “if you want to get married and if you want someone to like you, you need to tone it down as a woman... [which]...means that you need to sit down, shut up, and be a good woman. Not protest your husband, not talk back, not have opinions, not be so strong willed.” The expectation to remain respectful and dutiful to family members was also coupled with pressure to perform compulsory chastity. From an early age, Nilani was reminded by relatives that girls and unmarried women should be “pure and chaste”, because “a woman’s chastity is everything, it defines [her] character.” Not only was it pertinent to protect chastity to be seen as a good woman, but Nilani felt that her family’s collective orientation complicated how sexuality could unfold. For example, she shares that she rarely saw affection between her parents at home.

“I remember the first time when I was ten or eleven, I saw my parents kiss once, and literally lost my mind. Because I had never seen that kind of intimacy between them. But also, I think a big factor in that is that I used to live with my aunt and uncle, grandma and grandpa too, so they also had a big open audience as well. So, I think probably a big reason as well that we didn’t see that kind of intimacy was because it wasn’t just our nuclear family, it was my mom’s brother, my mom’s sister, my mom’s mom...”

She explains that the traditional family structure created a lack of privacy and indirectly positioned partnered sexual expression as suitable only behind closed doors, away from others. Nilani understood the family structure as requiring strict gender performances that often displaced the needs of the individual and that associated appropriate behaviour with chastity.

At home, Nilani’s family maintained strong adherence of other cultural norms. They spoke their mother tongue, and consumed cultural products like food, music, and movies on a regular basis. For a while, the interactions with her extended family and South Asian community allowed her to feel “really connected to [her] culture and [her] religion.” When around her South Asian community and relatives, Nilani “almost felt more like [her]self there. [She] could talk about dance practice, or [say] ‘I watched this [South Asian] movie’ and they actually know what you were talking about. It just went from being super white to knowing what you’re talking about.” However, this sense of inclusion and comfort contrasted with instances of feeling out of place during the other days of the week, when she was around predominantly white settler Canadians. In these instances, she believed her South Asian identity was not easily understood by her peers. To explain this sense of exclusion, Nilani describes an early example of downplaying her South Asian traits so that her name would be more easily pronounced and palatable to non-South Asians.

“I hated the way my name was pronounced, and I realized it sounded so brown... The majority is white people and I want to be friends with them, obviously, because that’s the major group. So, when I was in kindergarten, I thought my name sounded horrible, so I changed it to [a nickname] so that it sounded more like [a western name], because it was easier to digest... So that was the earliest point where I can remember thinking, I hate being brown because I don’t feel like it’s easy to understand for everyone else around me, because they don’t look like me and they’re not from the same place as me.”

Not only did Nilani feel out of place when in predominantly white spaces, she also began to resent being South Asian because she felt it was undervalued and undesirable when compared to western ideals. Since her lived reality seemed underrepresented and poorly understood, Nilani began to disconnect from her South Asian identity. This disconnection impacted how she understood her sexuality. For example, Nilani labels her adolescent self as “ha[ving]

internalized racism” because she believed “stereotypes and jokes about [her religion] and South Asians” that were disseminated around her in media representations. Nilani measured her self-worth and the worth of other South Asian peers against ideal representations of whiteness, which she came to epitomize as beautiful and interesting.

“...I was like, yea we’re all ugly, we are not attractive, we’re smelly, we’re just a bunch of nerds, basically... That was also the things I was seeing in the media. The stereotypes that they have against South Asian people. Especially South Asian women, oh we’re boring and submissive, and we don’t have anything else to talk about besides school... Everyone is telling me and I’m internalizing that we are just the most boring, ugly, unattractive people.”

She believed South Asians were archaic and unlikeable, leading her to feel both a strong sense of exclusion when she was around white peers and distanced from her South Asian identity. This internalization undermined the sense of belonging that Nilani once felt in South Asian spaces. She shuffled between feelings of exclusion and internalized racism as she moved through western spaces. As Nilani moved through adolescence, these pressures and feelings were exacerbated by the experience of divorce in her family and the prominence of dating and intercourse amongst her peers.

6.13: Adolescence

At the beginning of adolescence, Nilani’s immediate family moved to a large-sized CMA, enticed by the access to community and resources that a long-established South Asian immigrant population provided. This meant that Nilani’s school life unfolded around mainly South Asian Canadian peers. Her immediate family fostered even stronger connections to their South Asian community than during her childhood, and the collectivist orientation impacted how Nilani experienced sexuality. This was evident as she navigated puberty and her parents’ divorce. As Nilani moved through adolescence, the topic of sexuality was subject to conflicting sociocultural constructions. For example, she experienced sexuality constructed as an essential part of her daily reality, as dangerous, as a heteronormative act, and as the site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes. These unfolded as she considered her sexual identity and the expected path of heteronormative marriage that lay in front of her.

6.14: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Life and as Dangerous

When Nilani began menstruation, she encountered the dominant construction of sexuality as an essential part of daily life. Although partnered facets like physical acts of intimacy were private between her parents, puberty was more visible and it was responded to with nuanced

values. Through traditional Tamil practices, her family's response to puberty indicated that it was a transition into adulthood and a major milestone (sexuality as an essential part of daily reality). For example, she experienced a small puberty ceremony with her extended family when she began menstruation. Nilani understood this ceremony as acknowledgement of a natural stage of aging. She explains that menstruation is treated as a transition or "sign of womanhood." She shares that while the historical meaning that links menstruation with "read[iness] for marriage" and childbearing has wavered, the celebratory tone of beginning menstruation has persisted. Nilani states that "in the Tamil culture, there is a very particular process when a girl gets her period for the first time", involving prayers, special meals, and wearing one's first "half-sari" before transitioning to a full sari. Nilani's mother shared the news with Nilani's aunts, who exclaimed "you're growing up and I'm so excited for you," and offered "congratulations" on becoming "a woman". In this way, menstruation and the transition through adolescence towards adulthood was positioned as a conventional part of growing up.

The construction of menstruation as essential to sexuality was complicated by community members who emphasized the need for the body to be managed. Their expectations reflected and conveyed what feminized bodies should look like during puberty, including a stigma around menstrual bleeding. For instance, Nilani recalled a customary period of isolation and dietary restrictions that community members encouraged when she began menstruation. "A family friend" conveyed that these restrictions were necessary to meet beauty ideals, and "the only time that you can lose weight and become more figurely and look like a woman." Nilani also noticed constructions within the South Asian community that positioned feminized bodies as dangerous, prescribing strict management of her behaviours and dress. Nilani describes a complicated traditional expectation placed on menstruating women to avoid tainting their surroundings through engagement in regular life. For example, older girls and women withdrew from religious ceremonies and household duties "because they were on their periods," reinforcing stigma around menstrual bleeding (sexuality as dangerous).

Outside of her home, Nilani felt pressure to regulate her body to fit within the bounds of socially acceptable femininity. She learned that once a girl has her "first period and become[s] a woman, there are expectations of you, and that influenced [her]" to manage how she acted or how her body was seen by others. Community members monitored and created pressure to maintain appropriate behaviour and appearance as her body changed.

“In certain scenarios, not with my parents but other people, people realized you’re a woman... I remember one memory that sticks out, once I started developing breasts. I was part of a—my religious community—did a play every year, but once the girls started getting older, we stopped doing dance numbers, stuff like that where we were treated differently compared to the boys. I remember feeling so angry about it, very rattled.”

Dance practices and ceremonies were subject to restrictions for girls in ways that boys did not experience, indicating that feminized bodies and behaviours were dangerous if unmanaged. Though she generally felt like she had “ownership over [her] body,... there were instances where in terms of the way [she] dressed, there would be comments made on it,” particularly when she interacted in the South Asian community. At one of her last dance performances, Nilani’s “shawl came undone”, which showed “the top of [her] chest”. She was reprimanded by “one of the elders” and this made her feel that she lacked “agency” in the ways she wanted to “show... and use” her body. Given the deference required towards traditions and elders, it was difficult for Nilani to act in ways that centred her body without defying expectations from others. Her body was now marked as dangerous, requiring modesty to protect how it was consumed by others.

Nilani’s mother was a countering force towards sexual constructions about danger, because she showed Nilani that it was possible for an individual to challenge this and other dominant belief systems. For example, her mother did not “follow or believe” in cultural or religious sexual stigma. Instead, her mother resisted religious expectations and encouraged Nilani’s participation in prayer and ceremony “if [she] was menstruating or not, regardless of how old [she] was”. Her mother was also clear and open about how to manage her sexuality, which included discussion of sexual risks and boundaries based on Nilani's level of comfort and comprehension (sexuality as an essential part of daily reality). During adolescence, her mother provided detailed sexual knowledge, explaining the meaning of puberty, describing physiological changes, and sharing care practices. Her mother dispelled myths about puberty and informed her of sexuality-related illnesses that women in Nilani’s family experienced. In this way, sexuality was positioned as an endurable experience, not something to be discretely managed and hidden away. For instance, Nilani recalls,

“My mom told me that you can still go in the water when you have your period... Like, how long has it been,... you have to buy pads, [and] when you keep having them you’ll be able to pick what you like—do you need a light flow, heavy flow... If you know your period is coming up, make sure you wear liners, so it doesn’t happen and you’re unprepared for it. Always keep extra pads in your bag for yourself or even for others...”

Over time, Nilani's mother cultivated an environment where daily sexual communication easily occurred. Nilani recalls that as a teenager, she felt "lucky to be able to have this openness." Many of her South Asian peers felt compelled to compartmentalize their sexuality because their "households [were] way more conservative" about sexuality. They experienced stronger reservation and silence, where "it wasn't just puberty, but also sex. The sex culture, sex education, they reign that in big time. You don't talk about it." In comparison, Nilani's mother "believed in giving it straight to you and not coating anything." For example, while dating was not permitted during secondary school, her mother provided clear explanations for this expectation. She encouraged her "not to give [her] life up for a boy" and to instead prioritize education and self-growth. Her mother's acts of resistance and clear guidance helped Nilani feel "very liberated and supported during puberty." Nilani felt less beholden to expectations of how South Asian femininity should be performed. In this way, her mother helped her view sexuality not as an insurmountable risk but as having negative and positive aspects that Nilani could navigate with resources when she was ready.

Through open discussion and engagement of South Asian religious values, Nilani's immediate family also countered the positioning of feminized bodies as inherently dangerous, instead positioning them as venerated. For instance, Nilani's parents encouraged her to view her body as sacred, "something of god's creation." She recalls that dressing modestly regardless of gender was encouraged; bodies were "not something you should want to show other human beings, because they're not on the level of god." Her parents encouraged dress as a buffer against the compounded racialization and sexualization she experienced as she moved through western spaces. They explained if she chose to dress modestly, it could protect her from being objectified under a racialized, male gaze that would exoticize her body. They shared that, "people that we don't know, a lot of white males, white families, they don't understand. They're looking at you because you're exotic." In contrast to earlier instances with her religious community where modest dress was expected to cover risky bodies, modest dress helped counter sexual scrutiny without problematizing her body as dangerous. Instead of being positioned as a sexual object, she was treated as a sexual subject with agency to manage her body according to her own needs.

6.15: Sexuality Constructed as Dangerous and a Heteronormative Act

During adolescence, Nilani was aware of and continued to confront intersecting constructions that depicted sexuality as dangerous and as a heteronormative act. These constructions

became particularly apparent to Nilani when her mother transitioned through divorce. She describes a tense environment at home. She witnessed “a lot of domestic violence going on, political games between families, that typical type of stuff. It wasn’t a very happy atmosphere, it was mostly very hostile, not the healthiest environment to grow up in.” Nilani watched as her mother was slowly isolated and marked as dangerous for violating the appropriate form of femininity that required marriage (sexuality as dangerous). Divorce was not a common occurrence and was not well-received amongst her South Asian community. Rather than experiencing “outright judgement” post-divorce, her mother was socially excluded while her father was welcomed by family friends.

“She had to go through a lot of people not coming around. A lot of their friends. That’s a big thing that happened... people stopped coming around. You don’t realize it; I was young... at the time... and then she had to raise us by herself on her own income, which took a lot as well. But I think the biggest stigma is, [amongst] people and her siblings, she was the first one to get divorced. They liked my dad. They knew he was an alcoholic, but they were like, “oh, he was a really nice guy when he wasn’t an alcoholic”. But he was an alcoholic 99% of the time, so that [at] time he was a very scary person to be around... [but] he still came around to their houses and so forth.”

In comparison, Nilani believed that her mother was treated like “a second-class citizen,” in a way that would not have occurred “if she were married.” She was slowly overlooked for invitations to community gatherings, while her father’s social relationships were unchanged. He was not forgotten or perceived as a threat to social order in the ways her mother was, revealing that the construction of sexuality as a heteronormative act was also gendered. The result was that the community, which was previously vital to her family, became distant because, as Nilani explains, being able to participate in South Asian ethnic and religious communities is predicated upon participating “as a unit, as a husband and wife and their children.” The breakdown of her parents’ marriage violated the expected way of participating in the broader South Asian social structure, no longer “relat[ing] to... the common thing” they share which “is marriage.” This perceived violation was experienced more by her mother than her father. The divorce reaffirmed marriage as an especially crucial condition of women’s participation in social life. Now, her mother’s status as ‘divorced’ rendered her overlooked and an outsider. Furthermore, some of this is attributed to a fear of divorced women. There was concern about her mother’s risk to the marriages of other couples in the community, a risk that began with her mother “talking to their husbands.” So, Nilani’s mother’s status as a divorced woman indicated she was dangerous to social order because of her perceived lack of sexual restraint. Being unmarried was assumed to mean

women are sexually wanton due to no longer performing a heteronormative role as a wife (sexuality as a heteronormative act). Nilani watched as the community that was once so vital to her family failed to support her mother in times of need. Instead, they quietly treated her like a threat. In other ways, Nilani and her mother found strength in their extended family's collective orientation. Her mother's cousins, siblings, their children, and her parents helped her mother find additional employment, and provided financial and emotional support at a time when Nilani, her siblings, and mother were experiencing social isolation. Nilani believes that her grandparents "felt a sense of responsibility" and duty to continue to support her mother because they had arranged her mother's marriage, reinforcing the marital process as a collective experience.

Through the experience of her parents' divorce, Nilani shared that she "did not trust men" for some time. This had the unintended consequence of reinforcing her sense of autonomy. She was wary of being "put in any [situations she] didn't want if [she] wasn't ready." Nilani shares that she was influenced by her mother's decision to leave her marriage, perceiving this as a deliberate act of prioritizing the well-being of herself and her family. Nilani reflects on the difficulty of leaving abusive partnerships, and as a result, found it "powerful" that her mother was able to leave and "stand up for herself." She shares that watching her mother reject pressure to remain married "taught [her] by being brave enough to leave these marriages... and she taught [her] about the importance of being able to sustain yourself." While Nilani watched her mother navigate the pressures of sexuality constructed as a heteronormative act through her divorce, Nilani also began to focus on her own relationship to heteronormativity and danger. Nilani began to consider her sexual identity and its relationship to constructions of sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making and as a heteronormative act.

6.16: Sexuality Constructed as a Site of Ethnoracial Boundary-Making, and as a Heteronormative Act

Nilani experienced the intersecting constructions of sexuality as the site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes and as a heteronormative act, especially as she reflected on her sexual desires and identity. She recalls that young South Asian women were expected to maintain sexual chastity until ready for marriage. Virtuous South Asian girls and unmarried women do not consume "sexually explicit" popular culture, and they do not engage in "pleasure," "dating and romance." Good unmarried women prioritize family and education

while waiting until they are old enough to participate in a heterosexual marriage process. When ready, marriage to a man is expected and sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreation is permissible. Nilani recalls internalizing values that her South Asian peers held, even when her mother did not emphasize compulsory chastity and instead discussed sexual facets openly with her children. She explains,

“Even through my friends, I kind of ... there was a little bit of osmosis there. I picked up a lot of those cultural viewpoints without even having it be put upon me by my own family. So, I’m like, oh my god, this shouldn’t be something we talk about, and I think it influenced my choice of not having sex until marriage initially when I was 16 or 17.”

Compulsory chastity for South Asian women was further contrasted against the perception of western expressions of sexuality (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes). Nilani felt that some of her peers “were a lot more sexually active a lot earlier on, but in different cultures. They were Caucasian and so forth, and it was just more accepted in their cultures.” She positioned western cultures as containing more space for “love and intimacy first” before marriage (sexuality as a heteronormative act). Nilani viewed premarital sexual intercourse as a white, western experience. “People who had sex before marriage were white and people who didn’t were not white, and brown people don’t have sex until they get married.” In South Asian approaches to dating and marriage, love and intimacy were less emphasized before marriage. Nilani worried that a decision “to have sex outside of marriage” would be treated as a rejection of South Asian ethnoracial or religious identities. She worried others within her community would perceive her as “more white than... brown.”

The perceived cultural boundary around the expression of sexuality was also reinforced through representations “in the white media,” where premarital sexual intercourse was acceptable and celebrated. Young people in western media were presented with limited ways of “using their body, ... the way that they dated,” and “ways of falling in love.” These representations prioritized experiences of individuals who could more openly and easily explore their sexuality. The lack of South Asian representation reminded Nilani that western sex culture has “nothing to do with us; it’s not for us.” When South Asians were represented, Nilani found that stories did not depict “us holding hands” or “being in love” in the same way and did not reflect their cultural and religious realities. Consequently, sexuality was treated like an overlooked aspect that South Asians do not engage in, or as a rare and private act.

Nilani also worried about the ways her sexual identity might be received by her family and community. Nilani reflects on her attraction to men and women, positioning bisexuality (and

broadly non-heterosexualities) as largely overlooked and stigmatized in South Asian communities. She did not feel comfortable exploring relationships with women nor sharing her identity with others, anticipating discrimination and social rejection from her family and community. Through conversations with South Asian peers, she found queer sexual identities were positioned as an ethnoracial boundary. It was pathologized as “white people shit... White gay shit, white lesbian shit.” In this way, homosexuality is perceived as non-existent in South Asian cultures, essentially deleting “historical” and contemporary South Asian 2SLGBTQIA+ people (sexuality as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes; as a heteronormative act). Sexuality was constructed as heteronormative and as an ethnoracial boundary. Homosexuality is “whitewashed” and treated as a learned product of western acculturation; transmitted by “hang[ing] out too much with those white, queer people.” Violations of heteronormativity, such as being queer or transgender, are treated as transgressions that betray South Asian identities and cultures.

As a result of pressure to perform heteronormativity and compulsory chastity, Nilani chose not to disclose her sexual identity to South Asian peers, relatives, and family members. She felt her identity was explicitly and implicitly invalidated. She was sometimes met with silence from peers, or hear uncomfortable comments requesting she compartmentalize her sexuality, such as, “I don’t necessarily fuck with that shit but just do it over there.” Nilani worried that openly dating women would be perceived as a rejection of what it means to be a good South Asian woman. To avoid these comments and being unsafely outed by members of her community, Nilani compartmentalized her sexual identity and was careful about where she was seen dating women or how she moved through openly queer spaces (strategy: compartmentalization).

6.17: Adulthood

Recently transitioned into adulthood, Nilani is currently navigating sexual constructions and sexual well-being at the beginning of her twenties. Her journey in postsecondary school is nearing its end and her extended family is increasingly accepting of sexual exploration in order to find a husband. She is expected to complete several predetermined milestones which are treated as the primary path to fulfilment and happiness: education, marriage, and parenthood. Older relatives position postsecondary school as a viable space to “meet people that are going to be more serious” about dating and marriage. Nilani describes marital

pressure as time-sensitive, reinforcing sexuality constructed as heteronormative, functioning for the purpose of procreation. As she ages through her twenties, she is treated as almost too old to have biological children. Nilani now hears comments from family and community members that her time to marry is drawing close (sexuality as a heteronormative act).

“Recently my dad was like, ‘you can’t just be in school forever, I want to see you do something, you’re getting old.’ I was like, ‘what do you mean I’m getting old? What do you want me to do?’ ‘I’d like to see a little leg someday.’ Literal translation of what they say, ‘little leg, little foot’: he would like to see a grandchild someday. And I’m like, ‘listen dad... do you want me to start popping out kids because here we’re not allowed to talk about sex but all of a sudden you want grandchildren? What? How? How do you expect me to do that?’”

Though her mother does not share the same degree of urgency, her family feels a shared responsibility for Nilani’s marriage to occur. This is “because [she is] a girl. That’s the responsibility for a girl on their shoulders: we have to get her married to a house.” As a result, Nilani feels that her sexual decisions are not just her own: they represent and impact her family and community. For example, managing heteronormative expectations of dating and marriage is challenging because her “community is super connected.” Nilani is unsure of whether she wants to engage in heteronormative sexuality as encouraged by others. She is unsure of how to centre her needs after a long period where compulsory chastity was expected of her.

Nilani now considers if and how she will disclose her sexual identity to members of her family. She does so while questioning if she wants to be married or how a partnership with a woman will be received by her family and community. She struggles with the ongoing concern for “what people will think,” a common phrase she hears when her relatives worry that her behaviours are a social violation that the broader community will find out about. This sentiment echoes earlier stigma Nilani’s family experienced while navigating divorce, when their access to their South Asian community and its resources were negatively impacted by violating heteronormative marital expectations. She feels that if she were to “live the life [she] want[s] to live, [her] parents are always on the line.” There is further familial pressure to adhere to a strict marital timeline because her younger relatives are “left to get married” “in order of age”. These relatives’ marital chances are contingent upon their broader family reputation, which is shaped by the perceived success or failures of Nilani’s sexual decisions. There is a “whole chain of cousins that are following” her, “that would be affected by” her negatively if she violates the expected path towards marriage.

As a result of the expectation to perform compulsory chastity and heteronormativity through marriage and parenthood, Nilani often weighs what her decisions could mean for her and her family's future. Her family is a critical part of her life, and she wants to ensure their well-being, but she also feels this is an impossible feat. She describes tension between managing her sexuality "for them versus" herself. Nilani feels that "no matter what [she] do[es], [she] can't prove [her]self" as an ideal daughter and woman. Nilani feels as though her attempts to find a socially respectable career and follow the expected path of sexuality will never be sufficient to provide validation and support from her community and family.

Further, in the pursuit of sexual ideals prescribed around her, she finds little space "to develop a sense of identity" outside of ideal gender roles, broader marital expectations, or the ways that others perceive her. For example, pressure to get married has left little time to establish how to "develop healthy emotional capacities and coping mechanisms." She feels there is no time to pursue interests like "travelling," to establish a meaningful career, or to explore what her "hobbies and passions" are outside of school and relationships. Nilani wants to "live [her] life without marriage for some time before" deciding if she "want[s] to now share [her] entire life with another person." She wishes to establish her identities and self-worth outside of relationships she is expected to form as an eventual wife and mother.

Nilani wonders what her future might look like outside of heteronormative expressions. For example, she reflects on her sexual "anxiety," pain during intercourse, attraction, and the lack of space to (dis)engage from facets of sexuality the way she wants to. For example, for many years, she did not have "curiosity [for], like, masturbation", expressed little interest in dating, and was "not overtly an affectionate, touchy person." While Nilani feels pressure to maintain compulsory chastity, she also worries that she deviates too far from the normative pacing of western sexuality. She fears being deemed a "prude" or that "something's wrong with [her]" for wanting to slow down partnered physical expressions of sexuality. Now, Nilani seeks space for the possibility that she might remain unmarried, remain childless, be with a woman, or potentially explore her identity as asexual. As she considers whether she wants to be married, have children, or how she can safely date women, she reflects that these choices are perceived by others as a rejection of meaningful components of patriarchal South Asian and western cultures.

"I'm not straight so the women aspect, that's like death, like being involved with women. If you're single, if you're unmarried, and now you're saying you're not straight? You're being

a sinner on like four different levels... obviously family is such a huge thing in South Asian culture... “you don’t want to start a family, you don’t want to have kids, you don’t want your kids to play with other kids, you don’t want to be a mom?” That thing? That’s cross-cultural.”

As she learned through her mother’s experiences, heteronormative marriage is a condition for women’s community involvement. Furthermore, remaining childless is perceived as a rejection of what it means to be and find happiness as a woman. So, Nilani discretely explores her sexuality when living away from home for postsecondary education. Living away from home extends greater anonymity to use sexual health services and date women without sharing her sexual identity before she is prepared to do so with her family and community.

6.18: Sexuality Constructed as an Essential Part of Daily Reality and Well-Being Strategies

Nearing the end of Nilani’s postsecondary education, she reflects on its impact on her understanding of sexuality. It provides access to new sexual information, access to care on campus, and support networks. These resources position sexuality as manageable, enjoyable, and extend autonomy to Nilani to determine her own limits and needs. For example, her postsecondary education builds on the information her mother provided during puberty. She has explored consent in more detail, learned about experiences of sexual assault during her volunteering roles, learned how to get STI tests, and how to comfortably ask partners to also get tested. She also has attended “workshops and talks,” “joined a peer support group,” and opened up to friends about her sexual identities and inexperience. These interactions helped expand Nilani’s understanding of sexuality (sexuality as an essential part of daily reality).

Nilani also manages her sexual well-being by confronting internalized racism, heteronormative constructions of sexuality, and de-centring whiteness (strategy: rejection of internalized racism and de-centring whiteness; identity negotiation). By isolating power structures involved in the sexual constructions she experienced growing up, she has begun to confront her internalized racism and reclaim her South Asian identity. For example, she positions “homophobia” within her community as partially rooted in a “historic context” of “colonization” where “gender fluidity and same-sex relationships” were erased in favour of colonial understandings of respectable behaviour. As a result, she shares, “everything got really conservative,” an attitude which she believes has persisted in her community. Outside of coursework that has expanded South Asian sexualities and histories, she also turns to her

religious identity to find sexual empowerment. For example, she searches for scripture and “deities that are sexual” or who emphasize “feminine power” which she can model and validate her identities around. She now “celebrates” aspects of her religion and “think[s] of [her] religious identity more critically” by rejecting aspects expected by others that do not align with her reality or that make “her feel oppressed.”

Nilani also turns to a diverse network to bolster against the internalized racism that she began to feel as a child (strategy: network building). Now, she understands South Asians as multidimensional, “really interesting,” desirable, “intelligent,” having “so many passions and hobbies in life,” “funny, and not boring.” A range of representations have helped confront “the [negative] image of South Asian women... and... men” she once held. For example, Nilani has a diverse group of friends and uses “social media” and “magazines” to connect with and celebrate “different people of colour” and their broad range of interests and skills. Now, it is “not just South Asian people, even like Latinos and Black people and Asian people, [where Nilani feels], “you guys are all so beautiful,” and [her] whole life [she had] been told, ‘all of [us] are so ugly and all so one-dimensional’” when placed within a hierarchical system that values whiteness.

Nilani’s identity negotiation strategy also involves confrontation of traditional gender roles, particularly women as doting partners and mothers (strategy: identity negotiation). Instead, she is establishing her own meanings and expression of gender identity. She is now constructing her own vision of being a fulfilled, good woman, partner, or parent. For example, Nilani questions pressure on women to ensure they are a good fit “for the man,” believing there has “never been a checklist on how to be a good man, in our culture, or what you have to do to be a good fit for marriage.” Nilani now considers how to “identify healthy relationships,” whether she “want[s] to be a parent,” and what fatherhood and motherhood look like beyond traditional roles as “breadwinners” and self-sacrificing. She also seeks to slow down the marital clock and prioritize her own sexual timeline without feeling rushed to show affection or partnered intimacy. Though it is challenging, Nilani counters pressure to express intimacy or marry by reminding herself “no this is how I am, this is my body, I’m in control of it, if I’m not feeling a certain way to do whatever at whatever point... That’s my decision.”

“What’s worked for someone in the past doesn’t necessarily work for everyone, or you can’t paint everyone with the same brush. Holding hands for somebody could be a big deal.

Getting to know the person and why would be a big deal, having patience and not letting it be a big deal.”

Confronting heteronormative constructions of sexuality for Nilani involves seeking happiness outside of partnerships, slowly exploring partnered intimacy, and considering the prospect of relationships with women. As she navigates her sexual identity, Nilani considers how her relationships with her family and community may change if she decides to openly date women or find a partner who is not from the same community. She points to continuing pressure on her sexual well-being, stating that she may “have to leave [her] family in a sense” so that she can “live [her] own life,” though she is currently unprepared to make this decision (strategy: compartmentalization). Nilani notes that her mother wants Nilani to find a partner who “respect[s her] and takes[s] care of [her] and they’re good for [her], as she has recently found for herself. Because of this attitude, she believes that her mother may be accepting of her sexual decisions, especially with time. She states, she “might be uncomfortable in the beginning... if [she] did bring someone that’s not brown at all, if [Nilani’s mother] understood that they were right for [Nilani], good for [her], respectful to [her], [Nilani’s mother] would be okay with it.” Overall, Nilani hopes that her family and community will learn to see her as “standing on her own two feet” and “doing really cool things for herself.” Violating the expected path of sexuality and instead validating her chosen path of self-fulfilment is difficult, and she is slowly “standing her ground” without it being received as a sign of “disrespect” or rejection of her family and South Asian traditions.

Lastly, she counters the construction of sexuality as a heteronormative act by prioritizing the interconnection between her mental, physical, and sexual health in her sexual exploration. Her care strategies include recognizing how her health, relationships, and self-perceptions are intertwined (strategy: prioritization of the interconnection between mental, physical, and sexual health). For example, Nilani describes continuing sports and yoga as ways to connect with, find value, and build confidence in her body outside of its appearance and desirability to others. While navigating health care resources, Nilani also prioritizes care strategies that are conducive to her reality. For example, she expresses discomfort when physicians make assumptions about her locations or do not provide choice in her pursuit of sexual health care. She points to doctors who state that they are “assuming your people wouldn’t want transvaginal ultrasounds” or who problematize South Asian cultural norms, without providing space for dialogue around her needs. She rejects these instead views these as a

failure to accommodate her cultural reality, needs, and autonomy. She notes the connection between finding happiness in her daily life with her ability to explore her sexuality, stating,

“I feel like mind, body, and soul are all connected. So, I feel like your physical and mental well-being also impact your sexuality, and there has to be a balance. Everything contributes to your overall well-being. If one thing’s not right, another part of your system is not going to be good as well. You need to find a balance... Recently I’ve been doing a lot of work, and I know I’m progressing, and it makes me feel good. I feel a sense of euphoria because I know I’m getting all of this stuff done, this happiness and this drive also makes me horny... When I’m going through my episodes and I go down to rock bottom, it’s like I’m worthless and everything.”

Building a sense of accomplishment allows her to feel confident and connect to her sexuality without feeling guilt or shame. As such, she prioritizes time for her hobbies, managing stress and chronic illness, and building a meaningful career outside of the ideals she encounters.

Nilani shares that she is now “mindful of treasuring [her] body and understanding that there is pleasure” and connection that she can build with herself and partners but sees this as contingent on the attention she gives to other areas of her life. For example, she notes how economic pressures force her to exist within a “system [that] doesn’t allow us to take care of ourselves.” She is mindful of her family’s immigration and work experiences, stressing that her parents “had it so hard, no one even knows... what self-care is,” and this pressure to succeed has taken precedence over well-being. Nilani now prioritizes self-care practices even when she feels guilty for prioritizing her needs before her family or expectations placed on her. In this way, she is creating a sense of autonomy by defining what happiness can look like outside of expected sexual milestones and values of productivity.

6.19: Conclusion

Sexuality is “part of [Nilani’s] being now.” Though interpersonal bonds are critical to her sexual well-being, Nilani is learning to negotiate pressure to perform gender, manage her body, or partnered experiences as expected by others. Nilani’s sexual trajectory has involved a range of influences, with constructions of sexuality as essential in the home, and constructions about danger, heteronormativity, and boundary-making across her community. Over time, she has watched the power of community on women’s sexual violations through experiences of puberty and her family’s divorce. Now, Nilani pushes for space to establish her own understanding of sexuality outside of the confines of a heteronormative construction, though she continues to feel pressure to perform sexuality in order to find support from family and community. Nilani weighs her sexual needs alongside her interpersonal

relationships, wanting to preserve the support and inclusion she receives from family and community. She recognizes that her family members may not accept her sexual identity, so she manages this tension by waiting until she is financially and emotionally prepared to disclose her sexual identity to her family. Presently, Nilani prioritizes the connection she has maintained with her mother and pushes for recognition of her own sexual trajectory and pursuit of happiness.

“My mom is very open minded, and I have such a good case for not getting married, she’s like... ‘I want to see you happy,’ my rebuttal is always, ‘I am happy though.’ She doesn’t really have anything to say. I want to be taken care of, but I can take care of myself. ... I’m like, ‘it’s me and you ’til the end, mom!’ [laughs]. She laughs and says, ‘I would love that,’ and I’m like, ‘so, what’s the problem?’ I really reiterate this to my mom, if it happens that’s great, if it doesn’t, that’s great. It’s not a[n] ‘I failed you, I didn’t raise you right. It’s none of that. It’s not an item on the checklist.”

6.20: Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented findings based on participant interviews that address two research questions. These are, “*what are the predominant sociocultural constructions of sexuality as experienced by South Asian Canadian women throughout their life course?*” and “*how do women navigate these sociocultural constructions of sexuality in their pursuit of sexual well-being?*” To explore these questions, I synthesized five common sexual constructions and five strategies to maintain sexual well-being within two narrative composites. The narrative composites show how these constructions are reflected and reinforced by family, peers, communities, schools, and media representations at different points across the life course. I considered how the constructions shape and are shaped by participants, and how participants respond to the constructions in order to express their desired sexual life, given their realities. The narrative composites also reveal the intersecting impacts of gender roles, ethnicity, race, migration, religion, class, and caste on their expression of sexuality. In the next chapter, I examine these constructions and strategies using an intersectional life course framework. I analyse shifting access to power, the relationship between individuals, their locations, interpersonal contexts, and their ability to express sexuality in meaningful ways over time.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I presented findings based on participant interviews that address two research questions. These are, “*what are the predominant sociocultural constructions of sexuality as experienced by South Asian Canadian women throughout their life course?*” and “*how do women navigate these sociocultural constructions of sexuality in their pursuit of sexual well-being?*”. I found five common sexual constructions and five strategies used to maintain sexual well-being. I described these within two narrative composites. These constructions and strategies reflect the dominant responses from participants about their understandings of puberty, dating, marriage, intercourse, and sexual health.

In this chapter, I explain the relevance of the findings and connect them to existing literature. I pay close attention to the underlying power dynamics that shift over time, and I reflect on the implications of these sexual constructions and strategies for achieving and maintain sexual well-being across the life course. This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I re-engage in reflexivity, reflecting on my original goals in this research process and how I pursued these through the narrative composites. Second, I relate four sexual constructions that serve to constrain women’s sexuality to processes of power and domination. Third, I connect the fifth sexual construction and the five strategies used to maintain sexual well-being to agency and processes of resistance. In the concluding section of this chapter, I summarize the study and outline future directions.

7.1: Reflexivity and Research Goals

In the methodology chapter, I discussed how my identities and personal locations shape my power to influence the direction of research. I have power in the way I interpret and draw conclusions based on my role as a South Asian insider and as a researcher. I also shared how the narrative composites helped me to present participants’ experiences and cultural contexts as fluid and complex. This reflexive consideration around the positionality of myself, my participants, and my relationship to them helps to convey trustworthiness and strengthens the research findings. Throughout the interviews, we shared an understanding of the pressures existing within South Asian immigrant families, tensions moving between social spaces, and the slow process of negotiating caste-based, ethnoracial, religious, and sexual identities.

Expanding on my pursuit of reflexivity, I also reflected on the positionalities maintained in sexual health and sexuality research. This was important, as I wanted to use my research as an opportunity to confront how South Asian women's lives are presented in research. As a result, I explored which experiences are often included in existing research and the implications of excluding others. This pursuit led to the establishment of three research goals, which I detailed in my introductory chapter (chapter 1). These goals focused on expanding beyond the predominant research findings and positions and serve as my contributions to research on South Asian Canadians. In this section, I connect the three goals to a summary of the narrative composites.

7.2: Goal 1: Expanding Sexual Well-Being

My first research goal was to apply an expanded understanding of sexual well-being to the lives of participants in this study. This is important as sexual well-being is often presented and measured as a physiological state of sexual function and/or the absence of disease. Through the narrative composites, I showed that meaningful sexual lives do not always centre on or include romantic partnership and intercourse. Further, women find ways to connect with their sexuality even through illness and trauma. To capture this complexity, I argued that sexual well-being is reflected in the capability to live a personally meaningful sexual life. This conceptualization, while ambiguous, strengthened my ability to analyze how multiple areas of participants' lives are tied to their sexuality. This is because sexual well-being can encompass overlapping, contradictory, and shifting facets of sexuality. Though there are variations, I conclude that there is a tendency for participants of this study to experience sexual well-being when feeling safe and connected to their body, identities, and to a wide range of interpersonal relationships.

I showed that participants sought safety and connection to their bodies across their life course, despite barriers faced during multiple points of disconnection from their bodies. During adolescence and early adulthood, this was experienced as ignorance of puberty and menstruation, and uncertainty of how to protect their bodies during intercourse. Connection to their bodies was impacted by external pressures to be whiter, lighter, thinner, less hairy, or smaller. These were understood by participants as physical qualities required to be acceptable and desirable to men. Participants also discussed how women's bodies were often treated as a sexual risk, too desirable to men. As a result, participants were tasked with

censoring and monitoring their bodies before entirely understanding sexuality. These pressures complicated the perceived control participants felt over and connection to their bodies. With time, participants reconnected or are learning to connect with their bodies through strategies that indirectly disrupted broader social institutions. For example, participants pushed back on ideals that cause them to feel rejection in western and South Asian spaces, labelling them as racist, colonial, and patriarchal ideology. Participants' sexual well-being involves shifting from viewing their bodies as fragmented, objectified risks, to bodies that deserve care and have value outside of intercourse.

I find that participants sought connection to their sexual and non-sexual identities. First, participants wanted space to learn about needs, dislikes, and how to communicate these boundaries. They wished to have space to figure out who they wanted to be, and how to express their identities safely and authentically. Participants also wanted identity validation and support from families, peers, and communities, without being treated as deviant for violating sexual constructions. My data reveal that slowly, participants formed understandings of sexuality that recentered their individual needs, though their collective families, communities, and peer groups remained key parts of their sexual well-being. Second, participants' sexual well-being also involved bridging their sexuality with their non-sexual identities. With age and experience with the five strategies, there is a tendency for participants to be empowered to reject that their sexuality conflicts with their membership in western and South Asian spaces. Instead, many learn or are learning to prioritize their own understandings of gender, religious, and racial expression. Participants actively manage and negotiate their own understandings against broader messaging. The five strategies they use vary across time and space, and tensions linger or return even in adulthood.

Finally, participants sought connection with family, friends, and partners with whom they felt able to talk about important parts of their lives, including sexuality. In this way, sexuality was not just about connection to partners, but also connection to family, peers, and their communities. Types of connections ranged from speaking about relationships, actively confronting gender and caste expectations from family and communities or continuing to engage in the marital process as a collective unit. In these ways, participants learned to negotiate a balance between South Asian collectivist and western individualist sexual ideals. Over time, participants resisted the idea that sexual decisions are either made for the well-being of the family or oneself. Instead, participants treated both as compatible; for example,

providing sexual knowledge and support for younger relatives contributed to participants' own well-being. Ultimately, participants described a desire to make sexual decisions that benefitted and protected their family and wanted to feel protected by their immediate family members. I completed my first goal of applying an expanded definition of sexual well-being to the lives of South Asian Canadian women in this study. Thus, while sexual well-being can include an even larger range of facets, I find that participants in this study shift through states of sexual well-being and ill-being based on how they are able to manage the connections to their bodies, multiple identities, and the people around them.

7.3: Goal 2: Expanding Views about South Asian Sexual Conservatism

My second research goal was to complicate the stories told about immigrants and sexuality, especially where culture clash approaches positioned immigrants between two poles of traditional sexual conservatism and western sexual liberation. Such complication is necessary to avoid reaffirming that the sexual well-being of participants was contingent upon giving up parts of their South Asian selves to experience their sexuality, and masking how western sexual constructions also constrain sexual well-being. My approach thus avoided reducing women's experiences as solely the product of traditional sexual conservatism by paying attention to linked lives and to how and why sexual constructions might be reinforced, but nuanced, within families.

Storytelling through the narrative composites helped show that participants did experience sexual constructions in ways that sometimes positioned them between two poles of western and South Asian sexuality. Participants were expected to meet ideals of heteronormative sexuality differently in western and South Asian spaces. However, it was important to point out that parents' reinforcement of ideals arose from a desire to protect their daughters against sexual risk and ensure their future well-being. Parents' restrictions reflect and can be attributed to, in part, their locations and how they understood sexual risk. The participants described having parents who had internalized rigid gendered marital roles to different degrees, and who had felt that compliance was necessary in order to pursue community membership and maintain family honour. Retaining these connections to extended family and community were vital after migration when parents' social worlds drastically changed. The participants understood that their parents wanted their children to follow similar sexual

trajectories because they believed this would lead to safety and stability, as it largely had for them. Restrictions on sexuality can be constraining, but sometimes serve to protect against isolation, processes of racialization, and sexual objectification in western spaces. Storytelling also provided room to expand what sexual conservatism looks like within South Asian families. For example, although participants were expected to engage in seemingly conservative behaviours, they still had conversations with parents about sexual facets. In these cases, parents did not completely convey that sexuality was linked to morality or sin, but instead viewed sexuality as a series of experiences their children needed to be prepared to engage in. In fact, South Asian cultural and religious values were also used within families to foster sexual agency within participants. By presenting my findings through the narrative of storytelling, I was able to show how important families were in participants' pursuit of sexual well-being and convey the multi-dimensional nature of South Asian cultures, communities, and families.

7.4: Goal 3: Dynamic South Asian Cultures and People

My findings reinforce the depiction of South Asian cultures and people as dynamic and changing. At times, finding space to present variation was a challenging pursuit. Participants identified many heteronormative and casteist experiences related to their South Asian locations that appeared constraining of their sexual well-being. Expressing sexuality often conflicted with their family lives and with their South Asian selves. Attending to participants' recollections at different points of the life course allowed me to include complexity within families, cultures, and religions. South Asian cultural and religious understandings of sexuality were restrictive and liberating, occasionally at the same time. Parents were not uniformly sexually conservative and provided their daughters with varying amounts of knowledge about their bodies, partnerships, and sexual risks. Parents also changed their expectations around sexuality over time, especially as participants moved through adulthood. Generational and settlement differences also led to different degrees of retention to traditional sexual trajectories. For example, while marriage was still expected by Nilani's family members, the urgency around this expectation appeared to change amongst her maternal family after their shared experience of divorce. Further, some of Nilani's mother's openness to sexuality may reflect the experience of families who migrated migration to Canada in the late 1980s and 1990s, and parents who experienced parts of adolescence and early adulthood in Canada. I also conveyed dynamism by describing where

participants used strategies to respond to sexual pressure, to reclaim confidence, or to find partners that were embedded within South Asian cultural and religious systems. For example, participants' experiences of divorce highlight the enabling and constraining nature of extended families and communities. While experiencing isolation from their community, participants' maternal extended families provided key financial and emotional supports, teaching participants about independence and emotional well-being. In this way, participants experienced how collectivist values were vital to sexual well-being.

7.5: Conclusion

Through the narrative composites, I incorporated an expanding understanding of sexual well-being that went beyond physiological measures. I positioned sexual well-being as a changing web of sexual facets, managed through a range of strategies. I found that the sexual well-being of participants in this study involved fluctuating (dis)connections to one's body, identities, and to a range of platonic, familial, romantic, or physical relationships. The narrative composites allowed me to reveal how and why sexual constructions unfolded. As a result, I completed my second goal of avoiding treating participants as passive objects oscillating between a binary of South Asian sexual conservatism and western liberation. Instead, many negotiated gender, religious, and ethnoracial identities, and learned (or are learning) to manage exclusion and pressure in South Asian and western spaces. Similarly, the composites provided more space to expand my analysis of participants to include their changing family and community contexts. As a result, I completed my third goal of presenting South Asians and their cultures in this study as dynamic and constantly changing.

7.6: Domination and Control

In this section, I first revisit four of the five sexual constructions. These four align with the South Asian religious and cultural constructions of sexuality that I synthesized in the second literature review chapter (section 3.3). The four constructions unfold together and complement each other to reinforce ideal types based on notions of sexual risk, identity, gender, and family. Secondly, I explain the relevance of the constructions by connecting them to existing research. I explore these constructions in relation to power and domination, as a central component of my theoretical framework.

7.7: Sexual Constructions and Theory

First, sexuality, constructed as dangerous for young unmarried South Asian women was dominant and particularly influential during adolescent years. Within South Asian spaces, discussion of sexuality, consuming sexualized media content, or interacting platonically or sexually with boys and men was stigmatized during adolescence. Participants recalled messaging that linked non-marital sexual activity to the risk of pregnancy or to the risk of family dishonour. Both risks were maintained through fear that dating or intercourse disrupt womens' chances of marriage and participating in the broader ethnic or religious community. The impacts of deviating from this sexual construction, or rejecting these dominant prescriptions, were experienced both individually and collectively. The participants were held responsible for restricting and managing their sexuality, but if they did not do so appropriately, the extended family was at risk of social exclusion. This attention to risk overlooked participants' emotional or overall well-being. The consequence of this is that participants struggled to make sexual decisions that might hurt their family: struggling between individual and collective understandings of sexuality.

Second, I found that as participants moved across South Asian and western spaces, sexuality was constructed as a site of ethnoracial boundary-making processes. Chastity, heterosexual marriage, and parenthood were emphasized as ideals for South Asian girls and women. Expressing non-heteronormative sexual identities or behaviours, such as casual intercourse, asexuality, bisexuality, and remaining unmarried, were treated as a rejection of South Asian religious and cultural values. These were instead interpreted as falling within the bounds of being western. Of course, this messaging ignored how chastity and heterosexual partnerships are also privileged and normalized in western cultures. While participants felt their white settler peers were able to engage in sexuality earlier and openly, and described western media as portraying heteronormative and white relationships, this does not negate the sexual stigma women experience in western spaces. While this experience of stigma largely falls outside of the scope of my study, I briefly explored how western spaces were also exclusionary through maintaining ideals of beauty and normative sexual behaviours. I found that participants were challenged to view themselves as desirable and valuable to others, when presented with a ranking system based on proximity to whiteness. Appearance was also a marker of belongingness in South Asian spaces, as participants recalled casteist and colourist ideals that associated "upper caste" and lighter skin with higher marital value.

Third, participants explained that the construction of sexuality as immoral put pressure on them during adolescence and their early twenties to reject their sexual needs and desires. Engaging in dating and sexual intercourse meant that they were rejecting their cultural, religious, or family teachings around what constitutes being a good woman and daughter. This immorality was time-bound, with a narrow window of acceptable sexual behaviour. Participants recalled a strong emphasis on finishing education, then experiencing a short window of marriageability where they needed to find a partner. Failing to maintain chastity within this window, either expressing sexuality too early or not getting married, was treated as a failure of femininity. It was also treated as a failure of the family, culture, or religion.

Fourth, sexuality was constructed as an act of heteronormative intercourse. Following the previous constructions, engaging in sexuality was only acceptable within the confines of marriage, for the purpose of having children. As participants aged, they were expected to date in order to marry and ultimately become parents. This expectation positioned being single as an undesirable transitory state and led to the sidelining of other facets of sexuality. For example, several participants felt that through pressure to marry, personal understandings of happiness and fulfilment were overlooked. When dating was socially or culturally condoned, there was little emphasis on whether one was emotionally prepared for a relationship, how to assess if partners were compatible, or how to maintain a relationship. The rush to get married also meant that, for some participants, there was not enough time to enjoy the process of meeting people or develop their own identity. Personal fulfillment and the value of femininity were instead tied to the performance of heteronormativity.

These four constructions, presented as ideal types, more accurately reflect interactive dominant belief systems that constrain and prescribe what the sexuality of women should be. Existing research reveals the positioning of women's sexuality as dangerous, impure, or fragile is cross-cultural (Miller, 2018; Tolman, 2002). As I found in this study, the social control "of female sexuality is heightened during adolescence and emerging adulthood" (Miller, 2018, p. 5). In general, the sexuality of women is often "vilified" and viewed with suspicion because of its potential to upset the existing social order (Lorde, 1978, para. 2; Adur, 2020; Portillos, 2020). In this study, I similarly found that the constructions represent sexuality as a threat and risk to the status quo. I also incorporate personal locations such as race and religion, intergenerational connections, and position women's experiences within systems of domination such as colonialism. Though more detailed analysis around religion

and caste falls outside of the scope of this research, I acknowledge that participants' experiences of both are also significant and varied. Through these inclusions, my study also aligns with research that considers how women's sexuality is a site of fluctuating power, used to maintain ideas of the nation in a postcolonial context.

The findings align with and extend existing literature, where South Asians girls and women must embody chastity and heteronormative marriage as a duty to their families (Frost et al., 2016; Hawa et al., 2019; Menon, 2007; Ussher et al., 2017). They are also expected to be self-sacrificing by making decisions that prioritize and reduce harm to the family (Takhar, 2013). Participants' experiences in this study reflect ongoing tension between ideas of collectivism and individualism, and between "tradition and modernity" (Patil & Puri, 2020, p. 20). The existing literature positions these as central concerns in colonial, postcolonial, and post-migration contexts (Patil & Puri, 2020; Loomba, 2015). Across all three, communities who feel powerless against assimilating forces of (western) hegemonic ideology may attempt to protect their identity while also coping with the loss of home. As a result, a "tug-of-war" to define and maintain the boundaries of the nation occurs (Rajiva, 2010, p. 219). This process of boundary-making often occurs by linking tradition to sexual purity, which I describe in relation to multiple sexual constructions. Existing literature also asserts that the nation is defined through linking tradition to heterosexuality, which is "portrayed as sacred, virtuous and natural" while homosexuality and queer identities are Othered and linked to the loss of tradition (Siraj, 2016, p. 185; Collins, 2004).

South Asian women discover their lives to be intertwined with ideas of the nation through their adherence to or rejection of tradition. Indeed, the boundaries of the nation are shaped by women's decisions of who to have intercourse with, marry, or love. For example, endogamous, caste-bound marriages that keep traditional family structures intact are legitimized, while exogamous marriages are stigmatized (Adur, 2020). I found that participants in this study were expected to reproduce ideal femininity through their sexual behaviours and marriages. As discussed, participants' violations of sexual constructions risk destabilizing the family and community structures. These violations also challenge the idea of the nation, which is already under threat in a new homeland. The nation is "represented as feminine", vulnerable and in need of protection from predatory western influences (de Haan & Manchanda, 2018, p. 91; Loomba, 2015).

Women are held responsible for passively reproducing and nurturing the nation (de Haan & Manchanda, 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 1989). Despite femininity being a central feature of the nation, girls and women are not considered active agents in defining the nation and its culture (Yuval-Davis et al., 1989). This positioning of women as passive reproducers places women and their sexuality “in the private sphere”, as their primary role is to nurture their relatives and maintain purity (de Haan & Manchanda, 2018, p. 94; Yuval-Davis et al., 1989). As a result, women are treated as “emissaries of national sexual respectability” (Patil & Puri, 2020, p. 70; Menon, 2007). Aligning with the participants in this study, control over women’s sexuality is also used to bolster national and ethnic identity and self-perceptions in response to sexualization and racialization upon migration (Espiritu, 2012; Narayan, 2000; Bhopal, 2009). So, while participants experience exclusion in western spaces, they are also subject to sexual constructions that govern their access to South Asian group boundaries. As I discuss in further section 7.8, women do not passively reproduce the nation, but actively reclaim, resist, and transform what being western and South Asian women means.

Based on participants in this study, I find that the four sexual constructions, individually and in combination, serve to de-centre the individual from their sexuality. These constructions position girls’ and women’s bodies as constantly sexualized and as sexualized objects for others to consume. Participants in this study were tasked with managing sexual risk by disengaging from sexuality, which was treated as a physiological facet (i.e., intercourse). Accordingly, as reflected through the constructions of sexuality as dangerous and immoral, failure to manage sexual risk means that the individual is not a good, valuable woman. This is also the case if she fails to engage in heteronormative sexuality when it is appropriate and expected. The constructions are aligned in positioning partnership with men as both the best and most dangerous behaviours they can engage in. These constructions also position femininity as simultaneously vulnerable and powerful. Women are at risk because their unmanaged, unruly bodies have the power to disrupt society by enticing men and bringing harm upon themselves.

My findings reveal that the constructions, in combination, reinforce an idea of a femininity that is unsustainable. Participants’ experiences reveal unending pressure to be the ‘right’ woman. As a result, it is difficult for women to make decisions that support sexual well-being. For example, it is difficult to centre one’s needs when preoccupied with repercussions such as the denial of religious and racial identities. Women face the challenge of pursuing

their own needs and boundaries while simultaneously meeting expectations that they are responsible for the well-being of family members, whose social lives are contingent upon them adhering to sexual constructions. As I explore in the next section, each participant learns or learned to manage these sexual constructions through a range of differing strategies that re-centre the individual in relation to their sexuality.

7.8: Agency and Resistance

In this section, I will discuss the final sexual construction and the five predominant strategies used to maintain sexual well-being over time. I first discuss sexuality constructed as an essential part of women's daily realities. Next, I discuss participants' employment of network building, compartmentalization, rejection of internalized racism and de-centring of whiteness, identity negotiation, and prioritization of the connections between mental, physical, and sexual health. The construction and five strategies reflect and reinforce shifts in power at the micro-level. They counter (and co-exist with) the four sexual constructions described in the previous section, which function to constrain girls' and women's bodies, identities, and relationships. At different points in the life course, I found that participants learned or are learning how to resist the four constraining constructions, reframe their understandings of sexuality, and reclaim sexuality by positioning their needs as central priorities. After discussing the sexual construction and strategies, I draw on my theoretical framework to explain the relevance of these findings.

7.9: Sexual Construction

Participants in this study experienced sexuality constructed as an essential part of daily reality, where sexuality was treated as an expected, normal part of growing up. As older participants recalled moving through their twenties and thirties, sexuality was no longer solely framed as a dangerous act or distraction from an expected trajectory. Many met friends and partners who helped reframe sexuality as a pleasurable and positive part of daily life. Sexuality was repositioned as a form of care and way to connect to people around them. In comparison, a small number of younger participants experienced celebratory sexual constructions beginning in childhood. Their mothers provided clear sexual knowledge, rejected constructions that treat menstruating bodies as impure, and created space for sharing and asking questions about sexuality. Their immediate and extended families also participated in the celebration of the physiological transition into adulthood. In this case, the

construction of sexuality as an essential part of daily reality was embedded in their South Asian cultural and religious practices.

This construction of sexuality as an essential part of daily reality shapes women's lives by conveying that South Asian cultural and religious systems are not only a source of constraint, but also a source of agency that enables sexual well-being. The construction reveals that South Asian cultures and religions are more complicated than simply patriarchal and restrictive, as mentioned in section 1 of this chapter. Participants, for example, experienced cultural and religious expectations of femininity and modesty as stigmatizing, protective, and celebratory. Across South Asian spaces, participants experienced constructions that celebrated growing into womanhood, treated the body as sacred, and venerated marriage and motherhood. This construction aligns with the smaller body of sexual subjectivity studies that present South Asian religions and cultural systems as complex. For example, Siraj (2016) finds that women turn to Islam to validate their sexual identity while also resisting homophobia within Islam.

This construction is also important because it indirectly expands the idea of sexual risk. For example, the central sexual risk identified by participants in Ravnoor's composite was unintended pregnancy. While participants in Nilani's composite also identified pregnancy as a major sexual risk, their stories identified other risks too. When their mothers normalized sexuality as a part of their everyday life, these participants learned that it was important to protect against or respond to outcomes like unwanted pregnancy, STIs, or disease. However, their conversations about sexuality also included navigating unhealthy relationships and ensuring participants prioritized their overall well-being before engaging in relationships. Through conversations about the risks and rewards of engaging in sexuality, these younger participants learned that sexual risks can be manageable with adequate support and resources.

7.10: Sexual Strategies and Theory

In this section, I reiterate the five key strategies participants used to respond to dominant sexual constructions. These strategies were used by participants to resist and negotiate sexual expectations in their everyday interactions and pursue meaningful sexual lives. I draw on my theoretical framework, turning my attention to fluctuating power at the individual level.

The first dominant strategy participants employ to help resist constraining sexual constructions was to build diverse social networks. Peers and partners exposed participants to a wider range of family structures, gender roles within these structures, sexual health practices and information, and validated non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality. These networks counterbalanced the sexual constructions participants often encountered in adolescence which reinforced heteronormative partnerships in western and South Asian contexts. By relying on these networks, participants were better able to accept their own identities and sexual trajectories and were reminded that it was possible to live a safe and fulfilling life outside of heteronormativity.

Second, compartmentalization was used by most participants to manage tensions between wanting to explore their sexuality and wanting to preserve their family dynamics. As discussed, the risk of engaging in sexuality included dysfunctional parent-child relationships and rejection from the religious or cultural community. During most participants adolescence and early twenties, they explored sexuality in secrecy and performed compulsory chastity in public. Compartmentalization continued as a strategy for some participants in their thirties and forties who continued to feel repercussions for violating expectations of heteronormativity. Following existing literature, compartmentalizing was not a passive choice, but an active reclamation of power (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Choudhury, 2007). This process involved managing (and sometimes sacrificing) sexuality across multiple aspects over their daily lives and performing chastity in order to save face in the home and around South Asian community members. This strategy was employed when participants believed they could not outwardly reject the social institutions they were surrounded by. Since they could not reconcile their sexuality in these spaces, for example finding their sexuality incompatible with their religion, compartmentalizing served as a meaningful strategy (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021). 2SLGBTQIA+ men and women in existing research also employed compartmentalizing, actively managing the ways that “being lesbian or bisexual informs every ordinary aspect of [their] lives” (Choudhury, 2007, p. 128).

Third, participants responded to sexual constructions by confronting internalized racism and de-centring whiteness as a standard used to assess their own lives. Participants described the ways that western social institutions like schools and interpersonal often lacked space for their locations and realities. While in adolescence, they tended to internalize these experiences as personal deficiencies or flaws of their South Asian cultures and religions. As

they aged, they recognized how deeply western standards of beauty and ideal behaviours shaped their value of themselves and their South Asian identities. They instead used South Asian spaces and values as a buffer against western constraints, despite also navigating colourist pressures within South Asian spaces. Their experiences reflect a process of racialization that immigrants experience when settling in the west. Collins (2004) states that Asian immigrants must find space within a “ladder” that positions whiteness on top, Blackness on the bottom, and all others somewhere in between (p. 285). Maintaining power and position on this ladder also means that those in the middle denigrate those on the rungs below. Their reclamation of sexuality also involved resisting and questioning colourist, casteist, and anti-Black racist messaging in marital expectations maintained within South Asian spaces.

Fourth, participants engaged in identity negotiation to reject the ideas of femininity that constraining sexual constructions reinforced. This included redefining their ethnic, religious, and racial identities, and the ways these identities intersect with their sexuality. Through the narrative composites, I explored how participants experienced exclusion and racialization that positioned them between two worlds: not South Asian or western enough to be accepted. Establishing when to express certain identities via compartmentalizing was one form of identity negotiation used to manage the tension of existing in multiple spaces. Participants leaned into one identity as when it offered protection against exclusion and stigma. For example, participants leaned into South Asian identities to protect against western beauty ideals, and they rejected South Asian identities when struggling with homophobia within their religious community (Adur, 2020; Pande, 2015; Singh, 2009). As discussed, these were (constrained) agentic strategies used to navigate the realities of the social institutions around them.

Another approach to managing tensions between worlds was the reclamation and transformation of identities, so that participants were able to express multiple identities at once without feeling as though they conflicted. For example, rather than view their sexuality as a rejection of their South Asian identities, participants focused on aspects of religion that they felt a connection to. Participants explored precolonial or critical interpretations of their religion that highlighted sexual diversity, empowerment, or challenged the association of non-heteronormativity with sin. Participants evaluated how scripture aligned with their sexuality and used this to transform their relationship to religion. Others simply chose to

express the parts of culture and religion that aligned with their lives (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021). This restructuring of their sexual and non-sexual identities aligns with postcolonial understandings of liminality (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Griffiths & Tiffin, 2003). While participants in this study did feel compelled in their younger years to follow either their religion or express their sexuality, they often eventually established a third pathway. Liminality is used to describe this third in-between space that participants often occupy. This third space is where participants asserted agency by questioning the binaries they were expected to move between. In this third space, they questioned expectations that their femininity must uphold promiscuity or chastity, heterosexuality or homosexuality, and tradition or modernity (Griffiths & Tiffin, 2003). Instead, they redefined roles and identities, validating how they diverged from the binaries. Aligning with existing research, “reclaiming and reconnecting” with identities such as religion and “undertaking a journey of spiritual and intellectual development” helped individuals “bridge the seemingly vast disconnect between faith and sexuality and reunite their fragmented sense of selves” (Siraj, 2016, p 198).

Lastly, participants responded to constraining sexual constructions and instead actively promoted their sexual well-being by prioritizing the interconnection between their mental, physical, and sexual health or dimensions of their lives. For several participants, the pursuit of sexual well-being involved connection to their bodies in seemingly non-sexual ways. For example, participants prioritized therapy and self-care to manage chronic illnesses, recognizing how these sometimes inhibited their ability to connect with their sexuality. Others sought to prioritize sports or hobbies in order to build self-esteem and confidence. Participants pursued their emotional needs, reflecting on the conditions they needed to feel safe, happy, and what their goals in life were outside of the prescribed performance of sexuality. So, this strategy involved prioritizing other dimensions of sexuality across their lives, countering the ways that sexual constructions often maintained sexuality as a physical, heteronormative act of intercourse.

I find that the use of the strategies is influenced by factors such as timing, locations, and locally and globally linked lives. For example, participants left their hometowns to use sexual health services, access virtual spaces, travel, or move away for postsecondary education. Postsecondary life appears to be a transitional point for participants. It is here where participants meet peers, are exposed to sexual information and resources, and find space to explore their sexuality covertly. These strategies help expand the boundaries of

what sexuality can mean for participants, but they are not uniformly available to everyone; for example, they are enabled by financial means. Participants in Nilani's composite shared that they continue to compartmentalize sexual identity until they are financially and emotionally prepared to handle the potential familial and community rejection of coming out. Through financial resources, participants were better able to work within the constraining systems that prevented them from learning about or expressing their sexuality in public. Major life events, such as migration and divorce, and family or community linkages around them also impact constructions and strategies. For example, the participants included in Nilani's composite had open conversations about multiple facets of sexuality within the home. This may have occurred because of generational shifts in sexual attitudes, their mother's sexual health education in western schools, and/or their mother's divorce experiences which led to more conversations about emotional well-being. In comparison, participants in Ravnoor's composite experienced fewer parent-child conversations about sexuality. Still, owing to the power of the large South Asian community they were surrounded by, participants in Nilani's composite still internalized heteronormative, morality-linked views of sexuality. This aligns with existing literature, where even when women's "own families were less strict about clothing style or behaviour, the whole neighbourhood and other relatives would interfere in different ways" (Farahani, 2017, p. 85). Existing research finds that conflict over sexualities between parent and child reflects broader contradictory, intersecting "and overlapping forces of power relations" (Espiritu, 2012, p. 179).

Through the last sexual construction and through the five sexual strategies, I position sexuality as a site where participants assert agency. The strategies reflect a slow, fluctuating process through multiple life stages where participants access power over sexuality at the individual level. Reclamation of their identities involves repeatedly confronting constraining sexual constructions, unpacking the ways sexual ideals are deeply internalized and shape their entire lives. The strategies are important because they illustrate the complexities of participants' lives. For example, participants balance the stigma of violating heteronormativity with the position that their family and community are vital lifelines that they do not want to cut off entirely. As a result, participants' access to power tends to unfold as negotiation rather than outright rejection of the western and South Asian systems they existed within. When it appears "on the surface" that women conform to sexual constructions of chastity and heteronormativity, this actually reflects women with their "own

idea[s] of feminist agency actively contesting the forces of patriarchy” rather than a “romantic resistance to the family” (Pande, 2015, p. 182; Abboud et al., 2019). Their strategies prioritize their family orientations, or religious and cultural realities. This does not overlook the valid critique and concerns participants hold toward the problems of institutions such as the family and community. In fact, resistance at the individual level helps counter dominant sexual constructions and helps to contest the boundaries of social institutions (Collins, 2000). Through small changes and tactics during everyday life, participants transform the ways they understood and expressed sexuality, potentially also contributing to meso- and macro-level change of family, cultural, religious, and ethnoracial structures (Collins, 2000; 2004). Though the five strategies are employed and unfold uniquely across participants’ lives, the strategies are critical because they transform how sexuality is understood by participants and increase the likelihood that participants will experience sexual well-being at various points of their lives.

7.11: Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

In the literature review, I established that existing research often overlooks South Asian women’s sexual experiences beyond physiological risks. Research can benefit from attention to the ways that women negotiate what sexuality means and how they respond to sexual hardships across their lives. Through the research questions in this study, I prioritized not just “what people have and do, but [also who and] what they are able to do and be” in relation to their sexuality (Lorimer et al., 2019, p. 844). I began by addressing the dominant sociocultural sexual constructions that unfolded across participants lives. Participants were subject to surveillance and control over their sexualities through racialized, gendered, and risk-focused norms “that declare ungoverned desire to be illegitimate” (Menon, 2007, p. xvii). These norms served to maintain patriarchal and heteronormative interpersonal dynamics, family, and community structures. Still, a more complicated lens also helped identify multiple spaces where sexuality was constructed as an essential part of reality. Through the narrative composites, I found a complex set of constructions that detail what we understand as women’s sexuality.

I also examined the strategies participants used to manage sexual constructions in their pursuit of sexual well-being. As a result, I considered how participants defined and embodied their desired sexual life based on the fluctuating conditions, constraints, and

resources around them. The narrative composites revealed the intersecting impacts of locations such as gender, ethnicity, race, migration experiences, religion, class, and caste on their expression of sexuality. In my attention to agency and resistance, I also discussed how the sexual constructions were reshaped by participants and their families over time, actively transforming cultures at the micro-level. Attention to agency and resistance was important given my initial attention to sexual rights, which I outline in the first literature review chapter. A sexual rights lens holds that sexuality is a basic part of our personhood. The narrative composites demonstrate the everyday ways that sexuality is denied and reaffirmed as a part of participants' personhood. The attention to this level reminds us that participants have the right to be able to express their identities, boundaries, and needs, while experiencing dignity and safety. In micro-level interactions over the life course, participants repositioned sexuality as enmeshed with the decisions they made about careers and hobbies, the relationships they have with families, peers, and partners, and to the ways they viewed their bodies.

This study focused on a small number of cisgender women's experiences. The findings add nuance to the way we understand sexual risks within the context of being a South Asian cisgender woman and show how some women respond to these risks in order to live fulfilling, meaningful sexual lives. My study aligns with a small body of existing research that prioritize the sexual subjectivities of South Asian women. My research supports the position that sexual well-being fluctuates, but can be achieved through a range of strategies, including confronting and leaning into South Asian cultural and religious practices. My research is limited because it does not consider the range of experiences related to caste and religion. This warrants further research that can explore the nuances that exist within and between groups. Future research should continue to explore contemporary processes of colonization as they relate to religion, caste, race, and realities as settlers to Turtle Island. Future research should explore how heteronormative, patriarchal sexual constructions unfold and are navigated by other queer, transgender, and non-binary individuals. This attention may identify unique impacts of transphobia and homophobia and strategies used to negotiate the ways these unfold in South Asian and western spaces. Throughout the interviews, participants commented on the silencing and violence they sometimes witnessed towards members of 2SLGBTQIA+ groups, but I was only able to analyze the experiences of the few individuals who shared that they were not heterosexual. This research cannot, for example,

speak to the impacts of institutional policies and social norms that undermine the identities of transgender women.

Future research should also consider how cisgender boys and men understand sexual constructions that maintain ideals about masculinity, and how masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity. The women in this study reflected on ideas of masculinity, feeling as though their male counterparts' sexual behaviours were not managed nor stigmatized as closely as their own. Several participants also reflected on the role of men in the traditional South Asian family unit, and the meaning of fatherhood. The two male participants I interviewed also recounted having to manage their sexuality but distinguished these from the pressures they felt their female counterparts experienced. This attention can benefit from researchers who share these locations, as I believe my location as a cisgender woman limited the participation of cisgender heterosexual men in this study and could contribute to the expertise and safety of transgender women.

Future research should consider how sexual subjectivities can guide recommendations used to support the sexual well-being of South Asian women. At the end of our interviews, participants and I discussed supports that would help address some of the barriers that participants experienced. They suggested more interpersonal supports that help build confidence and programming for queer racialized people that could help normalize sexuality. Participants requested support in navigating conversations on boundaries, consent, and emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships. Participants also stressed the importance of ongoing sexual education for parents and young people that incorporated a range of locations such as disability and chronic illness. Finally, participants sought more culturally aware training for health care providers and for supports that collaborated with cultural and religious institutions and services.

Research and supports should be mindful of participants' social locations, for example acknowledging how participants are racialized and the ways they navigate disability. It should acknowledge the heteronormative and patriarchal structures that women encounter in their daily lives that constrain girls' and women's relationships to their bodies, identities, and interpersonal relationships. Future research should consider women's daily lives, for instance supporting their desire to build autonomy while balancing cultural, religious, family, and community structures. This helps avoid strategies that may be ineffective, such as supports that overlook the ways young women seek to compartmentalize their sexual behaviours.

While it is important to offer solutions or continue to explore unintended outcomes of sexual intercourse, the findings from this study indicate that supports should also help empower individuals to question gender roles, seek self-worth outside of partnerships, and create space for multiple understandings of ethnoracial and religious identities.

Overall, this study led to meaningful conversations that connected sexual well-being to participants' everyday lives. Participants reflected on their own and their families' experiences of relationships, divorce, and motherhood. Their stories were connected by a common thread: wanting to be loved and figuring out how to be their complete authentic self as they moved through multiple spaces. Participants shared the varied ways that they often found their authentic self, learning about their core values, identities, and the lives they wanted to lead. Several shared that the interviews served as a space to reflect on their sexuality and upbringing in ways they had not previously done. While it was challenging to succinctly make sense of participants' experiences, this last component served as a reminder of why such a study was important to complete. The narratives helped tell a story about critical moments that shape how participants understand sexual well-being, beginning with their parents' migration journeys to their transitions into adulthood. As a result, I positioned the pursuit of sexual well-being as a non-linear and ongoing journey of self-discovery and relationship building with oneself and others.

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Appendices

Table 2 Ravnoor Composite Details

	COMPOSITE: Ravnoor (age 40)								Composite features:
Participant	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	RAVNOOR
Noteworthy childhood context	mainly SA community	mainly white community	mainly white community	mainly white community	mainly white community	mainly SA community	mainly white community	mainly white community	mainly white community
Puberty	silence	high level discussion	silence	high level discussion	silence	silence	silence	silence; puberty ceremony	silence
Gender roles at home	traditional daughter, wife roles	traditional daughter, wife roles	traditional daughter, wife roles	no differences	traditional daughter roles	traditional wife roles	traditional	n/a	traditional daughter, wife roles
Parents' dating expectations	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited
Parents' premarital intercourse expectations	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited
Parents' marital expectations	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous
Interpersonal sexual support received	independent	peer support	peer and partner support	sibling & peer support	peer support	partner support	independent	partner and peer support	peer and partner support
Early dominant constructions of Sexuality	heteronormative; dangerous	site of boundaries; dangerous	site of boundaries; dangerous; immoral	site of boundaries	site of boundaries	dangerous; immoral	heteronormative	site of boundaries; heteronormative	site of boundaries; dangerous for girls; hetero timeline
Shifts in sexual constructions	n/a	twenties	twenties	twenties	twenties	twenties	n/a	twenties	twenties

Table 3 Nilani Composite Details

Participant	COMPOSITE: Nilani (age 24)										Composite Features:
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	N7	N8	N9	N10	NILANI
Noteworthy childhood context	mainly SA community	move to mainly SA community	mainly SA community	mainly SA community	mainly white community	mainly white community	move to mainly SA community	mainly white community	mainly SA community	move to mainly SA community	move to mainly SA community
Puberty	silence	detailed conversation	detailed conversation; puberty ceremony	silence; puberty ceremony	detailed conversation; puberty ceremony	minimal conversation; celebration	detailed conversation	minimal conversation	silence	silence	detailed conversation; puberty ceremony
Gender roles at home	n/a	traditional daughter, wife roles pushed by community	traditional daughter, wife roles pushed by community	traditional daughter, wife roles	traditional daughter, wife roles pushed by community	traditional daughter roles	traditional daughter, wife roles pushed by community	no differences	traditional daughter, wife roles	no difference	traditional daughter, wife roles pushed by community
Parents' dating expectations	prohibited	prohibited	permitted	prohibited	permitted	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited
Parents' premarital intercourse expectations	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited	prohibited
Parents' marital expectations	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; exogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous	strict timeline; endogamous
Interpersonal sexual support received	independent	mother support	mother support	independent	mother support	peer support	mother support	independent	school support	support from sibling	mother support
Early dominant constructions of Sexuality	heteronormative	normalized; dangerous; heteronormative	normalized	site of boundaries	heteronormative; normalized	heteronormative; immoral; site of boundaries	heteronormative; normalized	heteronormative; site of boundaries	heteronormative; dangerous; immoral	site of boundaries; dangerous	heteronormative; site of boundaries; dangerous; normalized
Shifts in sexual constructions	twenties	adolescence	adolescence	twenties	adolescence	twenties	twenties	twenties	twenties	n/a	adolescence; twenties

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval



Date: 5 April 2018

To: Dr. Lorraine Davies

Project ID: 110481

Study Title: Intersections of culture, sexuality and sexual health: A study of South Asian Canadians across the life course

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Full Board

Meeting Date: 08/Dec/2017 12:30

Date Approval Issued: 05/Apr/2018

REB Approval Expiry Date: 05/Apr/2019

Dear Dr. Lorraine Davies

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Debriefing	Debriefing document	27/Feb/2018	2
Interview Schedule	Interview Guide	11/Oct/2017	1
Letter of Information and Consent	Written Consent/Assent	26/Feb/2018	2
Poster 1	Recruitment Materials	27/Feb/2018	2
Poster 2 (email address only)	Recruitment Materials	27/Feb/2018	2
Script	Oral Script	21/Mar/2018	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

General:

Q: Can you tell me about yourself and your family growing up?

Puberty:

Q: How do you remember learning about puberty growing up?

Q: If relevant, what messages were conveyed in the silence surrounding puberty? How did the silence make you feel?

Q: Do you remember any advice you were given, or that you read?

Q: Do you remember being aware of different attitudes within the South Asian immigrant community?

Q: Can you remember when you first were aware that the messages you were receiving from your family and south Asian community were different from the broader Canadian culture?

Dating:

Q: Can you tell me about your experiences of dating?

Q: How would you describe your parents' expectations and values about dating?

Q: Did you feel you were walking a line between the South Asian values and the dominant Canadian culture? Can you tell me more about that?

Q: Would you say that these values shaped your views of yourself and choices you have made or may make around dating? How were you impacted by these all of values and messages?

Q: To help me understand the challenges that can be involved in being a South Asian woman/man, can you tell me about a dating experience that you felt shows what it means to walk the line between two cultures? What went well? What didn't go so well?

Sex:

Q: What is your first memory that is associated in any way with the topic of sex. Can you tell me about this memory?

Q: How, and if so, what did you learn about sex ("the talk")?

Q: How would you describe your parents' expectations and values about premarital sex?

Q: How did South Asian values inform your experiences?

Q: What was the most influential experience that shaped your understanding of sexuality?

Q: In your teenage years, did you feel you had ownership over yourself or your body? Did you feel pressure to behave a certain way or engage in sexual practices?

Marriage:

Q: In your experience, how does the South Asian marriage market work? Can you tell me about your experiences or conversations around marriage?

Q: How were you impacted by these all of values and messages? Would you say that the values from others shaped your views of yourself and choices you have made or may make around marriage?

Sexual Health:

Q: Would you be willing to share with me your sexual health practices?

Q: How do you maintain your sexual health? When did you first start to think about your own health?

Q: Do you have a family doctor?

Q: (if needed) Do you have a gynaecologist?

Q: What is your relationship with your family doctor or gynaecologist?

Q: Do you feel like doctors are aware of sexual health concerns of South Asian men or women?

Q: Compared to your experiences growing up, what does sexuality mean to you now?

Q: What does sexual health mean to you now?

Q: (if relevant) Based on your own experiences from childhood to now, what values would guide you if you were to raise your own children? Are there particular cultural practices that would guide your childrearing?