

# A Content Analysis of Popular Sex Education Books for Teens:

Analyzing themes of gender and virginity in sex and relationships

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*On my honor I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this assignment.*

-SYR

## **Abstract**

This article is a content analysis of best-selling teen sex education and relationship books. The purpose of this study was to examine alternative resources for sex and relationship education. I specifically look at how gender, virginity and abstinence are constructed in these books and how they are similar or different to the information and lessons in sex education classes. Furthermore, I examine how religion is an important component for discussion of relationships and sex. I argue that similar to public sex education courses these books enforce gender stereotypes and teach teens and young adults that abstinence is the only healthy form of sexuality.

The purpose of this study is to examine what norms and beliefs about gender, relationships and sex are being communicated to teens and young adults in best-selling sex education books and how they are similar to or different from public sex education courses. Two similar themes emerged: the use of gender stereotypes and an emphasis on virginity and abstinence. The findings of this study show that, like public sex education programs, these books promote gender stereotypes and the belief that the only healthy expression of teen sexuality is abstinence. This study also looks at how religion is used in the sector, specifically how a majority of the books in this study were overtly religious. I examine how gender stereotypes are promoted and enforced in these different books. I also look at how the authors differentiate between virginity and purity.

## **Background**

Public sex education programs in the U.S. have been continually charged by researchers with failing to properly prepare teens and young adults for sexual relationships (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011, Weissbourd, Peterson and Weinstein 2014 and Williams 2011). Teen pregnancy and STI rates in the U.S. are among the highest of first world countries (CDC 2015). Despite these startling figures, the U.S. has continued to use abstinence-only sex education in most public schools around the country, despite the growing evidence that these programs are positively correlated with higher STI and pregnancy rates among teenagers (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011).

Beginning in the Clinton administration the U.S. saw the first legislation that officially declared that abstinence-only programs would be the only form of sex education taught in public schools. As part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PROWRA), the Title V of this act allocated \$250

million dollars in funds over five years to abstinence-only education (Williams 2011). Following this was the passage of Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) and The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), both of which increased funding for Title V by \$200 million, all in support of abstinence-only education (Williams 2011). Then, under the Bush administration for the 2005 fiscal year, \$167 million was allotted for abstinence programs (Waxman 2004). It was also under the Bush administration that the Special Programs of Regional and National Significance (SPRANS), an organization that gives federal grants to community-based organizations that teach abstinence-only, started and became the fastest growing source of federal grants to community-based abstinence-only programs (Waxman 2004). In 2009, with the end of the Bush administration and the beginning of the Obama administration, much of that funding was redirected to the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) (Fields 2012). OAH was funded specifically to support only evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention approaches; while this marked a promising start, it did not address the growing STI/HIV rates among teens and young adults (Fields 2012).

The abstinence movement is strongly backed by Evangelical Christians, a group that is also referred to as the Christian Right (Williams 2011). In the report prepared for Representative Henry Waxman on public school sex education programs it was found that some programs offered moral judgment that had a blatantly religious message and some offered these moral judgments as scientific fact (2004). This extended to discussions of abortions, the consequences of premarital sex and non-heteronormative relationships. Since then, much of the focus and research around public sex education

have focused on the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs in public schools and the use of Christian values in such programs.

Since the first implementation of abstinence-only education, teen pregnancy rates and STI rates have both dropped and are continuing to do so (CDC 2015). However, the U.S. rates are still much higher than other western, industrialized nations (CDC 2015). Overwhelmingly, 91% of parents of high school students throughout the U.S. support some form of sex education being taught in schools, with 65% supporting comprehensive education programs and less than 7% of parents of high school students believing that no sex education should be taught (SIECUS 2007). Despite the growing support across the U.S. for more comprehensive sex education programs, the minority that make up the abstinence-only movement still continue to push their agenda through ties with the Republican party and through its vast network of grass-root organizations around the U.S. (Williams 2011).

## **Literature Review**

### *Gender Discourse*

Currently, the gender discourse operates primarily in a gender-binary construction, where man and woman are the only options for gender expression. West and Zimmerman theorize that men and women enact learned gender scripts and constantly perform their gender for society; what they refer to as "doing gender" (1987). By "doing gender" people support the gender binary and reinforce the notion that there are innate qualities to gender that can be tied to biological sex. However, scholars have found that many of these traits are not innate (Trotter and Alderson 2007).

Stereotypes about the differences between men and women are still taught as an integral part of sex education courses (Waxman Report 2004 and Greenblatt 2008). We see this in several discourses used in sex education courses. For example, in Jennifer L. Greenblatt's analysis on sex education in Texas she quotes several abstinence-only education programs that demean the accomplishments of women and reinforce their reliance on men for economic stability (2008). Most common are the implications about the emotional capacity of women. In both Waxman (2004) and Greenblatt (2008) it is referenced that women, unlike men, are incapable of making a decision without their emotions playing a major part. This is then used to explain that while men can have multiple sexual partners in their lifetime, women will be emotionally damaged if they are in too many sexual relationships.

Furthermore, these assumed gender differences lead to negative assumptions about gender and create gender roles that teens and young adults must follow. In Polly Haste's ethnographic study of boys' sex education classes she discusses the impact of negative stereotypes she encountered in a London school for boys (2013). The boys were expected to behave in a crude sexual manner and expected to know more about sex than a professionally educated, adult woman. While the boys did use graphic and crude language for the purpose of shock and awe, they also used it to ask very serious questions that were troubling them. The negative assumptions that the administrators and staff held about the boys clouded their judgment in providing real answers to their serious questions (Haste 2013). This is a common idea among adults in the U.S., that men are always more sexually experienced and knowledgeable than women. This assumption leads to what Claire Greslé-Favier describes as the "hysterical image" of children in sex education

courses (2013). In this image children are viewed as having an animal sexuality that must be controlled; boys in particular are feared for their high animal sexuality and thus the image of the chaste girl becomes the controlling image for sexual impulses (Greselé-Favier 2013).

This, in turn, perpetuates the stereotype that it is the girls' job to control her sexuality and the sexuality of boys too. In a 2001 analysis of sex education films in Oregon public schools, a majority of the sexual decision-making scripts reinforced the gender stereotype that men were making decisions to seek sex, while a women's decision making script focused on denying a boy access to her body (Hartley and Drew 2001). This attitude is what makes it more acceptable for men to make crude jokes about women. In C.J. Pascoe's paper she discusses the "fag" discourse that boys use to police gender lines in high school (2003). Things like crude, sexual locker room talk among boys is expected, and is used as a way to deflect any suspicions of being a "fag" from the boys participating in it (Pascoe 2003).

Even in more comprehensive sex education programs, sexual agency for women is ignored. A 2015 content analysis of popular sex education websites for teenagers found that while many spoke positively about masturbation for boys, girls were more explicitly cautioned about pursuing that pleasure (Marques et. all 2015). Desire and pleasure are also taught in classrooms as being more acceptable for males than females, and pursuing pleasure is also more acceptable for males than females (Hartley and Drew 2001). This can also lead to pervasive gender stereotyping in the future lives of students. In Ménard and Kleinplatz's study of sexual scripts in popular magazines they found that, while there was a strong emphasis placed on women achieving orgasm, most of the sex

tips were given with the direction that they were for male pleasure with little to no consideration of whether or not the women would enjoy it (2008). This study also found the stereotype that women were to dress and act desirably towards men for their pleasure, but women were not supposed to act on that desire (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008), thus limiting the agency of women seeking sexual pleasure.

This also leads to a difference in the ways men and women discuss sex. In Pascoe's analysis of the fag discourse, crude locker room talk about women is common and encouraged among boys (2003). Having demeaning stories or crude jokes is a way to reinforce one's masculinity and is a practice that is continued as men grow older. In Brinkman and Rickard's study of everyday gender prejudice faced by college students, men often reported hearing a demeaning joke about women as a regular experience of gender prejudice (2009). Women also reported regularly hearing demeaning jokes about women and regular sexual harassment from strangers (Brinkman and Rickard 2009).

### *Non-Heterosexual Identities*

Despite the growing visibility of the LGTBQ+ community since the 1970s teens in sex education courses are still primarily taught misleading and pathologizing information about the queer community, or they are taught nothing at all (Gowen and Wings-Yanze 2014).

A continued struggle for the queer community is the constant pathologizing and stigmatization of their entire community in sex education classes. The gender binary mentioned above only further exacerbates the problem of heteronormativity in U.S. society. In Gowen and Wings-Yanze's study of LGTBQ+ youth in Oregon, most

students recounted stories of their identity being associated with AIDS (2014). In fact it is quite common that non-heterosexual identities are only brought up specifically in the context of disease. While the queer community does have higher rates of STIs than their heterosexual counterparts this stems from stigmatization and lack of information about proper protection more than inherently riskier behavior (McCarty-Caplan 2015). Many courses also instructed that penis-vaginal intercourse was the only type of sexual act, thus making anyone, including heterosexual students, deviant if they participated in any other type of sex act (Gowen and Wings-Yanes2014).

The even bigger problem facing members of the queer community is the continued invisibility they face in sex education courses. In James Joseph Dean's review of current literature on the construction of heterosexual identities, he discussed how in high school heteronormativity is reinforced through social rituals like attending prom, where heterosexual couples are celebrated as the ideal for healthy teen relationships (2011). The complete disregard for non-hetero identities creates a sense of isolation for many queer identifying teens (Gowen and Wings-Yanze 2014).

### *Virginity and Abstinence*

With the strength of abstinence programs around the U.S., two major themes have developed; the unequal emphasis on virginity and the queering of certain heterosexual identities. Virginity was an expected lesson in abstinence-only curriculum, however the gender binary has led to more emphasis being put on a girl's virginity than a boy's. Nowhere can this be seen more readily than in the growth of the purity pledge movement. Beginning in the 1990s, as part of the Southern Baptist Convention, purity pledges have taken on a wide definition from small ceremonies to full-fledged balls (Hickey 2013).



While many organizations like True Love Waits and The Silver Ring Thing target everyone, the more spectacular events target girls specifically. The Purity Ball, held annually at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, is a father-daughter dance where the daughter pledges her virginity to her father (Treay 2008). These types of events are significant because they reinforce the gender expectation that is the women's responsibility to be the "gatekeeper" for not only her sexuality, but that of men too. This stereotype is expressed in the program "Right Time, Right Place" which dictates that "girls have the responsibility to wear modest clothing that doesn't invite lustful thoughts," (Greenblatt 2008: 10). However, as much research has shown, purity pledges tend to get very mixed results (Landor and Simons 2014). In their study of 1,300 college students, Landor and Simons found that the success of purity pledges had more to do with an individual's level of personal religious commitment (2014). They also found that students who signed purity pledges and broke them were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than their counterparts who never signed them, leading to the possibility that purity pledges may have more negative consequences for people who "fail" to meet them (Landor and Simmons 2014). Landor and Simmons also found that women who signed purity pledges and had high levels of religious commitment reported lower levels of sexual partners than men who met the same criteria (2014). This may have to do with negative gender stereotype that encourages men to be more promiscuous while demeaning women who engage in the same behavior.

The queering of certain heterosexual identities is another theme that has become common among strong believers in the abstinence movement. In Jimmie Manning's interviews of thirteen families who enacted purity pledges, he found that families who

enact these often do so to contrast between a pure heterosexuality and what they consider to be impure heterosexuality (2015). These families liken anything that is not heterosexual sex in marriage to the deviance once only associated with homosexual relationships (Manning 2015).

However, these parents are still having some kind of conversation with their teens about sex. A national survey of parents and teens about communication regarding sex found that a strong majority of teens and parents are having some kind of conversation about sex (Planned Parenthood 2012). With teens utilizing parents as one of their primary resources for sex education, I decided to investigate a source that parents and teens may turn to get answers about sex and relationships. I examined seven books found on Amazon from two of their best-sellers list, “Sexuality and Pregnancy” and “Dating and Intimacy”. I used these books to examine messages about relationships and sex. Through the use of their purchasing power I examined what people feel are the most important things teens and young adults should be learning about sex and relationships. I analyzed resources on sex education that do not get as much attention as the programs being taught in schools. I specifically examined the norms and values that these books communicate to teens about gender, relationships, sex and virginity. This research is intended to study what parents feel is important to teach their teens.

## **Methods**

To examine what norms are communicated regarding gender, relationships, and sex I used the qualitative method of content analysis to research some of Amazon’s bestselling teen sex education books (Altheid 1987). I initially picked ten books from two separate bestsellers lists for teens and young adults. The first list is "Teens and

Young Adult Dating" and the second list is "Teen and Young Adult Sexuality and Pregnancy". I decided to use both of these lists since I was interested not only in sex education, but also in relationships. There was a third list I considered that specifically targeted LGBTQ+ teens and young adults, but I decided not to include it since I wanted to see if books not specifically targeting members of the queer community would address issues of non-heteronormativity.

I picked the top five best-sellers from each list on the date of December 19th, 2015 (the ranking order has since changed). There was one book that appeared on both lists in the top five so I skipped that one in "Teen and Young Adult Dating" and picked the next book on the list that met all the criteria so as to get ten different books.

I ended up eliminating three books from the study completely. All three books came from "Teen and Young Adult Sexuality and Pregnancy" bestsellers list. I eliminated all three of the books due to a difference in format and style. The majority of the books were written in a novel style. Two of the books eliminated were written in the format of a textbook and the third book eliminated was written as a workbook. These differences in styles made the coding process incompatible with the rest of the books in the study. Several of the books that remained in the study had workbook sections in the back, but those sections were not included in the coding process. For details on the books included in the study and the authors who wrote them see tables 1 and 2 respectively. Before continuing it should be noted that, of the seven books selected for coding, five had overt religious messages. All of them were written by authors who openly identified as Christian (table 2). These were also all of the books that came from the "Teen and Young Adult Dating" bestsellers list. The two books remaining were secular. The objective of

this study was not to compare religious and secular texts, but instead was to analyze the texts for major themes.

Once the final seven books were chosen, I used a manifest coding scheme to code the books for four different categories with each category being comprised of at least three themes (Ménard and Kleinplatz 2008). The first category focused specifically on sex education. The second category was about gender and gender stereotypes. The third category was about relationships and heteronormativity. The final category captured the authors' beliefs and morals about relationships, sex, and virginity. During the early stages of coding, the theme of virginity in this fourth category became quite prominent and was thus expanded to include virginity, purity, and abstinence. This required a re-coding of a few texts to include this expanded theme.

There are several limitations to this study. The first is inter-rater reliability; due to this being an independent study, there was no second reader contributing to the decision process and checking for reliability of coding. However, after the initial coding process I re-read sections of each book to check for consensus with myself about the coding that was done. The second limitation in this study was the influence of my own personal biases. As shown by tables 1 and 2 most of the books were written for a Christian audience. Since I am not a Christian, it is likely that my personal opinions about that community influenced how I read and coded some of their thoughts and ideas.

## **Results**

Similar to public school sex education programs, these books reinforced gender stereotypes and that abstinence until heterosexual marriage is the only healthy option for

teens' and young adults' sexuality. The bestselling books had many different approaches to addressing gender, relationships and sex education. Some of the differences included using blatant religious messages to communicate norms and values about these issues, strong use of personal anecdotes to communicate lessons and a greater emphasis on relationships overall. However, there were also many similarities to public sex education courses. Like public sex education programs, these bestselling books reinforced gender stereotypes and promoted abstinence as the only acceptable and healthy option for teens and young adults when it came to sexuality.

### *Gender Stereotypes*

Gender stereotyping was one of the most common themes throughout all of the books in the "Teen and Young Adult Dating" category. These stereotypes were used to enforce gendered behavior, dictate gendered responsibilities, and instruct both genders about healthy relationships. One of the most common stereotypes was that men are the natural leaders in the world. The books viewed this trait as a God given gift that both men and women should honor. In turn, this enforced the stereotype that women, when living correctly by the Bible, should follow their men willingly. "Guys were created to lead. It's in their nature to lead....I also know that it is completely biblical to let a guy lead, even if that's not always a popular opinion." (*The Chase*, p. 76) The emphasis on it being a Biblical act is an important element. It gives the authors more authority when giving this direction to young men and women. It also creates a sense of sin or shame for women who do not let men lead. Aligning this role with Biblical scripture implies that women who fail to let men lead go against God. Letting men lead also became an explanation for healthy courting rituals.

“When a woman tries to take a man’s role in a relationship, she robs him of his masculine strength. Sure, he may first appear to like it when a woman pursues him...but in the end he will lose respect for both her and his own masculinity. Instead of becoming her protector and leader, he will become lazy and lackluster, expecting her to do all the work in the relationship.”(*When God Writes Your Love Story*, p. 282)

The prevailing notion in these texts is this: If men are to be true leaders then women cannot take the lead. Many of the books specifically stated that women leading in the relationship was emasculating to the men they were dating. The authors charged women who do not let their men lead with turning them into lazy, unmotivated children incapable of reaching their full, God-given potential.

The right of men to lead and women to follow came with the following caveat: women should only follow a specific kind of man. Women were expressly cautioned not to blindly submit to any man, especially if that man was not a man of godly character, which is explained as a man who tries to emulate Jesus in his way of living. "A man of honor is a man who shoulders the responsibility of being the leader and who carefully and sensitively wins a woman's heart, submitting to the guidance of God's Spirit every step of the way." (*When God*, p. 282) Only men of godly character were considered worthy of a woman's submission. If the man was not a man of good godly character then women were given permission to take charge in one of two ways, either by guiding this man back to God or by simply leaving the relationship. Leaving the relationship altogether was the most promoted option for women in such situations. In *The Chase*, the authors share a personal story about women who tried to change a man by bringing him back to God, but in the end the relationship failed and the woman broke up with the man. The moral of this story is that it is a man’s responsibility to lead a woman in all things,

including spiritually (p. 119-125). In this story the woman taking the initiative was akin to a man being lead by a woman and in the author's mind this was not healthy relationships. Thus, the authors advocated for simply leaving the relationship altogether.

This notion of women leading only at certain times complicates the stereotype of men being the leaders in relationships, and reinforces a gender stereotype that is prevalent throughout many sex education programs in public schools (Hartley and Drew 2001). While the books emphasized that both men and women should control their sexual desires, the stereotype that men are more sexually driven than women is used to reinforce different gender expectations for men and women when it comes sexual desires. In a chart in *Every Young Woman's Battle*, the authors compare men and women stating that guys are "driven by their physical desires" whereas girls are "driven by their emotional desires" (p. 21). By setting up this idea that men's main goal is to get sex, the authors set up the "gate keeper" stereotype for women, making it their responsibility to curb all sexual desire since they are not as controlled by theirs. This stereotype becomes the premise for why women need to watch the way they dress.

In every book from "Teen and Young Adult Dating" the issue of women's clothing was discussed. All of the books blamed the over sexualized, secular culture for women learning to dress in an immodest fashion. They instructed women who wanted to be good, Christian women to dress more modestly. One book went as far as to provide a list of rules that women should check all of their clothes by to make sure that they were modest and appropriate. One such rule is "Do your skirts or shorts come above your thumbnail when your arms are at your side?" (*Every Young Woman's Battle* p. 95). There was absolutely no discussion of men's clothing. Also, very little attention was paid to

how this might make a woman feel about her attire, instead focusing completely on how that woman would be perceived by people. Most of the conversations focused on emphasizing that women were to dress modestly for the benefit of men. Some books went as far as to say that if women dressed in a way that was considered immodest, they were asking for a certain kind of treatment from men; namely, unwanted sexual attention. By telling women that they have to dress a certain way in order to achieve a certain level of respect, these books enforced the stereotype that it is up to women to control the sexual desires of men.

The two secular books I read did not take the same approach in addressing these issues of gender. The starkest differences consisted in addressing the issue of gender stereotypes. While the religious books enforced gender stereotypes, the secular books worked to challenge and refute them. In *Being a Teen*, the third chapter directly challenged many of the stereotypes held about men and women, calling out double standards and unrealistic expectations that are held about both genders. "Often when a woman speaks her mind she is called a bitch. When a man does, he is called forceful." (*Being a Teen*, p. 26)

*100 Questions You'd Never Ask Your Parents (100 Questions)* was more interested in dispelling myths than stereotypes and stressed the importance of gender similarities in areas concerning the body. Things like sexual pleasure were stressed as being equally important to both males and females. It also stressed the importance of gender neutral responsibilities when it came to discussing things like protection and if someone was ready for sex or not.



Both of these books looked to dispel the idea that it was any one genders' responsibility to take charge. The benefit in this can be seen most directly with sexual safety practices. "So if you're not ready to have sex yet, tell your partner, and stick with the decision you have determined is right for you." (*100 Questions*, p. 44) By putting the responsibility on both genders to be in charge of protection, seeking help, and openly communicating about sex, it increases the likelihood that when teens and young adults engage in sexual activities at least one partner will be prepared and both will feel comfortable speaking their minds about what is happening. This can have positive long-term impacts on healthy relationships, as well as lowering STI and teen pregnancy rates.

### *Virginity and Purity*

Due to the religious nature of the five books from the "Teens and Young Adults Dating" best sellers list, abstinence until marriage was a common and expected theme. Similar to sex education courses, it was promoted as the only healthy form of expression for teen sexuality. However, the sub-themes that this notion developed into were more encompassing than a simple doctrine of "no sexual intercourse". Instead, they focused on all aspects of virginity and purity. They also incorporated themes surrounding heteronormativity and healthy relationships.

Before continuing, it is important to define the two key terms of this section: virginity and purity. Virginity is most commonly defined as never having had vaginal sex. That term has been broadened to mean never having had penetrative sex of any kind. For the purpose of this paper, we will follow the definition provided by the books. This means that virginity is to be defined as never having engaged in vaginal intercourse. Purity is a bit a more complicated since it has a broad range of implications. Since most

of the references to purity are in conjunction with an area such as body, mind, emotions, ect., when purity is mentioned it will be defined as not engaging in anything sexual having to do with that particular area. For example, when purity of the body is mentioned that means not doing anything sexual with the body, which includes remaining a virgin, not engaging in oral sex or masturbation and so on. I will also be using the term "total purity" which refers to not letting anything sexual become a part of one's life.

All of the five books from the "Teen and Young Adult Dating" category stressed the importance of remaining a virgin for both men and women., viewing sex as a gift that God intended for a man and a woman to share in marriage. However, the books chose not to look at virginity as the only physical requirement for living a good, Christian life. Physical purity was also equally important and only to be shared between a man and woman in marriage. "So if you want to live a life of sexual integrity, you will be undivided in your devotion to sexual purity, refusing to be controlled by your sexual passions." (*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 24)

In most of the books this meant not engaging in anything blatantly sexual with a partner or by ones' self. For girls this manifested in strong warnings against compromising in the oral sex department. "...we hope you'll agree that oral sex outside of marriage is, in fact, sexual activity that you should refrain from altogether as a young woman of emotional and sexual integrity." (*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 175) For boys there was much negative discussion of masturbation, which, in the book *Every Young Man's Battle*, resulted in an entire section dedicated to discussing why masturbation is a sin and an activity that men should abstain from. For both genders, it meant limiting all physical contact with members of the opposite-sex. The belief is that

by limiting contact, people would be less tempted. While masturbation was discussed for girls, the emphasis on not engaging in oral sex was a stronger message, suggesting that when women engage in sexual activities, it is not for the purpose of seeking their own pleasure. The books explained this as women being more interested in seeking love and relationships, whereas men were more interested in sex than love and relationships. This promotes the gender stereotype that men are more interested in sex than women.

Emphasis on physical purity led many of the authors to discuss what is being called "technical virginity". "Technical virginity" as explained by many of the authors is when someone engages in any or all sexual activities except vaginal intercourse, thus keeping their virginity intact. However, by the standards of physical purity that are set by most of the authors, the people who engage in this behavior are not living physically pure lives. "Not to mention the fact that, although I technically remained a virgin, I wasn't keeping myself physically pure." (*When God*, p. 101) Technical virginity was used to emphasize that oral sex was not the same as a remaining a true virgin for women. For men, technical virginity focused on how masturbation was not being faithful to one's future wife. It was also explained that by masturbating to thoughts of other women, men were taking pleasure in something that was not theirs. Technical virginity was mentioned as either technical virginity or sexual purity when used in books aimed at both genders or just women. When it was used in books for both genders it was done in a gender neutral way, making it clear that men who received or performed sexual acts were only remaining technical virgins too. In the book written only for men it was not referred to as technical virginity, but as sexual purity only.

Demanding total physical purity was not enough for the authors of these books; the issue of purity was extended to purity in all areas of life, also known as "total purity". To be truly living God's will a person has to be pure of body, mind, emotion and spirit. "So sexual integrity is not just about remaining physically abstinent. It is about purity in all four aspects of your being- body, heart, mind and spirit." (*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 25)

The emphasis on remaining pure in all areas has to do with a recent emphasis on certain biblical scriptures and the interpretation of remaining pure and faithful throughout all of life. "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure." (*Hebrew 13:4*)(*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 194)

Many Christians within the purity movement are now taking that to mean that any emotional, physical, mental or spiritual behavior that is somehow intimate or sexual with a member of the opposite-sex who is not that person's wife or husband is adultery (Hickey 2013)(Treyas 2008). Many of the more devout Christians have begun to save everything about themselves for the person they marry. This includes anything from physical contact like kissing and holding hands to not investing any romantic emotions in a person until they are sure that it is the person they are supposed to marry, an idea that is echoed throughout many of the books. The emphasis on biblical scripture has also caused some in the purity movement, as well as the authors, to view anything that is not pure heterosexual relation in marriage as a sin. The result is what Manning has termed "queering heterosexuality" (2015), meaning that some have started equating heterosexual relations that happen outside of marriage as the same level of sin as homosexuality.

However, total purity is emphasized differently for men and women. In the books written for women, there was much greater emphasis on remaining not only bodily pure, but emotionally pure as well. This is most clear in the book *Every Young Woman's Battle*, where discussion of purity is almost always paired with an emphasis on remaining pure of emotions too. Total purity for men comes with a much greater emphasis on remaining sexually pure first. The focus on masturbation makes this the clear goal of the authors of *Every Young Man's Battle*. All of the authors advocated for total purity, but they emphasized different areas for men and women, suggesting that each would be more likely to fall into temptation in certain areas than others.

The secular books also focused a lot on abstaining from sex. While they did not approach it from the religious perspective, that remaining a virgin was God's intention, they did stress the consequences of engaging in sex too early, as well as the physical ramifications. "The best way to prevent getting a sexually transmitted disease is to practice abstinence (not having vaginal, oral or anal sex)." (*100 Questions*, p. 78) What is important to note here is the similarity in messages between all of these books, particularly regarding teens not having sex. In all of the books advocating for delayed sexual activity for teenagers and young adults, it becomes clear that it is not the idea of just the religious or secular communities, but is a goal supported by both sides. While the religious books tended to emphasize this in the idea of total physical purity being part of remaining faithful to one's spouse, the secular books stressed it as being more about an individual's decision to feel comfortable and safe. "Remember, you can always decide to be intimate later, but you can't ever take it back. So if you're not ready to have sex yet,

tell your partner, and stick with the decision you have determined is right for you."(*100 Questions*, p. 44)

### *Abstinence and "Second Virginity"*

The authors of religious books did not operate under the assumption that everyone would live up perfectly to the standards they set. Many of the authors themselves had fallen short of such high standards and they shared their personal stories of coming back to God and the right path. In those cases, what they stressed was the importance of God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness has many dimensions, from forgiveness for not remaining pure spiritually to giving away virginity to someone other than a spouse. While all the books stressed that while this was a serious sin, they also emphasized that the love of God was all consuming and that he would forgive someone who made a mistake, apologized for it and rededicated themselves to God. "If you're that [person who gave away your virginity before marriage], please make this the day when you commit to start again. It's never too late to say you're sorry to God. He knows everything about you, and He loves you anyway." (*The Chase*, p. 131)

Many view this as a "second virginity" of sorts, where a person who repented to God whole-heartedly would be forgiven and would be a virgin in the eyes of God again. However, merely apologizing was not enough. A person also had to recommit to remaining abstinent again. Abstinence is defined in this case as not just abstaining from vaginal intercourse, but all sexual activities. Making sure people know they will be forgiven was an important theme to many of the authors, particularly the ones who had failed in that area themselves. Taking the blame and shame away from their actions was an important part of the overall message many of the authors were trying to communicate

about God. Many feared that teens and young adults tend to view God as cruel and unforgiving. They wanted to enforce a more loving and compassionate image of God. The implication is that this would bring people back to God. Some of them expressed the fear that the Christian community is dwindling because people are sinning and believe that God would not forgive them, but if they knew that God would forgive them, then the hope was that they would rededicate themselves to the church. An important element of this forgiveness is that it is given to anyone and everyone. There was equal shaming for both genders if a person failed to remain a virgin. In the past, we have seen heavier shaming of women who fail to remain virgins, but all the authors equally enforce virginity as the standard for both men and women (Hartley and Drew 2001).

Many of the books also discussed the serious issue of sexual assault and rape. Since many victims feel that they were somehow to blame for these crimes, many of the authors emphasized reassuring young women that it was not their fault, that God still loves them and that they are still pure in the eyes of God. "Rape and promiscuity are entirely different things. If you have been raped do not make the mistake of believing that you are no longer pure or that you have no reason to save yourself any longer." (*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 76)

The authors also discussed the importance for women to not view rape as a loss of virginity. One of the authors was the victim of date rape and in her story, she explained her loss of self-respect and her disconnect with God. She also shared her trauma and the pain of not being able to discuss it with anyone for her fear of shame. "I was date raped, which I never told anyone about for fear that I would be blamed." (*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 11) All the authors writing to women worked to dispel the myth that women

should feel shame about being raped or sexually assaulted and that they should seek help from an outside source. They also worked to dispel the idea that a woman was no longer a virgin if she was the victim of completed rape. The authors assured women that God still viewed them as virgins and that only engaging in a consensual act of sex would make them non-virgins in his eyes.

This was an interesting contradiction to the conversation surrounding women's clothing that occurred in all of the books. While the authors emphasized that it was in no way the victims fault, in different parts of the books they enforced the idea that when women dressed a certain way they sent signals suggesting that they were sexually interested in men." 'Even though you don't intend to dress to catch guys, they can't avoid noticing you dressing the way you do. If you dress like a cute little plaything and present yourself as a toy, then boys will be boys and try to play with that toy.' "(*Every Young Woman's Battle*, p. 90) These contradicting messages can lead to women who act and dress a certain way to still blame themselves for a rape because they were behaving and dressing in a way that invited boys to view them as a sexual object.

The flip side of this discussion is that the authors who wrote specifically for men never discussed rape or sexual assault in any way. The closest they got was discussing men not "pressuring" women into sex or "wearing down" their defenses. In no way did they discuss non-consensual sex with a woman, and the importance of recognizing that when a woman says no, a man should respect that decision. This is similar to sex education courses, which also go into very little detail when discussing issues of rape and sexual assault (Weissbourd et. all 2014). These books also enforced the idea that men are blameless when they view women's clothing as an invitation to make sexual advances.



When discussing women's clothing options, all of the books framed it as the women's responsibility to dress modestly or risk the consequences of sexually stimulating men and then having to deal with their advances. "Dressing slutty will get you the quick attention, but not the kind of attention you really want or from the guys you want attention from." (*The Chase*, p. 71-72) At no point was the issue of men interpreting women's clothing as an invitation for sexual advances viewed as an issue. In fact, some books even portrayed men as being the victims to women's clothing choices, since it unfairly got them sexually excited without being able to have a proper release. "Because women can't relate, they have little mercy on us and rarely choose to dress modestly." (*Every Young Man's Battle*, p. 57)

A second problem with these discussions was that there was no discussion of men being raped. While the exact statistics for men being raped or sexually assaulted are unknown due to lack of reporting, according to RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest and National Network) three percent - or 1 in 33 of American men are victims of completed or attempted rape (2009). This also ignores the issue of non-heteronormative relationships. By portraying rape as something that only happens between men and women, these authors ignored sexual violence that happens in the queer community and further marginalizes the sufferers of that violence.

The secular books had a similar message to the religious books about the issue of rape and sexual assault. Like the religious books, they stressed the importance of victims not blaming themselves and urged victims to seek help for the abuse they suffered. "No one[...] has the right to force you to engage in any sexual activity or harass you sexually."

(*Being a Teen*, p. 178). The secular books also included resources such as websites and hotlines that could be visited for help.

## **Discussion**

There were many similarities between sex education books and public sex education classes. In this study I analyzed how gender stereotypes were similarly enforced and how virginity and abstinence were promoted as the only healthy expression for teenage sexuality. The books in this study had many differences from the sex education programs taught in public schools in the U.S. The books from "Teen and Young Adult Dating" all had blatantly religious messages. While the Waxman report found that some of the programs in the U.S. had religious messages, they were not quite as blatant as the ones in these books (2004). The secular books in these studies differed from public programs by providing much more comprehensive information about sex, gender, and relationships. However, some of these books impose many of the same gender messages and narrow ideas of healthy teen sexuality that public sex education programs have. This was most clear in regards to the use of gender stereotypes and the emphasis on virginity and abstinence. These findings suggest that teens and parents seeking sexual education materials are often presented with gender stereotypes that are likely to be interpreted as facts. Also, the narrow definition of healthy teen sexuality is limiting the discourse about alternative sexual behaviors and ignoring the existence of other healthy choices.

Like public sex education, women were given the role of "gate keeping", a term that refers to the guarding of their sexuality and the responsibility to control the sexuality of men. Unfairly placing this burden on women not only diminishes their sexual agency

and teaches them to be ashamed of it, but it also teaches men that they are unable to control their own sexual urges, thus limiting the agency of men. Men who choose not to be sexually active may be ridiculed by their peers. Those men who are sexually active may view this as an excuse to pressure women into sex or to justify using force. In the end, both genders are confined by a predetermined standard as to how they are supposed to behave sexually.

Also similar to public programs, these books enforced a gender dress code that solely targeted women. As part of their "gate keeping" responsibilities, women were instructed on how to dress in a way that would not sexually stimulate men. There was no similar discussion for how men should dress. The long term consequences of this enforces two things: it teaches women to objectify their own bodies and instructs men that they are not accountable for their actions. By enforcing the idea that women are judged by the way they dress and that their value as person is tied to that presentation of self, women begin to view themselves as objects whose worth is tied only to their bodies. Men also learn to view women as objects, specifically objects for their sexual pleasure (Brinkman and Rickard 2009). The constant objectification of women that we have seen leads men into thinking that they have a right to access a woman's body. In the long run, this causes women to feel disconnected from their own sexuality, thus limiting their sexual agency and pleasure, and furthers the view that force is an appropriate means for men to get what they feel they are entitled too.

There was also a similarity in the discussion of virginity and abstinence. A vast majority of sexual education programs in the U.S. are abstinence. The books also stressed this as the best and preferred option. A majority of the books, like public sex education

classes, discussed heterosexual marriage as the only place for sex. However, the books diverged from the message of the public sex education classes, instead focusing on total purity of the body, emotions, spirit and mind. This emphasis comes from the growing purity movement in the U.S. In this movement there is a new emphasis on remaining faithful to one's spouse before any type of meeting has occurred. The emphasis has produced many events, such as purity balls, that specifically target women and reinforce the idea that their virginity is one of their most valuable assets. A similar response has not been seen in regards to men's virginity. While all of the books in "Teen and Young Adult Dating" stressed the importance for both men and women to remain pure, it is important to note that only one of those five books only one was written exclusively for men. Of the other four books, one was written for both genders and the other three were written exclusively for women. So while all five of these books advocated for both genders remaining pure, the greater focus still seems to be on women remaining pure.

These books offered a glimpse into what teens and parents are buying about sex and dating. Since these are best-selling books we can begin to see what many Americans feel is important for teens and young adults to know about sex and relationships. Similarly, all of these books advocate that virginity and abstinence are always the best and safest options for all teens and young adults. More telling is how similar these messages were to the government funded sex education programs teens receive in public schools. While there were many differences in how the messages were told, the norms communicated by these books overwhelmingly supported gender stereotypes, virginity, and abstinence as the only option for teens and young adults.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

I was specifically interested in examining the way bestselling books communicated norms and beliefs about gender, relationships and sex to teens and young adults. The use of qualitative content analysis examined each text for these categories. The results of this study show how norms about gender and virginity are communicated in the popular books regarding dating and sex for teens and young adults. It also shows how the conversation around virginity is taken to the next level, making it not just about physical virginity, but having purity in all areas of life. These findings show that many of the popular books sold regarding relationships use messages that are similar to those found in the purity movement.

A limitation of this study was that I eliminated three books from the bestsellers list "Teens and Young Adults Sexuality and Pregnancy" because the style they were written in was not compatible with the rest of the books in the study. This meant that the secular side of society was underrepresented in this study because the majority of books that were secular came from the "Teen and Young Adult Sexuality and Pregnancy" bestseller list, whereas the books that came from "Teen and Young Adult Dating" were all religious in nature. It also meant that the category specifically looking at sex was also underrepresented; while some of the books from "Teens and Young Adults Dating" did address sex, it was in a very limited capacity. Another limitation was that I was only a coder in this study. This meant that my own personal biases were not checked by an outside party. While I attempted to recognize those biases and correct against them, it is doubtful that I was successful in eliminating them.

Future research in this area might attempt to examine more books from other bestsellers lists. There were other bestsellers lists on Amazon that addressed the issues of

gender, relationships, and sex; a content analysis of those books could prove very useful. Other studies also may benefit from a quantitative analysis of the books addressing how many times certain themes are brought up. It would also be interesting to interview readers of the books to assess what messages were most important to readers and which messages were disregarded.

**Table 1**

<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Intended Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Secular vs. Religious</b>	<b>Bestselling List and Bestselling Rank</b>	<b>Year Written</b>
<i>The Gender Quest Workbook**</i>	13-23	Both	Secular	Sexuality and Pregnancy Rank 1 Dating Rank 2	2015
<i>Changing Bodies, Changing Lives**</i>	13-19	Both	Secular	Sexuality and Pregnancy Rank 2	1998
<i>S.E.X.**</i>	14-23	Both	Secular	Sexuality and Pregnancy Rank 3	2007
<i>100 Question You'd Never Ask Your Parents</i>	11-18	Both	Secular	Sexuality and Pregnancy Rank 4	2013
<i>Being a Teen</i>	13-18	Both	Secular	Sexuality and Pregnancy Rank 5	2014
<i>The Chase</i>	13-22	Female	Religious	Dating Rank 1	2015
<i>When God Writes Your Love Story</i>	15- 23	Both	Religious	Dating Rank 3	2009
<i>Every Young Woman's Battle</i>	13-22	Female	Religious	Dating Rank 4	2004
<i>Every Young Man's Battle</i>	13-22	Male	Religious	Dating Rank 5	2002
<i>Praying for Your Future Husband</i>	13-17	Female	Religious	Dating Rank 6	2011

\*\*books eliminated from study

**Table 2**

Author Name	Book Title	Vocation	Author's Religious Affiliation	Author Relationship
Elisabeth Henderson and Nancy Armstrong M.D.	<i>100 Questions You'd Never Ask Your Parents</i>	Henderson: Sex Ed Teacher Nancy Armstrong: OB/GYN	N/A	Friends and co-authors
Jane Fonda	<i>Being a Teen</i>	Entertainer	N/A	N/A
Kyle and Kelsey Kupecky	<i>The Chase</i>	Kyle Kupecky: Christian recording artist and public speaker Kelsey Kupecky: Designer, actress, and public speaker	Christian	Husband and Wife
Eric and Leslie Ludy	<i>When God Writes Your Love Story</i>	Eric Ludy: President of Ellerslie Mission Society, public speaker and blogger Lisa Ludy: Public speaker and blogger	Christian	Husband and Wife
Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn	<i>Every Young Woman's Battle</i>	Ethridge: International conference speaker and certified life coach Arterburn: Founder and Chairman of New Life Clinics, creator of Women of Faith Conference national public speaker and minister	Christian	Friends and co-authors
Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker	<i>Every Young Man's Battle</i>	Arterburn: Founder and Chairman of New Life Clinics, creator of Women of Faith Conference national public speaker and minister Stoeker: Founder and Chairman of Living True Ministries and public speaker	Christian	Friends and co-authors
Robin Jones Gunn and Tricia Goyer	<i>Praying for Your Future Husband</i>	Both primarily authors	Christian	Friends and co-authors



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