



# They Were the Best and the Worst of Times: Reflections Illuminate Emerging Adults' Sexual Experiences

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Human sexuality courses are offered at most universities. Students often bring a breadth of experiences and a need for emotional processing of these narratives into these courses as it relates to course content. The purpose of this study was to expand research exploring emerging adults' sexuality narratives to be inclusive of positive stories.

**Methods** Guided by a semi-structured questionnaire, 113 students from two USA universities reflected in 2017 on their sexual history using an established educational activity asking students about their “best” and “worst” sexual experiences.

**Results** Qualitative analysis resulted in five themes describing their “Best” and four themes describing their “Worst” sexual experiences and one theme with dual meaning. “Best of” was highlighted by student themes of *romance, beyond intercourse, emotional intimacy, listening, and safety*. “Worst of” was highlighted by themes of *physical health factors, alcohol and/or substance use/misuse factors, exploitation and victimization, and feelings of shame*. The dual meaning theme of *firsts* emerged in both best of and worst of.

**Conclusions** Findings suggest that human sexuality courses must consider students' lived experiences. Further, we propose a call-to-action for clinically trained mental health professionals, such as social workers, as sexuality educators.

**Policy Implications** Universities should incorporate sexual health education policies that acknowledge students who bring a collection of sexuality stories to learning spaces. Centering a student's sexual voice also would support campus programs, policies, and interventions that benefit students. Finally, policies that guide professional accreditation of social work university programs to include sexual wellness content in the curricula are warranted.

**Keywords** Emerging adults · Experiential learning · Sex education · Qualitative research · University students

The promotion of sexually healthy adults is the purpose of sexuality education (Santelli et al., 2017), and studies have concluded that sexuality education improves behaviors, reduces risks, and improves health outcomes (Kirby et al., 2007).

However, comprehensive sexuality education is not being taught in most schools in the USA (Guttmacher Institute, 2019). According to SIECUS (n.d.), only 29 states and the District of Columbia require sexuality education to be taught in schools, while 35 states require schools to stress abstinence when sex education or HIV/STI instruction is provided. Only nine states require sex education or HIV/STI instruction to include information on consent. And while 11 states have policies that include affirming sexual orientation instruction on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities or discussion of sexual health for LGBTQ youth, eight states explicitly require instruction that discriminates against LGBTQ people. The impact of the abstinence-only until marriage (AOUM) movement cannot be overlooked when noting the erosion of comprehensive sexuality education in U.S. schools (Santelli et al., 2017). Due in part to this emphasis on AOUM programs during adolescence, and high school human sexuality instruction steadily decreasing (U.S. Department of Health and Human

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Services, 2015), human sexuality education in the USA has been largely relegated to institutions of higher education. It is critical to pause and highlight this educational gap. Many students enter university sexuality courses with little to no formal sex education, but often-rich lived experiences—experiences that must be considered within these university sexuality courses.

Human sexuality courses are often offered at the undergraduate level in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, social work, nursing, gender or women's studies, education, queer studies, and public health. Most public institutions in the USA and nearly 40% of private institutions offer a comprehensive human sexuality course (King et al., 2017). Alarming, a review of introductory-level university textbooks in biology, psychology, and anthropology highlighted that little attention is given to the positive aspects of human sexuality (Wilson et al., 2020) even though sexuality is most often such a salient element of emerging adult lives.

Of particular importance is research that helps us to understand how the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (18–29 years old) impacts sexuality education. The period of emerging adulthood is a developmental milestone marked by discovery, risk-taking, and change especially where adult roles are deferred while pursuing higher education and contemplating life goals (Arnett, 2015). The sexual lives of emerging adults have been studied in a myriad of areas; however, we contend that the scholarship could benefit from a richer understanding of students' sexuality narratives or backstories. Feminist theory values the lived social experience of people, creating knowledge from the actual day-to-day realities of groups who have traditionally been excluded from the production of academic knowledge. Pincock (2018) states that "...considerations of what empowerment looks like in relation to one's sexuality are particularly important in relation to schooling" (p. 909). This history provides critical events or details that have shaped students' sexual narrative up to this point. Students' lived experiences may provide a normative developmental perspective and be particularly revealing, thus helping to inform future teaching approaches.

### Limited Narrative: Risk Avoidance, Sex Negativity, and Pathology

Echoing a larger societal narrative on pathology and sex negativity, research on emerging adults' sexuality has often been dominated by a risk-avoidance focus around pregnancy and disease prevention (Allen, 2007). Other sex negativity issues have included alcohol and substance use/misuse and negative sexual experiences (Ford et al., 2021), sexual violence (Graham et al., 2021), and lack of sexual consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). In contrast, emerging research has noted the importance of examining sexual pleasure not only as human right but also as essential for sexual health (Coleman

et al., 2021). Further, while researchers have examined sexual narratives, many prescribe a definition of sex such as *initial coitus* (Schwartz & Coffield, 2021), thus limiting participant's lived experiences and potentially missing their nuanced meaning-making of sexuality experiences. Others (Anders et al., 2017) focus on penetration to determine if participants were sexually active by only looking at experiences about intercourse. Not only may this center heteronormativity and cisnormativity in this dominant framing, but it may implicitly privilege goal-oriented orgasm activities. For example, Struckman-Johnson et al. (2017) defined sex as engaging in self-masturbation, genital touching with another, and oral, vaginal, or anal sex. And while the results yielded a variety of responses about participants' positive and negative memories about sex, this study was limited in its focus on sexual experience in parked cars. Other studies (Opperman et al., 2014), while attempting to define sex more broadly, explicitly defined sexual activity as oral, penis/vagina intercourse, anal intercourse, and mutual masturbation.

### Missing Positive Narratives

The student's sexuality narrative is important. Bay-Cheng (2017) noted that students telling their sexual story through a timeline experienced higher sexual esteem immediately after completing the activity. Of note, the research posited that opportunities for retrospection and introspection may be more warranted and profound for those who experience violation and discrimination. Olmstead et al. (2021) suggested that sexuality education should help students make sense of meanings assigned to their sexual experiences.

An often-missing approach, the sex-positive framework (Dodd, 2020; Harden, 2014; Williams et al., 2013), highlights pleasurable sexuality and brings into consideration the rewarding aspects such as love, affection, and intimacy. Applying this framework in research on emerging adults could provide a lens to counter the pathological, risk avoidance, sex negativity narrative typically associated with research on this cohort.

### Foundational Research

Walters (2001) described an educational activity commonly used in college-level human sexuality courses where students are asked to anonymously write a brief narrative describing their best and worst sexual experience. This is an un-graded activity. Scholars have reported that students describe this activity as a valuable, fun, and memorable learning experience that is shown to aid students in re-evaluating their implicit and explicit norms related to human sexuality (Dupras, 2012; Walters, 2001). Walters (2001) notes, "students must perceive

that their own intellectual and affective experiences are valued and are recognized as important contributions to a discussion about sexuality” (p. 116). Walters acknowledges that students may feel challenged or surprised by the activity but notes that effective learning is a balance between challenge and support. While Walters provided a sample of student quotes as exemplars of best and worst experiences, there was no in-depth analysis of the themes. Examples identified for best experience included mutual love and physical pleasure. The article provided four quotes as exemplars and noted that students described others’ best experiences as “erotic, beautiful and personally relevant” (p.119). Examples provided for worst experiences included first/unplanned sexual intercourse, poor communication, and alcohol/substance use. Walters shared that sexual abuse, rape, or some other forms of sexual coercion typically make up 15–20% of responses.

Dupras (2012) elaborated on Walters’ (2001) semi-structured classroom activity by exploring how a reflection activity can be used to move students away from overly focused attention on how to “make love” to why “make love” (p. 174). Objectives of the activity included (1) build sexuality knowledge, (2) improve sexual practice, and (3) develop sexual autonomy. Dupras identifies an activity goal that encourages students “to see themselves not solely as a cognitive, but also as a social being” (p. 174) or “identification of the elements of a sexual situation belonging to a broader and more complex sexological system” (p 174).

## The Current Study

There is a dearth of scholarship that examines emerging adults’ lived experiences, specifically research that centers their best experiences through a sex-positive, pleasure-focused lens. Acknowledging these gaps in current sexuality literature, this qualitative study examines emerging adults’ sexual narratives: the best and the worst. We propose that emerging adults bring to the classroom a history, a sexuality backstory, which we posit that provides a foundational baseline for their interactions in the classroom as well as a lens in which they filter learning. While a previous publication (Turner & Pelts, 2022) demonstrated that students engaged in an active learning teaching model can utilize reflection, processing, and meaning-making with the Walters’ activity, the current study elaborates on Walters’ (2001) study. However, Walters’ paper described the activity process, offering a limited look at the themes. This study adds to the scholarship by bringing this classic sexuality education activity forward and applying thematic analysis to critically examine the narratives of students who participated in a re-creation of Walters’ activity. Research examining the full student sexuality experience may help how university sexuality courses are organized

and approached, specifically in content development. Knowing the audience of sex education is good practice. Further, student narratives can provide a rationale for the need of university-offered courses addressing human sexuality, especially those that move beyond a focus on reproduction and include a more holistic approach centered on pleasure, emotional intimacy, gender roles, sexual orientation, and relationship enhancement.

The goal of this research is to qualitatively explore a collection of human sexuality students’ narratives to answer the research question: What are the best and worst sexual experience descriptions of emerging adults enrolled in an undergraduate human sexuality course? To answer the research question, we replicated the best of, worst of reflective activity described by Walters (2001). Having explored the existing literature around sexual narrative, we present the methods of this study, followed by the results and a discussion of the findings. Finally, implications for human sexuality education and research are presented.

## Methods

Beginning with a student’s sexual story informs both theoretical and practical efforts to recognize and appreciate the discursive construction, the meaning-making, of their sexual narrative. Theoretical underpinnings of this research included emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015) and symbolic interactionism (Burr et al., 1979). To provide a framework for our discussions, we drew from de Lauretis’ (1991) queer theory, which moved us from the dominant discourse around *sex is bad* to supporting what has been defined as a radical experience to disrupt, deconstruct, and disorder (Mule, 2016) the disease, disaster, and dysfunction discourse of sexuality. This aim of queer theory to problematize unquestioned procedures (Hall, 2003) underpins our research.

Through an inductive approach and applying thematic analysis, we sought to understand the essence of emerging adults’ best and worst sexual experiences from multiple participants’ perspectives. The following research question guided this study: What are the best and worst sexual experience descriptions of emerging adults enrolled in an undergraduate human sexuality course? To answer the research question, we replicated the best of, worst of reflective activity described by Walters (2001). The ethics application was approved by the University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board (EthicsID 16050403) for this analysis to be undertaken.

## Researcher Positionality

At the time of data collection, all the researchers in this study worked as academics at public universities in the USA.

Three hold doctorate degrees, and one is pursuing her doctorate. All researchers currently teach, or have taught, human sexuality courses at the university level. Turner was involved with study design, data collection, and analysis, and Pelts was involved in study design and analysis. Both Frabotta and Pacey provided input on study design, were involved with data collection, and provided member checking by reviewing the data, results of analysis, and findings.

## Participants

Using a purposive selection method, the first author worked with co-investigators on this study to select the sites and classrooms for this study. Undergraduate students at two Mid-western universities in the USA were invited to participate in this study during their regularly scheduled human sexuality course. In keeping with Walters' (2001) original design, participants were not asked about their demographic information. Regarding undergraduate size and setting, both universities were classified as public, large, and primarily residential. Of the 121 students in the two classes, 8 elected to not participate in the research leaving 113 students (site 1  $n = 80$ ; site 2  $n = 33$ ).

## Data Collection

On day 1, the facilitator, a social work educator and certified sex therapist, informed students of principal investigator contact and university ethics board approval and provided Title IX (United States Education Amendments of 1972) and other supportive resources (e.g., student counseling center, community mental health center, sexual assault center). Resources were provided to ensure that students readily knew where to find and access support to address any stressful reactions generated by the potentially personal and sensitive nature of this activity.

Following the procedures outlined by Walters (2001), students were given a sheet of paper and the same type of writing utensil in an effort to ensure anonymity. Students were informed that the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study. If they chose to opt out of participating in the research, they were asked to write about what they wanted for their birthday as an alternate so that their peers would be unaware of their decision to not participate.

In an effort to avoid the coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001), students were informed that they got to define sexual experience and that it could be activities beyond vaginal/penile intercourse. Alternate activities such as anal intercourse and holding hands were noted by the facilitator. Students were asked to maintain silence and to keep their eyes on their own papers. Additionally, to provide structure and consistency, students were allotted 20 min minimum time for writing before they could excuse themselves while

the remaining students were allowed to finish. A total of 113 best of/worst of essays were collected. Each essay consisted of two parts. In part one, students described their best sexual experiences; in the second part, students described their worst sexual experiences.

## Analysis

An inductive approach using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was applied to explore and analyze the best of and worst of student narratives. Because the data consisted of handwritten essays by students, we elected to complete the analysis manually. Two investigators, Turner and Pelts, were the primary analysts with the other two authors, Frabotta and Pacey, providing a review and feedback of codes and themes. In the first step of analysis, two investigators read all the best of and worst of narratives to develop an overall awareness of the data. Following the comprehensive reading of the narratives, qualitative analysis was conducted consistent with the steps identified by Braun and Clark (2006). Initial coding of text included identifying significant and meaningful statements and phrases. Investigator one initially coded the best of narratives, and investigator two initially coded the worst of narratives. The investigators met to review results, and the review of content was reversed, so each investigator reviewed both the best of and worst of narratives. The two researchers reviewed the codes that emerged during this initial stage of coding to reach consensus on meanings, definitions, and preliminary themes. This round of coding resulted in 47 codes in the best of narratives, and 40 codes emerged in the worst of narratives.

To more deeply understand the narrative data, the next round of coding included clarifying and identifying connections within the data that were associated with each code. The labels and meanings of the codes were discussed by the investigators to ensure consistency and to ensure that the meaning identified in first round open-codes was included. This iterative and reflexive process allowed us to examine the essays again and organize the data. This process resulted in the identification of 18 codes in the best of narratives and 14 codes in the worst of narratives. A final stage of analysis involved sorting the codes into thematic categories.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the analysis was assessed in several ways. Credibility was established by the involvement of four investigators. Each investigator is experienced in qualitative methods, and three of the four were directly involved in data collection. One investigator, an established qualitative investigator, was involved in the study design, directly involved in data collection at all sites, and involved throughout the analysis. All investigators reviewed the study and the results for credibility.

To confirm qualitative findings and address the potential for bias, the two investigators who were not involved in initial data analysis but were involved in the data collection reviewed the results and findings. In our efforts to maintain trustworthiness of the findings, we applied the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014).

## Results

The qualitative analysis process resulted in ten themes. Results are presented in two sections, students' best sexual experience and students' worst sexual experience. One theme which had dual meaning is also presented. The uneven discussion of the following themes does not reflect their salience in the results. Generally, errors in grammar and punctuation were not corrected in the directly quoted content from student narratives.

### Best

Five overarching themes related to the best sexual experience emerged from students' narratives: (a) alternatives to intercourse, (b) importance of connection, (c) honoring self, (d) nostalgia, and (e) organic. Each of these themes, along with corresponding codes, is described with excerpts from students' narratives that illuminate the theme.

#### Alternative to Intercourse

Participants described sexual contact outside of the coital imperative of traditional intercourse (e.g., penis vaginal penetration) as their best sexual experiences. Codes such as holding hands, kissing, falling asleep together, making out, biting, oral sex, massage, anal finger fucking, hanging out, cuddling, and the use of sex toys informed the overarching theme.

#### Importance of Connection

Participants described their best sexual experiences as connecting on three different levels: connecting verbally, connecting emotionally, and connecting physically. Verbal connections included a wide spectrum of content, such as learning intimate details about their partner, as described in this statement:

I craved learning about his life, his family, and his future aspirations. I love learning the little things about people that no else knows. I love being trusted with this information by my partner.

Verbal connections also included talking about sex, as reflected in the statement: "we talked about our expectations

beforehand" and "he asked for consent (which was cool) and then we had great sex. I was happy for weeks after that." Finally, verbal connection included communicating verbally during sex, such as "you're going to be okay" and "he told me he loved me" and being praised and given verbal accolades before, during, and after sexual activity.

Connecting emotionally is described as actions and descriptions of feelings associated with a high level of bonding that resulted in heightened comfort or appreciation. This theme emerged from the codes: acceptance, humor, kindness, compatibility, harmonious, romance, equating sex with love, idealized love, and fairy book romance. Quotes that illuminated this theme included the following: "It was like a fairy tale. It was cute," "My boyfriend makes me feel loved every time we have sex," and "We laughed with each other...after the sex... we laughed about things until we fell asleep." One student shared,

There honestly wasn't anything exceptional about the sex itself, don't get me wrong it was good sex just not life-changing sex. What made it the *Best* sexual experience I can recollect is, first off the person I was with I cared about a ton (we were emotionally intimate with each other before being physical)

Connecting physically is described as physical attributes or features that contributed to a heightened level of relating resulting in the best sexual experience. One participant described a partner who was "out of my league; too attractive compared to myself" that defined their best sexual experience. Others described specific facial or body features of their partner that they found particularly attractive and sexually stimulating. Finally, participants used words such as "skin hunger" to describe their physical connection with their partner that contributed to the "best orgasm ever" or "multiple orgasms... I died and went to heaven."

#### Honoring Self

This theme is described as being honest and true to one's sexual self. Participants described honoring themselves in a best sexual experience by "not participating in sexual intercourse with a partner," choosing not to be sexual, and openly identifying as asexual, transgender, or gay or lesbian or bisexual.

#### Nostalgia

This theme was defined by a sentimental recollection of the best sexual experience because of the place, an association with an event, or a specific period in their life. Participants used statements such as "Looking back on it, this guy was sweet as pie and I definitely took it for granted," "All

I remembered is her eyes which I felt they could penetrate me,” “I can still smell the vanilla of the air freshener,” and finally, “I had good meaningful sex with someone on vacation in the Bahamas. It was late at night and we were on a lounge chair on the beach” and “In Greece (Island hopping) having intercourse on cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea (he was holding me up so I wouldn’t fall) a little/lot dangerous; dark out at night somewhat in public although hidden. Somewhat rough scratched his back while being held up (left scratch marks). My safety completely in his hands he literally held me from falling down cliffs.”

### Organic

The organic theme is described as a best sexual experience that occurred in a natural and unforced manner. Codes that informed this theme include a focus on pleasure versus performance and a lack of pressure. Participants described “not feeling enmeshed” and “not seeking distance”; however, concurrently, there was a “sense of [personal] wholeness and completeness” which allowed each person to enjoy the other. An enjoyment of the sexual experience was an outcome “without feeling like we are giving too much.” Participants also described being fully present by separating themselves from their smartphones and other technologies. Descriptions used by participants included the following: “It was as if no one else existed” and “didn’t have much to worry about or anything that required our immediate attention. The attention was on the experience and not on the orgasm.”

### Worst

Four overarching themes related to the worst sexual experience emerged from students’ narratives: (a) physical health factors, (b) alcohol and/or substance use/misuse factors, (c) exploitation and victimization, and (d) shame. Like the five themes that were presented describing participants’ best sexual experiences, each of the themes that describes the worst sexual experiences, along with corresponding codes, are presented with excerpts from students’ narratives that illuminate the theme.

### Physical Health Factors

Participants described physical health factors that contributed to their worst sexual experience as fears, specifically, fears related to pregnancy, fears of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and physical dysfunction. My worst sexual experience was “having sex with a random hookup & realizing that I might be pregnant. Good news, I wasn’t” and “I had a pregnancy scare last year... he was dismissive, not giving me the emotional support, I so badly needed in that moment. I’ve always wished he would have handled the situation a little

better.” Regarding ability to function physically, one participant described a partner who was experiencing difficulty and “he blamed me for his erectile dysfunction.”

### Alcohol/Substance Use/Misuse Factors

Participants also described mental health factors and alcohol or substance use/misuse that contributed to their worst sexual experiences. Participants described in detail how alcohol and/or substances negatively contributed to their sexual experiences stating, “He was drunk/high and I was completely sober, so that combination probably wasn’t the *Best*. It was gross.” “... it was drunk forced, and shameful.” Another student shared:

Him and I were really close but hooked up when we were drunk. The whole thing ended with me not enjoying the sex and crying over feeling like a shitty person since I knew he had a girlfriend. He left angry with me crying and we never talked about it since. Our friendship was mired, and we’re no longer friends, but I’ll see him around once in a while out and he’ll hug me and say hi as if nothing ever happened.

Additionally, one participant described that a partner’s addiction negatively impacted their sexual life. She described feeling defeated: “I wanted to help/save him and time after time it became too much.”

### Exploitation and Victimization

Participants described experiences of rape, being touched sexually without consent, incest, manipulation, and objectification. One student shared, “The worst sexual experience I have had was unwanted touching/grabbing that occurs at bars. These touches are uninvited and unprovoked. They anger me because I feel like a sexual object instead of a person.” Stories included a lack of consent, as recounted by this student.

I was at the beach. Some friends and I were drunk. One guy there was aggressively trying to finger/kiss me while no one was around. I verbally told him to stop and even tore his hands off my body. I’ve never felt worse about something sexual in my life. I ran away scared and confused that someone would do that and it wasn’t even as bad as it could have been...

Stories included relationships with a romantic partner who violated the participant. This woman added:

The ex-boyfriend, let’s call him Joe, started to get a little too touchy the more he drank. When there was a pause in conversation he reached over and kissed me. I was uncomfortable and told him to stop, but this time was different. Instead, he continued to kiss me and

deepen his grip on me. He was strong. I just decided to go with whatever he wanted. He fucked me, pulled up his pants and left. I cried for hours after and could not believe what had happened. I felt violated and alone. It was the worst (sexual) experience I have ever had.

Some violated students discussed a sense of need to act “normal” or to minimize their experience as less than traumatic, such as with the following:

My worst memory is when I was pressured to give this guy I hardly knew oral sex. It felt uncomfortable & scared & played it off like it wasn't a big deal even though it was... it changed my views on guys for a while.

A participant elaborated on the subject with their experience of sexually developing early.

Every time someone mentions my boobs I feel more and more dehumanized. When I was younger I bloomed early. Got my period at 11, had D cups in 5th grade and was looked at by everybody who was in my grade and a few grades older than me.

Incest was included in student experiences as documented by this participant who shared:

When I was younger I had a family member do sexual things to me. I was six or seven. My older brother and I were playing a board game in his room. Somehow we both ended up in our underwear dry-humping. I was scared and confused. He was about 11 or 12. I remember that he convinced me to take my underwear off so it would “feel better”, so I did. This happened a couple of times that day. Later that night my oldest brother, who was 13 or 14 came in and lay on top of me so his penis was on my butt. He told me to touch his penis.

### Feelings of Shame

Participants described experiences of self-blame, culpability, remorse, regret, humiliation, and embarrassment. These feelings of shame were illuminated by participants sharing stories such as the following:

The worst sexual experience I have ever had was when I was sexually assaulted in elementary school. A boy on the playground jabbed me between the legs and would not let go. I screamed for him to stop and pushed him down and ran inside to tell the teacher. The thing I remember most, however, was when my dad came to pick me up and asked me why I was crying. I remember feeling horrible, ashamed, and scared to tell him. I don't know why, because we have always had a good relationship.

Relationships suffered due to shame experienced by participants as documented by this student describing:

My worst was right after my boyfriend broke up with me. I had been cheating on him and he found out by looking through my phone. So, I was very emotionally & mentally disturbed at the time. I ended up at my guy friend's house and we were cuddling, but he was pushing it further. I never really said no, but it was also obvious that I was not into it. We ended up having sex and I would not in any way say I was raped, but it just made me feel worse about myself. After that day we hung out a couple of more times, but then I stopped speaking to him and it has been five years since we've spoken.

One student related her shame in being “caught,” judged, and made to feel “humiliated” as detailed here:

... getting caught in the bathroom of a bar by a bar staff member. It started out great, thrilling because this was the first time my boyfriend and I attempted “sex in public” sort of thing. It turned bad when, after we emerged from the bathroom (thinking we were so sly) a bouncer from the bar told me and my boyfriend we had to leave the bar immediately. I was so humiliated and enraged. It's a fucking bar... (still pissed). I think this sexual experience was one of the worst because it was a harsh learning experience and attached a connotation of shame to sex for me –which I didn't appreciate.

### Dual Meaning

In addition to the five themes that described best sexual experiences and four themes that described worst sexual experiences, there was also one additional theme. The theme of firsts emerged in the narratives of both the best of sexual experiences and worst of sexual experiences. First was defined as the first-time experiencing sex, the first time with a lover, or the first time experiencing a particular sexual activity. Participants described how their first experiences were descriptive of their best experiences with quotes such as “It was very intimate and sensual as we were both extremely close and both our first time,” “By best sexual experience was when I was 16, I had this first boy ever really interested in me,” and finally “The other person did not know it was my first intercourse sexual experience which took the pressure off (I chose to purposely not disclose that).” Interestingly, this person notes that their best time did not follow the traditional definition of success, sharing,

My best sexual experience is ... the first time I had sexual intercourse. Most people say their first time is bad but even though neither of us had an orgasm or finished it was an amazing moment to share. We spent a lot of time connecting emotionally.

Likewise, this person noted their best sexual experience did not follow the intercourse-centric narrative, detailing her experience as:

My best experience was the first time I was ever eaten out. It was something that made me feel self-conscious to think about & nervous but my boyfriend just did it once, like it just kind of happened, and I felt closer to him than after the first time we had like penis & vagina sex.

Conversely, participants described how their first experience was also their worst sexual experience with memories such as, “The first time I topped, he was dirty.” Other students first experience echo themes of shame, alcohol/ substance use/misuse, forced, and differing reflections. This student disclosed her worst as:

The first time I was with the love of my life it was drunk forced, and shameful. We were young and in high school and I wanted to show him I wanted to be with him. It was on the sink of a classmate’s bathroom. I was on my period and it wasn’t enjoyable. When we reflected on this night we had very different opinions on what happened. We went on to date for three years but I still regret it.

In another first-time story, the following depiction counters the societal narrative that men always enjoy any sex. Here, a male student openly shares his disappointment caused by feeling “awkward” and “unsure” and ultimately revealing his feeling of pressure to meet the orgasm requisite as follows:

This was both of our first times so it was more awkward and unsure of what good rather than enjoyable... it was very apparent that neither of us was enjoying it. After a while, I just pretended to cum so it could be over. I took off the condom, kissed her goodnight, and left. Horrible night.

## Discussion

This study uniquely adds to the current body of sexuality research by revisiting a popular sexuality education activity, Walters’ (2001) reflective activity. More specifically, it highlights the importance not only of student sexuality stories. It sets the stage for social work educators practicing from a sexual wellness lens to create a space for this meaningful activity (Turner & Pelts, 2022). These lived sexual experiences of emerging adults in the USA illuminate using participant-defined sexual experiences. From a research standpoint, this paper is particularly important because it demonstrates how students’ sexual experiences are rich, diverse, and include not only negative but often under-reported positive sexuality experiences. Replication of Walters’ study is warranted because, while Walters identified several best and worst themes and provided a sample

of student quotes as exemplars, there was no in-depth analysis of the themes. This replication makes a significant and meaningful difference to the sexuality scholarship by expanding upon Walters’ description offering a comprehensive thematic analysis of results. This collection of sexual selfhood stories highlights not only a moment in time but also a process of revision as students curate, compose, and communicate a sexual narrative. People are natural storytellers, and our students have sexual stories that need to be recognized. This study provides rich rationale for universities offering a sexuality course. More importantly, these crucial courses must offer a reflective element beyond traditional anatomy lessons—meaning instructors must be able to engage in processing student emotions and experiences that underpin their interaction with the course material. According to Turner (2020), this processing of emotions is a core social worker skill who often have advanced interpersonal skills, as well as training to explore sensitive topics positioning them to be ideal sexuality educators.

Overall, the best of theme is notable for two reasons. First, it values positive sexual experiences including a discourse that acknowledges and celebrates sexual pleasure, enjoyment, and positivity as a primary goal for emerging adults. Creating a narrative around pleasure and positivity that is more than just centering on physical orgasms helps to normalize that often, the best sexual experiences are not dependent on intercourse, but rather emotional intimacy, self-honoring, and meaningful, organic experiences. Findings echo the work by Astle et al. (2021), who found that students want education that specifically discusses diverse sexual behaviors and the social, emotional, and relational aspects of sex.

The second reason is highlighting the importance of developing a sexual voice. The process of telling one’s sexual story and carefully curating the narrative follows previous research on the importance of developing a sexual voice (Turner & Crane, 2016). It was noted that this is a crucial developmental step because while some people have the opportunity to engage through traditional peer groups, not all people have this opportunity. A class group process activity may help facilitate students finding and flexing their sexual voice.

Of particular interest is the first finding, alternatives to intercourse, which emphasizes that people’s actual experiences of their sexuality are more nuanced. Overall, this theme mirrors the findings by Beckmeyer et al. (2021), which noted that student reported pleasurable sexual experiences that were positively related to preparedness, desire, and feelings of closeness. Specifically, participant stories highlight that lived stories extend the notion of great sex beyond an intercourse-centric pop culture definition. The second finding, importance of connection, underpins the importance of a holistic approach to sexuality education that discusses more than reproduction and includes essential



elements such as emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy (Dailey, 1981), defined as risk-taking, vulnerability, and being known, was illuminated by students as a factor of best of sexual experiences. This may speak to a critical skill needed by sexuality educators around processing emotionally heavy material. The third finding, honoring self, which is defined as participants being honest and true to one's sexual self, was illuminated in the best of stories. Sexual self-esteem may need a place in reflective exercises and class discussions as a part of exploring this aspect of best of sexual experiences. Sexuality educators may want to offer space for students to have a comparative discourse around sexual self-esteem in relation to a culture of valuing social media likes. Further, sexuality lessons might include a critical analysis of honoring a sexual self against the concept of rape culture. Exploring the nuances of vulnerability and the importance of emotional intimacy against the backdrop of sexual truth may also play a key role in sexuality lesson plans.

Also compelling were the results identifying the worst of themes echoing Finger's (1992) sentiment that people frequently associate their sexual experiences as their most profound source of pain and their deepest source of oppression. These worst of themes serve as a reminder of the importance of providing emerging adults comprehensive, age-appropriate, accessible, medically accurate, shame-free, inclusive, and pleasure-affirming, sex-positive informed sexuality education. This approach should encompass not only the biopsychosocial aspects of sexuality but practical relational advice that improves skills and tools that contribute to positive sexual outcomes. The first finding, physical health factors, highlights the importance of sexuality education on college campuses. Emerging adults can feel isolated and fearful about their sexual wellbeing. Hearing these stories may normalize sexual experiences and provide students an opportunity to change their sexual scripts moving forward. Human sexuality courses that include experiential and process-oriented material may be desired more by and have more value for students than those focused on theory or information-only courses.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students reported histories of sexual abuse and trauma as well as challenges associated with sexual dysfunction and alcohol and/or substance use/misuse (finding 2). A strong rationale can be made that a course incorporating a process-oriented focus that acknowledges a students' backstories may have significant meaning to students. This warrants human sexuality educators skilled in processing challenging conversations and facilitating meaning-making.

The third finding, exploitation and victimization, highlights the notion that the study of sexuality could benefit from feminist critiques that guide us in questioning the influence of control and patriarchy and personal agency (Fahs & Plante, 2017). Moreover, while some universities are

beginning to implement mandatory online sexuality courses for incoming students focused on sexual violence, consent, and alcohol (Deme, 2016), these courses often fail to balance discussion with the joys of sex leading to student-led and organized campus events known as Sex Week (Quenaqua, 2012). According to students, these events often are in reaction to classroom lectures that lack practical, real-life advice for students, thus reinforcing our argument that sexuality education must be based in a holistic model that addresses contemporary, inclusive, practical approaches. Sexuality courses that provide rich content on areas that have traditionally been a part of social work expertise; consent, power, rape, and relationship enhancement, as well as a process element to engage students, can bolster universities' commitment to sexual violence prevention/education programs. The connections made between holistic sexuality education and sexual violence prevention are important. This is an opportunity for social workers, skilled in community engagement, to liaise the academic sex education with university prevention/response programs. Our approach in education and student support can acknowledge power, oppression, and pleasure together—as the students naturally could do in this activity.

Students may have a lack of sexuality education prior to entering higher education that contributes to misunderstandings, myths, and misinformation. Further, this research indicates student stories steeped in sexual negativity. The fourth finding, shame, is crucial for sexuality educators to recognize and maybe help students reframe as a “message that something in our emotional experience requires attention” (Glickman, 2005, chapter 4, para 4). A sex-positive (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017) grounding may help counter student shame. Social workers may be advantaged in processing emotionally laden sexual material.

## Limitations

Limits to the generalizability of this qualitative study include students who chose to enroll in a human sexuality course that may be more comfortable talking about their sexual experiences, and students may experience recall bias. This sample was predominantly women, with students presenting as White and female; however, a limitation is that we did not ask for student demographics opting to maintain fidelity to Walters (2001) original activity description. Future studies should explore sexual and gender identity as categories as well as age and the diverse ethnic backgrounds of emerging adults in different college environments (e.g., urban commuter colleges, historically Black colleges). Understanding how individuals from diverse backgrounds describe sexuality will inform more robust scholarship. Results should not be generalized to non-college students or to all college students. Additionally, despite this being an un-graded

activity, the fact that the instructor was present in the room may have influenced students due to social desirability (King, 2022). Despite these limitations, our findings have implications for consent, substance use, sexual health, and sexual education courses on college campuses.

### **Policy Implications: University Sexuality Education Programs/Courses**

Our findings have important policy implications, particularly for emerging adult sexual health education, suggesting that sexual health interventions and campus programs should not solely focus on risk avoidance but be sex-positive and inclusive of relationship enhancement and pleasure. Centering student sexual voices in campus sex education and consent programming is recommended. We know that individuals who have comprehensive and accurate information about sex make informed decisions that result in better sexual health outcomes, reduced homophobia, reduced sexual violence, and increased sexual satisfaction (Case & Stewart, 2010; Kirby et al., 2007). Because we know that many emerging adults in the USA do not receive comprehensive sexuality education during adolescence (Guttmacher, 2019), the obligation of higher education to meet this unmet need is even greater. As we begin to think about how we can fulfill this obligation, it is imperative that we develop campus programming that considers students' perspectives. Further, universities should consider programming facilitated by qualified sexuality education staff. It is recommended that universities create policies that target filling campus staff positions such as sexuality outreach coordinator positions with certified sex educators through the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). Teaching human sexuality may also benefit from a certified sexuality educator, such as a licensed clinical social worker, who can facilitate group processing and reflection.

### **Policy Implications: Social Work Accreditation**

The content breadth of participant stories and a need for emotional processing is a call-to-action for social workers or other clinically trained mental health professionals to develop and offer human sexuality subjects as a larger service course to the university. It is also suggested that university sexuality courses be taught that incorporate student meaning-making by trained mental health professionals with skills in emotional processing and reflection. This would require a bold move warranting policies that guide professional accreditation of social work university programs to include sexual wellness core competencies within social work training.

Results of this qualitative study highlight the variety of negative and positive lived sexual experiences that students enter higher education with or experience within their time at university. Engaging students in meaning-making should be re-prioritized as a significant and critical area of sexuality education. Given the breadth of these experiences, shame and substance use to emotional intimacy and authenticity, it could be argued that students could benefit from a sexuality educator who is also a social worker trained in a holistic biopsychosocial-sexual framework (Turner, 2020).

### **Policy Implications: Research**

Sexuality scholars continue to examine and expand upon teaching about sexuality in higher education (Hillock, 2021). As we continue to modify and seek to improve the content and delivery of human sexuality courses on college campuses, it is important to evaluate the use of activities. Research on how people re-story their sexual narrative over time by comparing their experiences to others can serve as a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of reflection and process activities. Research that continues to elaborate on emerging adults' definitions of sexuality, illuminating how sexual behavior terminology is categorized, is crucial. Perhaps more importantly, in-depth research is needed that illuminates meaning-making of sexuality for emerging adults, and more directly explores how process and reflective-oriented sexuality courses differ from more theory-based courses. These actions are more easily adopted with the support of university policies that prioritize student sexual wellbeing within a comprehensive health approach. Making sexuality a part of overall research aims, and providing ethics review boards that are sex-positive and sexually literate, is highly recommended to fulfill these goals.

### **Conclusions**

This paper adds a sex-positive, strength-focused perspective to the current body of literature on emerging adults' sexuality. This study speaks to the richness of student sexuality narratives, specifically noting positive experiences. Engaging students in meaning-making should be re-prioritized as a significant and critical area of sexuality education. More importantly, this research reinforces the need for university policy that should be inclusive of sexuality education that embraces the tough but often rewarding conversations around pleasure, emotional intimacy, and relationship tools in meeting student learning. Further, university policy makers must acknowledge that students bring a collection of sexuality stories to their higher learning experience.

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## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** Ethics application was approved by The University of Southern Mississippi, Institutional Review Board (Ethics ID 16050403) for this analysis to be undertaken.

**Consent to Participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Consent for Publication** Not applicable.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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