



Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life: Using Popular Movies to Navigate Sexual Initiation¹

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This study examines virginity-loss movies as tools for navigating early sexual life. Data come from qualitative content analyses of 25 movies and in-depth interviews with 61 socially diverse women and men, focusing on 28 participants who reported using movies to make sense of virginity loss. Films are open to multiple interpretations and young people use them creatively, both prospectively and retrospectively. Discrepancies between participants' personal stories and the scripts in nominated films were patterned by gender and "nonideal" experiences were resolved more positively in movies than in real life. Such discrepancies may increase feelings of distress after "imperfect" virginity-loss encounters.

KEY WORDS: adolescence; culture; mass media; sexuality; text and meaning; virginity loss.

INTRODUCTION

Virginity loss, an experience widely perceived as one of the major turning points in sexual life, is, not coincidentally, one of the most common themes in media depictions of teen sexuality (Carpenter, 1998, 2001). Popular TV shows such as *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) and *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–present); movies such as *American Pie* (1999) and *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005); and magazines such as *Seventeen* and *CosmoGirl!* consistently juxtapose adolescents intent on giving their virginity to a “true love” with devotees of casual sex and youth who see first sex as a step in growing up. In short, more than one understanding—or script—for virginity loss is available in U.S. popular culture today.

How adolescents who are exposed to multiple interpretations of virginity come to prefer one over the others was one of the questions that inspired me to undertake a qualitative study of virginity loss in the contemporary United States (Carpenter, 2005). Among the issues covered in my interviews with 61 socially diverse women and men was how, when, and from whom

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they learned about virginity loss and sexuality. My interview guide included a series of open-ended items specifically about virginity loss in movies, television, magazines, pornography, and other mass media. Though media texts are multivalent, they tend to guide audiences to particular interpretations (Hall, 1980); therefore, I expected that participants would report being influenced chiefly by media texts that attributed the same meanings to virginity loss as they did. For example, a man who was ashamed of being a virgin might recall watching many TV shows that depicted virginity as a stigma. Yet, many of the people I interviewed remembered being influenced by materials in which their own views about virginity were minimized or absent. Others reported using media retrospectively, to make sense of experiences after the fact.

This article explores young people's use of media texts through an analysis of the interviews I conducted and the popular films cited in those interviews. The questions motivating this study are: What cultural scenarios for virginity loss appear in movies? How do these scenarios map to the interpersonal scripts that unfold in young people's lives? What uses—prospective and retrospective—do individuals make of virginity-loss movies in their own lives, especially given those movies' multivalence? How do people negotiate discrepancies (or similarities) between movies and real life?

DEFINING TERMS

It is worth clarifying what I mean by virginity loss. Although most Americans define virginity loss as occurring the first time a woman or man engages in vaginal sex, many disagree as to whether virginity can be lost through other sexual practices, such as sex between same-sex partners, heterosexual oral or anal intercourse, and rape (Berger and Wenger, 1973). All the heterosexual women and men I interviewed said they lost their virginity through vaginal sex, whereas many of the lesbian respondents reported losing their virginity via oral or anal sex with same-sex partners (Carpenter, 2005). Out of respect for this diversity, I defer to individuals' own understandings rather than imposing a single uniform definition on their experiences. Notably, all but three of the films I viewed for this project unquestioningly equate virginity loss with first vaginal sex. *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995) implies that women can lose their virginity with one another and *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997) features a debate about whether, and through what sexual acts, a woman can lose her virginity with another woman. In *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), three friends question, but ultimately affirm, the vaginal sex virginity loss equation as they discuss the relationship between (unspecified) foreplay and virginity. As Dionne (Stacey Dash) puts it: "My man is satisfied, he's got no cause for complaints. But technically, I am a virgin."

SEXUAL SCRIPTS AND MEDIA RECEPTION

Three bodies of literature inform the present analysis: the scripting approach to sexuality; sociological studies of media reception and the uses of culture; and interdisciplinary research on mass media's effects on adolescent sexuality.

Sexual Scripts

Developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), the sexual scripts approach conceptualizes people's sexual lives as governed by socially learned sets of desires and conduct in addition to (or instead of) biological forces. Sexual scripts exist at three interrelated levels (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, 1987). At the societal level, the *cultural scenarios* created and disseminated by social institutions like mass media serve as sexual "roadmaps" that people can consult to guide their choices about when, where, how, why, and with whom they should be sexual. The virginity-loss stories featured in movies are cultural scenarios. A variety of cultural scenarios may be simultaneously available in a single society; however, some scenarios may be perceived as specific to particular social groups, such as gay men or heterosexual women. At the level of social interaction, people "write" *interpersonal scripts* when they interact with one another, influencing and being influenced by one another's sexual conduct and beliefs. Interpersonal scripts often entail improvisations on cultural scenarios, as when potential sexual partners see different behaviors as ideal and must find ways to compromise. The individual, or *intrapsychic*, level of scripting refers to people's particular desires, fantasies, and intentions (which are shaped by cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts). The present analysis focuses on the cultural and interpersonal levels of sexual scripts.

Media Reception

Mass media play a major role in transmitting cultural scenarios for sexuality. Media images typically reflect the prevailing values and behaviors of the societies in which they are created and, in turn, help reproduce those values and behaviors (even as media content changes over time, in ways that both reflect and foster social change) (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980; McCracken, 1993; Pleasance, 1991). Yet, people are not uncritical consumers of media messages, nor are the meanings of media products fixed and unitary. Rather, consumers actively negotiate among multiple meanings, albeit within limits set by the texts.

Many studies of media reception have focused on how members of particular social groups interpret media products to fit their own needs and interests. For example, Shively (1992) found that American Indian and Anglo men

living in a reservation town interpreted movie Westerns in similar—but by no means identical—ways. Both groups identified with the white “good guys” rather than the Indians, and deemed action, beautiful landscapes, and happy endings to be Westerns’ essential ingredients. However, the Indian men especially valued the movies’ celebration of the free and independent “cowboy way of life,” whereas the Anglo men enjoyed the movies as authentic portrayals of pioneer history. College-educated Indians living off the reservation, on the other hand, identified with the Indian characters and felt that Westerns were racist. In short, people’s social locations profoundly influence their interpretations of cultural products. Shively concluded that the men in her study used Westerns to affirm their ethnic groups’ values, ideals, and way of life, and as a fantasy realm in which to explore value conflicts. (For additional work on uses and interpretations of culture, see Griswold [2000], Swidler [2001, 2008], and Vaisey [2008].)

Teens and Mass Media

Many parents, politicians, religious leaders, and journalists take it for granted that mass media have powerful, largely deleterious effects on adolescents’ sexual lives. But until recently, few empirical studies attempted to assess this claim. Surveys routinely find that teenage boys and girls cite mass media as one of the top sources from which they have learned about sexuality (Harris *et al.*, 1991; Steele, 1999; Strasburger, 1997). However, many adolescents also say that they distrust the information they obtain from the media and that they more often follow the advice of friends and family members (Treise and Gotthoffer, 2002). Nor are teens’ interpretations of media products any more monolithic than adults’. For example, Ward and colleagues (2002) found that college students’ perceptions of sexual relationships on prime-time TV series were patterned by gender and preexisting beliefs about sex. Brown *et al.* (2006) found that sexual content in media differentially impacted white and African-American teens’ sexual behavior.

Still, many adolescents report consciously emulating *some* of the behaviors they see in media and assessing their own beliefs and actions in comparison. Ethnographic and interview studies by McKinley (1997), McRobbie (1994), and Christian-Smith (1990) (among others) reveal that young women consult mass media images to guide their decisions about sexual activity and other aspects of life (see also Radway, 1984). Of particular interest is Steele’s (2002) exploration of the ways a racially diverse group of adolescent men and women interpreted and used movies. Drawing on focus groups, media journals, “room tours,” and in-depth interviews, Steele found that although study participants’ movie preferences and the social activities surrounding movie viewing were patterned by gender and race, one film—*Higher Learning* (John Singleton, 1995)—struck a chord across social groups. Teens used this explosive tale of race relations and sexuality not only to reaffirm their existing

beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality, but also to question those beliefs and to entertain new perspectives. On balance, mass media appear to play a reinforcing role in sexual socialization, with youth generally attending to materials that reinforce their existing beliefs and values, but sometimes using media to explore new approaches.

Longitudinal studies have linked youths' sexual conduct to their consumption of media with sexual content. Brown *et al.* (2006) found that 12–14 year-old white boys and girls exposed to media diets high in sexual content—based on a measure weighting the frequency of sexual content in movies, TV shows, music albums, and magazines each teen used regularly—were significantly more likely to have had sex by ages 14–16 than white teens with media diets lower in sexual content, even after controlling for other predictors of sexual activity. The relationship was not statistically significant for black teens, possibly because (as the authors contend) black youth formed their sexual expectations earlier than white youth or because (as Milkie's [1999] research suggests) the relative absence of people "like them" in most media enables black youth to dissociate themselves from media depictions of sexuality.

METHODS

Data for this article come from two sources: 61 interviews with a diverse group of young adults and 25 movies they cited as having prospectively or retrospectively influenced their understandings of virginity. More specifically, I focus on the 14 women and 14 men who mentioned specific movies and the 20 films that explicitly address virginity.

Interviews

In 1997–1998, I interviewed 33 women and 28 men, aged 18 to 35, about their beliefs and experiences related to virginity loss. They came from diverse racial-ethnic, social class, and religious backgrounds and about two-thirds self-identified as heterosexual, while one-third self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (GLBQ). (See Table I.) Fifty-six described themselves as nonvirgins at the time of the study; their average age at virginity loss was 16.4.

To locate study participants, I used a theoretically-driven snowball sample (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).³ My chief theoretical concern was representing diverse social backgrounds and a range of sexual

³ Snowball sampling helped me locate members of numerically rare and relatively invisible groups, like GLBQ men and women and "secondary" virgins, and to overcome people's reluctance to participate in research on topics perceived as private. To enhance sample diversity and to offset the relative homogeneity of most social networks, I began 17 snowballs and interviewed no more than five people in each.

Table I. Interview Participants (All Compared with Movie Nominators)

	Entire Sample (N = 61)	Movie Nominators (N = 28)
<i>Gender</i>		
Women	54.1 (33)	50.0 (14)
Men	45.9 (28)	50.0 (14)
<i>Racial-Ethnic Background</i>		
White	78.7 (48)	78.6 (22)
African American	9.8 (6)	3.6 (1)
Latino/a	6.6 (4)	7.1 (2)
Asian American	4.9 (3)	10.7 (3)
<i>Age/Generation</i>		
18 to 25	54.1 (33)	53.6 (15)
26 to 35	45.9 (28)	46.4 (13)
<i>Religious Affiliation (Current)*</i>		
Mainline Protestant	34.4 (21)	21.4 (6)
Conservative Protestant	16.4 (10)	17.9 (5)
Roman Catholic	26.2 (16)	17.9 (5)
Jewish	13.1 (8)	21.4 (6)
None/atheist	9.8 (6)	21.4 (6)
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Heterosexual	63.9 (39)	57.1 (16)
Lesbian, gay, bisexual	36.1 (22)	42.9 (12)
<i>Social Class Background**</i>		
Middle class	67.2 (41)	71.4 (20)
Working class	32.8 (20)	28.6 (8)
<i>Interpretation of Virginity (at Time of Virginity Loss***)</i>		
Gift	31.1 (19)	25.0 (7)
Stigma	31.1 (19)	32.1 (9)
Process	31.1 (19)	39.3 (11)
Honor God	1.6 (1)	0.0 (0)
Irrelevant	4.9 (3)	3.6 (1)

*Current religious affiliations match religious backgrounds with the exception of one mainline Protestant and one Roman Catholic who became conservative Protestants as adults.

**As measured by parental education and occupation.

***At time of interview, for virgins.

beliefs and experiences. After locating initial respondents through professional contacts and special-interest organizations, I then asked each person to recommend others who might be willing to participate. Because snowball samples are neither random nor representative, they cannot be used to establish the overall distribution of beliefs or behaviors in a broader population. However, a sufficiently diverse snowball sample is well-suited for illuminating the range of ideas and experiences available in a given social group (like young adults in the United States), and the ways that they are patterned by social identity. When I express my findings in terms of statistical patterns, I do so not to imply that they can be generalized to young Americans as a whole, but to give a more precise picture than is possible through qualitative expressions like “some” and “most.”

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours and covered topics including the definition and meaning of virginity loss; sources of information about virginity loss; and the respondent’s personal sexual

history, particularly experiences related to virginity loss. The interview segment on information sources began with the statement: "Now I'd like to talk about how you learned about virginity—not only what it was, but also what affected your ideas about it." After a series of questions about people with whom the respondent "ha[d] talked with about virginity" (family, peers, teachers, doctors) and before questions about formal sex education and religion, I said:

Now I'd like to ask about what you may have seen or heard about virginity from some different kinds of mass media. Do you remember seeing or hearing anything about virginity from television programs? Movies or videos? Magazines? Books/novels? Comic books? Radio? Pornography? Any other sources?

For each type of media, I asked a series of follow-up questions.

Which ones? When did you see them? What did you see/hear/learn? Did you discuss what you heard/saw/learned with anyone? Did you find what you heard/saw/learned helpful? How/when?

These conversations were often less structured in practice, allowing respondents to highlight issues that mattered to them, but every interview covered the same categories of information. Movies and other mass media also came up spontaneously at other points in the interviews.

Some participants mentioned specific characters and plot points, while others discussed films and their content in more general terms. I did not ask which sources of information had been most influential, although some participants offered such rankings. Most responded to my questions about the timing of media exposure in broad terms (e.g., "that movie *Nine 1/2 Weeks*, everyone ... rented it in high school"; Marcy Goldberg, 27, white, heterosexual), making it difficult to develop detailed chronologies of media influences. (All respondent names are pseudonyms.) The interviews' retrospective nature no doubt precluded greater specificity for some in my study. However, broad answers like Marcy's and the context of respondents' comments enabled me to determine whether they consumed specific media sources before or after virginity loss. Many described movies (and other media), along with parents and peers, as relatively early sources of information—in elementary or middle school. Only one, Kelly Lewis (24, white, heterosexual), recalled a film as her first exposure to the concept of virginity.

There was a movie, and everybody was talking about it in fourth grade, called the *Last American Virgin*. I had no idea what that was. And I asked my mom what a virgin was. I don't remember her answer But that's I think where I, the first time I ever heard the word virgin.

To analyze the interviews, I relied on a modified form of the systematic inductive procedures referred to as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Rather than imposing my preconceived notions about how people might interpret virginity loss, I read transcripts of each interview multiple times, allowing salient themes to emerge. Through this procedure, I discovered that almost everyone in the study made sense of virginity loss through

one of three metaphors, comparing virginity to a gift, to a stigma, or to a step in the process of growing up (aka, rite of passage). (For more details on this analysis, see Carpenter [2005].) At the time of their own virginity loss (or the interview, in the case of virgins), 19 people saw virginity as a gift, 19 as a stigma, and 19 as a step in a process. One virgin heterosexual woman (a devout conservative Protestant) likened premarital virginity to an act of worship and three nonvirgin gay men (from diverse backgrounds) described virginity as irrelevant to their own experiences.⁴ Each of these metaphorical interpretations suggests an ideal script—a cultural scenario—for virginity loss (detailed below). These interpretations were neither static nor sharply bounded. Many participants were familiar with metaphors to which they did not personally subscribe. One-third of the people I spoke with reinterpreted virginity over time, typically (in 17 of 22 cases) after they lost their virginity.⁵ My analysis focuses on respondents' interpretations at the time of virginity loss (or the interview, for virgins) because most respondents (23 of 28) used movies prospectively and because 8 of the 12 who cited movies and reinterpreted virginity made that reinterpretation after virginity loss. (Exceptions are noted as relevant.)

Movies

Of the 61 people I interviewed, 52 either told me that they remembered seeing or hearing about virginity from the mass media I inquired about or discussed specific media at another point in the interview. Movies were mentioned by 28 respondents, magazines by 19, pornographic magazines/videos by 16, television programs by 15, books by 13, advertisements/billboards by 4, songs by 3, and role-playing games (e.g., Dungeons & Dragons) by 2.⁶ Four participants did not cite specific examples, but felt that mass media had influenced their understanding of sex. Kevin Cleary's (22, white, heterosexual) response was typical.

From the time a guy is 6, he's seeing images of how to fulfill physical love, on television, on the radio, he's hearing, pictures, wherever, magazines. Every single one of these images reiterates that when you get this feeling ... the thing to do is to fulfill it by, you know, inserting tab A into slot B [laughs].

Five respondents did not think that mass media influenced their understandings of virginity. For example, Cindy Passmore (32, white, heterosexual)

⁴ The 2004 independent film *Saved!* (Brian Dannelly), in which a devout conservative Protestant teen becomes pregnant when she has sex to "cure" her boyfriend's homosexuality, depicts premarital virginity as an act of worship.

⁵ Most commonly, respondents who initially saw virginity as a stigma came to see it as a step in a process after losing their own virginity.

⁶ The most-cited items were the TV show *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, *Playboy/Penthouse/Hustler*, and books by Judy Blume, especially *Forever*. Role-playing games often include "medieval" elements like rescuing virgins. Only one respondent mentioned a pornographic video by name: *Deep Throat*, which had a theatrical release in 1973.

responded to my query: "I can't say as I do I don't remember it [virginity loss] being advertised much."

The present analysis focuses on movies for several reasons. Movies were mentioned more often in my interviews than any other single form of media and were equally likely to be cited by women as men (whereas magazines were typically nominated by women and pornography by men). Additionally, movies are more easily traced and recovered than general or hard-to-specify sources, like "reading *Cosmo*" or "looking at Web sites." Mainstream films also tend to have self-contained plots that lend themselves to bounded analyses, whereas TV series feature multiple plot lines across many episodes and magazines cover virginity loss only sporadically.

Respondents who mentioned movies resembled the sample overall in terms of social characteristics, although men, Asian Americans, GLBQ people, Jewish and nonreligious individuals, and products of middle-class families were slightly overrepresented, while African Americans, mainline Protestants, and Roman Catholics were somewhat underrepresented. (See Table I.) Movie-nominators were also more likely to have viewed virginity loss as a step in a process and less likely to have seen it as a gift.

Twenty-five movies were cited by name, with nine being mentioned by two or more participants. (See Table II.) Five people mentioned movies in more general terms (e.g., "teen movies," "queer-themed movies"). One named John Hughes, a director/producer/writer responsible for three of the nominated movies (*Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Breakfast Club*), as well as several other popular mid-1980s teen movies (e.g., *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, 1986). The majority of the films in the sample were made in the 1980s and early 1990s, the period during which most of the respondents grew up, and thus learned about virginity loss. However, many of the younger women and men cited films that premiered when they were preteens, which they saw then or later as video rentals or on cable television. Of course, movies that premiered after I collected my data, such as the 1999 summer blockbuster *American Pie*, which recounts four high school boys' pact to lose their virginity, were not available for nomination.

I viewed all 25 movies at least once (typically two or three times), paying particular attention to virginity-related plot elements. For each film, I took detailed notes, which I subsequently coded in terms of content categories (e.g., location of virginity-loss encounter) and overarching themes (e.g., virginity depicted as a gift). My analysis relies on the ethnographic content analysis method developed by Altheide (1996). Although I expected that some themes would emerge through the viewing/coding process, I was most keen to discover whether the movies presented virginity from the same metaphorical perspectives as those held by the people I interviewed and what sorts of virginity-related scripts unfolded on the screen.

Twenty of the movies directly addressed virginity and/or virginity loss (some extensively, some briefly), while five included themes related to sexuality but not virginity per se. As shown in Table II, these movies can be further

Table II. Movie Themes by Individuals' Interpretations of Virginity at Virginity Loss

Movies by Dominant Theme/Frame (Date Released) [# of Nominators]				
Person's Interpretation of VL	Gift	Stigma	Other Virginity	Not About Virginity Per Se
<i>Gift</i> 10 movies 7 nominators (19 possible)	<i>Clueless</i> (1995) <i>Pretty in Pink</i> (1986) <i>Sixteen Candles</i> (1984)	<i>The Graduate</i> (1967) <i>Last American Virgin</i> (1982) <i>Revenge of the Nerds</i> (1984) <i>Risky Business</i> (1983) <i>Summer of '42</i> (1971)	—	<i>9-1/2 Weeks</i> (1986) [2] <i>Ten</i> (1979)
<i>Stigma</i> 7 movies 8 nominators (19 possible)	<i>Sixteen Candles</i> (1984) [2] <i>Breakfast Club</i> (1985) <i>Endless Love</i> (1981)	<i>Porky's</i> (1981) [2] <i>Fast Times at Ridgemont High</i> (1982) [2]	<i>Once Bitten</i> (1985)	1984 (1984)
<i>Process</i> 15 movies 12 nominators (19 possible)	<i>Sixteen Candles</i> (1984) [2] <i>Pretty in Pink</i> (1986) <i>Breakfast Club</i> (1985) <i>For Keeps?</i> (1988) <i>Clueless</i> (1995) “John Hughes movies”	<i>Porky's</i> (1981) [2] <i>Fast Times at Ridgemont High</i> (1982) <i>Last American Virgin</i> (1982) <i>Little Darlings</i> (1980) <i>Losin' It</i> (1983)	<i>Chasing Amy*</i> (1997) [2] <i>The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*</i> (1995) <i>Halloween**</i> (1978) <i>Scream**</i> (1996)	<i>Sound of Music</i> (1965)
<i>Irrelevant/Act of Worship</i> 1 movie 1 nominator (4 possible)	—	—	—	<i>A Chorus Line</i> (1985)
	6 movies	9 movies	5 movies	5 movies

*Movies with same-sex virginity loss themes.

**Movies with “virginity as supernatural power” themes.

categorized according to the dominant virginity-loss scripts they featured. Based on my readings, six movies foregrounded plots depicting virginity as a gift, nine treated virginity primarily as a stigma, and five featured virginity-related stories that did not closely fit one of the metaphorical scripts favored by the people I interviewed. Three of these latter five (*Once Bitten*, *Halloween*, *Scream*) treated virginity as conferring supernatural powers; for example, in *Once Bitten* (Howard Storm, 1985), a woman vampire must drink the blood of three virgins lest she begin to look her age.⁷ The other two—*Chasing Amy* and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*—addressed same-sex virginity loss but not in ways clearly comprehensible in terms of the gift, stigma, or process metaphors. Although none of the nominated movies

⁷ In *Halloween* (and many other horror films), the only survivor is a female virgin (see Clover, 1992), a fact made much of in the 1997 satire/homage *Scream*.

emphasized a distinct process script, several contained elements suggesting this interpretation (see below).

With the exception of *Chasing Amy* and *Incredibly True Adventure*, these movies are populated almost exclusively by characters who are heterosexual—as well as white and middle class. The people I interviewed were more diverse, however; and research reveals that first sexual experiences are patterned by race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual identity (although such differences have narrowed since the 1960s) (Joyner and Laumann, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2003; Upchurch *et al.*, 1998). Several of the nominated films, including *Pretty in Pink*, *Little Darlings*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Clueless*, query the relationship between social class and sexuality by depicting working-class youth as more “promiscuous” than their middle-class counterparts and/or including characters who believe this stereotype. Although a number of popular movies starring and directed by African Americans feature virginity loss themes (e.g., *Cooley High*, 1975; *House Party*, 1989; *Boyz N the Hood*, 1991), none of the people I interviewed mentioned them. In *Clueless*, the one nominated film with black actors in lead/supporting roles (as the white heroine’s best friend and her boyfriend), romantic and sexual relationships are depicted similarly across race.

FINDINGS

Three Ways of Using Movies to Make Sense of Virginity Loss

The people I interviewed used movies to make sense of virginity in three distinctive ways. Twenty spoke of using films as sources of information about virginity loss while they were still virgins. Dan Levy (29, white, heterosexual) recalled:

There was the movie *Porky's* that probably came out when I was 13 and that definitely talked about, you know, virginity. One of the ... nerdy characters on there, they kept calling a virgin. So that might have been a very concrete way for me to get what virginity was That it was a bad thing.

In some cases, movies influenced viewers by providing examples they rejected. Jessica Tanaka (28, Japanese-American, bisexual) discussed “a movie ... about some girl losing her virginity” (*Fast Times*) only to conclude, “I think I thought it was stupid.” (See also Dana’s comment about *Revenge of the Nerds*, below.)

Four participants indicated that movies had retrospectively helped them interpret or explain their virginity-related experiences to themselves or others. For example, Ed Winters (28, white, bisexual) likened his own previrginity-loss interactions with peers to an incident from *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985). In that scene, “the Brain” (Anthony Michael Hall), accused of being a virgin, claims that he had sex with a girl he met on vacation in Niagara Falls (he later recants). Said Ed:

The whole virginity thing was like the one thing that you could lie credibly about I mean, it could be just like, you know, "My many conquests in the Niagara Falls region." I loved *The Breakfast Club*.

In Ed's view, the film accurately captured an aspect of his life.

Eight respondents retrospectively compared their virginity-loss experiences to expectations they derived prospectively from movies (specific or generally) when they were still virgins. (Two of these eight also used movies prospectively, like Dan, and two used them retrospectively, like Ed.) According to Marcy Goldberg (27, white, heterosexual):

I thought it [virginity loss] would feel like, really, really, really good, like, the way they describe, you see it in movies. These women yelling and screaming and throwing their heads around. And it wasn't like that. No bells rang, no, you know, no rainbow came out of the sky [laughs] [I]t was just something that had happened, it didn't last that long and it wasn't that good.

Considering the "prospective" and "comparison" categories together, 26 (of 28) participants reported using movies in some prospective manner.

Participants' Ideal and Actual Virginity-Loss Scripts

Each of the metaphors used by the people I interviewed suggests an ideal script for virginity loss, rooted in generic expectations for gifts, stigmas, and rites of passage. (On metaphorical thinking, see Lakoff and Johnson [1980]; for a more detailed analysis, see Carpenter [2005].) People who described virginity as a gift idealized a scenario in which a virgin would give her/his virginity to a beloved partner, who would in turn reciprocate with the similarly valuable gift of love and deepened commitment to the giver (Mauss, 1954; Schwartz, 1967). Many saw a return gift of virginity as ideal, but insufficient for reciprocation. For men and women who saw their virginity as a stigma, the ideal scenario was one in which a virgin rid himself or herself of that shameful trait, preferably as soon as possible, without incurring any additional stigmas, such as a reputation for sexual ineptitude (Goffman, 1963; Jones *et al.*, 1984). Many in this group attempted to conceal their virginity from peers and potential sexual partners. Individuals who likened virginity loss to a step in a process or a rite of passage envisioned scenarios in which the virgin would gain new knowledge (about sexual activity or about himself or herself) and be transformed (as from a child into an adult); they often compared these plots to other familiar transitions in status, like high school graduation or marriage (Glaser and Strauss, 1971; Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1908).

In practice, each of these metaphors (cultural scenarios) was associated with two or three typical trajectories of experience (interpersonal scripts) before, during, and after virginity loss (see Carpenter, 2005). Eight of 17 non-virgin "givers" told stories that closely resembled the ideal gift script. Four personally chose to diverge from the ideal script (e.g., deciding to lose virginity without being in love) and five had experiences that diverged from the ideal

because of their partners' behavior (e.g., being dumped after giving one's virginity). Fifteen of 19 nonvirgins in the stigma group described experiences that closely resembled the ideal stigma script, while three were jeered at by partners who discovered their (concealed) virginity or became frustrated by their sexual inexperience. One had a partner react favorably when she discovered his virginity. All 17 of the nonvirgin "processers" lost their virginity in ways that resembled the ideal rite-of-passage script; 11 described their encounters as physically and/or emotionally enjoyable, while six found the experience to be physically and/or emotionally unpleasant but a worthwhile learning experience nonetheless. Women were more likely to interpret virginity as a gift and men were more likely to interpret it as a stigma (they favored the process script in roughly equal proportions); however, when men and women shared an interpretation of virginity, they typically experienced virginity loss in similar ways.

Did Movie Scripts Reflect Personal Interpretations?

Study participants' interpretations of virginity often diverged from the primary cultural scenarios in the movies that influenced them. (See Table II.) Three of the 10 movies named by gifters foregrounded gift themes, while five featured stigma themes. Similarly, two of the seven movies nominated by the stigma group showcased stigma scenarios, while four featured gift scenarios. Five of the 15 movies cited by processers featured gift plots and five showcased stigma plots. A closer reading of the films helps make sense of these patterns. Although one virginity-loss script was dominant in each of the 15 "virginity movies" that featured a gift or stigma script, all but a few also contained alternative cultural scenarios and/or plot elements that could be interpreted in more than one way. In other words, most of these movies are multivalent, like the Westerns Shively analyzed. (On media texts' tendency to guide consumers to "favored" interpretations, see Hall [1980].)

"Gift" movies are exemplified by *Sixteen Candles* (cited by five respondents), *Pretty in Pink*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Clueless* (each cited by two). *Endless Love* and *For Keeps?* (each cited once) include similar script elements but address virginity less directly (or extensively). *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984) tells the story of Samantha Baker (Molly Ringwald), a pretty but otherwise ordinary high school sophomore whose entire family has forgotten her 16th birthday. Unbeknownst to Sam, popular senior Jake Ryan (Michael Schoeffling) has intercepted a pencil-and-paper "sex test" in which Sam confessed that if she were to "do it," she would want Jake for her partner. At that night's dance, while Jake inquires about Sam behind his stuck-up girlfriend Caroline's back, Sam finds herself besieged by a lust-crazed freshman geek (Anthony Michael Hall). The geek shamefacedly admits that he has "never bagged a babe" and pleads with Sam to have sex with him so that he can preserve his "ladies' man" reputation with his friends (i.e., he feels stigmatized by his virginity). She declines, explaining that she's "saving" her virginity

for Jake. Later that night, after a riotous party, Jake sends an inebriated Caroline (Haviland Malford) home with the geek. When they wake up together, fairly certain that they had sex, Caroline tells the geek she thinks she enjoyed it—much to his delight and relief. Meanwhile, Jake has spirited Sam away from her sister's wedding reception to a romantic first “date,” complete with birthday cake. They kiss and Sam says her wish has come true. Jake, in short, appears to be the kind of guy who is worthy of receiving the gift of a girl's virginity. Similarly, in *Clueless*, after Murray (Donald Faison) demonstrates his love for Dionne (Stacy Dash) by patiently teaching her to drive, she gives him what she sees as the ultimate gift: “Dionne's virginity went from technical to non-existent.” In *The Breakfast Club*, as in *Sixteen Candles*, the female characters Claire (Molly Ringwald) and Allison (Ally Sheedy) view virginity as a gift (“if you love someone, it's okay”) while their male counterparts John (Judd Nelson) and “the Brain” view it as a stigma (see quote above).

Pretty in Pink (Howard Deutch, 1985) likewise portrays women's virginity primarily as a gift. The film's heroine, high school senior Andie Walsh (Molly Ringwald), is a social outsider because she is poor and has quirky taste in clothing and music. Her fellow misfit best friend, Duckie (Jon Cryer), is on the verge of confessing his abiding love when Andie begins to date wealthy, handsome classmate Blane (Andrew McCarthy). Blane promises to take Andie to the senior prom and, convinced that they love one another, Andie gives her virginity to Blane (in one reading of an ambiguous scene). Shortly thereafter, Blane's friend Steff (James Spader) bullies him into dumping Andie on the grounds that she's socially inferior and probably promiscuous besides. Devastated, Andie decides to attend the prom alone, where a remorseful Blane begs her for forgiveness and they are joyfully reunited (with Duckie's grudging approval). The overall “lesson” of the film is that if you choose the recipient of your virginity with care, she or he may behave badly at first but will wise up in the end. (I do not detect a stigma plot in *Pretty in Pink*.)

“Stigma” movies are exemplified by *Fast Times* (cited by three respondents), *Last American Virgin* (cited by two), and *Porky's* (cited by four; though the plot of *Porky's* revolves more around “getting laid” than losing virginity). The remaining stigma movies (with one nomination each) contain similar script elements. Young men and women both find virginity embarrassing in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982). (Though a departure from traditional norms for women, this portrayal is consistent with real-life trends in the 1980s (Thompson, 1995).) As the film opens, 15-year-old Stacy (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a Ridgemont High freshman, is worried that if she remains a virgin, she'll “fall behind” her peers. Self-styled sexpert Linda (Phoebe Cates) urges her to take action: “It's no huge thing, it's just sex.” (*Little Darlings* [Ronald Maxwell, 1980] similarly features two 15-year-old girls racing to lose their virginity at summer camp.) Lying about her age, Stacy courts Ron (D. W. Brown), a 20-something stereo salesman. On their first date, Ron and Stacy have sex in the baseball dugout of a local park, still mostly dressed and having barely conversed. Ron penetrates Stacy without

foreplay; she lies passively on her back, unaroused and in evident discomfort. (She doesn't mention her virginity, a reticence shared by *Little Darlings'* Angel [Kristy McNicol].) The next day, Linda comforts her: "It gets a lot better, I swear."

When Ron stops calling a few months later, Stacy decides to pursue men her own age, but when she makes sexual advances toward her classmate, Mark (Brian Backer), he panics and beats a hasty retreat. Stacy then turns to Mark's friend Mike Damone (Robert Romanus), a self-proclaimed ladies' man who calls Mark a "wuss" for claiming to be in love with Stacy. Stacy and Damone's encounter is awkward: He ejaculates almost immediately and moans so loudly, she asks if he's okay. "I think I came," he explains. "Didn't you feel it?" Embarrassed, Damone rejects Stacy's friendly overtures at school. (Neither boy's virginity status is made explicit, but their awkwardness implies virginity.) Stacy is hurt, confused, and, as it turns out, pregnant; her brother drives her to the abortion clinic. These experiences, along with her suspicion that she should be getting more pleasure from sex, prompt Stacy to begin a new quest. "Anyone can have sex," she declares. "I want a relationship, I want romance." By the end of the movie, she and Mark are in love and dating, but "haven't gone all the way."⁸ Similarly, at the end of *Clueless*, it is implied that if Cher (Alicia Silverstone) has not yet lost her virginity with Josh (Paul Rudd), she will soon because he is special and they are in love.

Unfolding alongside Stacy's story is that of her older brother, Brad (Judge Reinhold). A senior, Brad likewise perceives virginity as a stigma and is frustrated that Lisa (Amanda Wyss), his girlfriend of two years, refuses to have sex with him. "I don't want to have to use sex as a tool," she says. (Women "saving" their virginity are equally marginal, if not absent, from the other stigma movies.) It's implied that both are virgins; however, Brad portrays himself as sexually active, telling a co-worker, "I love [Lisa] and all. I mean, she's great in bed." Hoping for better luck with other women, Brad decides to end the relationship, but Lisa dumps him first and he can't seem to get a date with anyone else. In short, *Fast Times* showcases the stories of teens who see virginity as a stigma, but also features characters—Mark, Lisa, and the "reformed" Stacy—whose approach to sex/virginity is more in line with the gift metaphor.

The Last American Virgin (Boaz Davidson, 1982) reinforces the convention that men's virginity is stigmatizing, even as it presents the possibility of an alternate stance. The plot centers on three high school boys, two of whom are so eager to lose their virginity that they proposition literally every female they meet, and one who assures his friends he wants casual sex but really wants to wait for love. Rick (Steve Antin), the best-looking and most socially adept of the three, and David (Joe Rubbo), an overweight wheeler-dealer, lose

⁸ In virginity-loss films of the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Where the Boys Are* (1960), young women who lose their virginity are almost always portrayed as irrevocably ruined. The "suffering with a happy ending" pattern seems to have been established by the (late) 1970s, as in *Grease* (1978). See Carpenter (2002) and Douglas (1994).

their virginity first, to a lonely-but-lovely housewife (Louisa Moritz) on their pizza delivery route. (*Summer of '42* [Robert Mulligan, 1971] and *Porky's* [Bob Clark, 1982] also feature young men competing, respectively, to lose their virginity and "get laid"; in *Risky Business* [Paul Brickman, 1983], Joel Goodsen [Tom Cruise] hires a call girl to eradicate his virginity before he heads off to college.) Nice-guy Gary (Lawrence Monoson) meanwhile falls head-over-heels for Karen (Diane Franklin), the cute new girl in school. When his awkward attempts to date her founder, Rick moves in. Pressured by his friends, Gary loses his virginity with a prostitute who mocks him: "You've still got a lot to learn, little boy." Shortly thereafter, Karen gives her virginity to Rick, who pretends to love her; but when she discovers that she's pregnant, he angrily rejects her. Gary hocks his stereo to pay for Karen's abortion and, while she's recovering, confesses that he loves her. They kiss and Karen seems to return Gary's affections; but within days, she is back with Rick and Gary is heartbroken. The moral of the story appears to be that men who value romance and think that virginity is special don't get the girl.

In sum, many of the nominated movies showcase one cultural scenario for virginity loss, but also include one or more subplots featuring an alternative scenario (possibly excepting *Pretty in Pink* and *Porky's*). Notably, none of the nominated films foregrounds a distinctive rite-of-passage scenario.⁹ However, since the hallmarks of that scenario are gaining knowledge and being transformed from one status to another, all the films potentially can be viewed through a "process of growing up" lens. For example, Stacy's "practice makes perfect" quest for physical pleasure suggests a scenario in which learning about sex is an ongoing process.

Movie Plots (Cultural Scenarios) Meet Individual Stories (Interpersonal Scripts)

To explore the relationship between cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts for virginity loss, I will now compare scenarios from the cited films to the experiences of study participants who drew on those scenarios/metaphors and/or used movies prospectively.

The nominated movies feature three basic "virginity is a gift" scripts, which are largely contingent on the gender of the virgin in question. When film heroines give their virginity in a committed love relationship, they either have positive experiences or are temporarily abandoned by, then lovingly reunited with, their partners. For example, although Sam remains a virgin at the end of *Sixteen Candles*, Jake's loving behavior suggests that he would respond "properly" to the gift of virginity. (The Dionne-and-Murray and Cher-and-Josh plots in *Clueless* do the same.) In *Pretty in Pink* and *Last American Virgin*, Andie and Karen believe that their love is reciprocated

⁹ *American Pie* (1999) does offer fairly distinct versions of all three cultural scenarios.

before they give their boyfriends their virginities and, although the boys subsequently abandon them, they are reunited in the end (Blane's remorse is genuine, Andie's experience less traumatic). On darker notes, the romance in *Endless Love* becomes dangerously obsessive and the *For Keeps?* couple experience unintended pregnancy, but both relationships persist. Movie men who viewed virginity as a gift had less positive experiences. Gary (*Last American Virgin*) and Mark (*Fast Times*) both stand by paralyzed as their best friends seduce (or are seduced by) the girls they love. Mark ultimately winds up with Stacy—after she has decided that sex should be contingent on love—but Gary's misery seems unlikely to abate. (These are the only nominated films to treat men's virginity as a gift.)

Things unfolded quite differently for many of the young people I interviewed. Nine of the 14 women in the gift group lost their virginity with boyfriends who reciprocated their gifts with deepened love and commitment. For example, Kelly Lewis (24, white, heterosexual), who “remember[ed] the movie *Ten*, and watching Bo Derek and wondering [trails off] ... right around the time that I lost my virginity” (though she described *Moonlighting* as “the show that kind of pushed me”), felt that giving her virginity to her beloved boyfriend of two years brought them closer together and stabilized their sometimes rocky relationship. But none of the four women who were rejected by their virginity-loss partners received an apology or were later reunited with them.¹⁰ Dana Hagy (30, white, heterosexual), who reported learning about virginity loss from *Pretty in Pink*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Revenge of the Nerds*, believed that giving her virginity to someone she loved would “kind of cement our relationship.” Regarding *Pretty in Pink*, Dana recalled:

Molly Ringwald ... was in front of a fire and she was with this guy that she finally got They're doing *something* [sexual]. And you feel happy for, you go, “Oh, it's so nice, she got the guy,” you know, “He loves her.” Which I don't think is based in reality that much. In my experience, at least. So I sort of romanticized sex based on a lot of these kind of movies. Not *Revenge of the Nerds*, but [laughs]. More of the, you know, relationship kind.

During her senior year in high school, Dana's boyfriend pressured her to have sex with him: “He kept saying, ‘It would mean a lot to me,’ and ‘I love you,’ and ‘I want you to be the one.’” When she finally consented, a week before leaving for college, she felt terrible. “I thought ... we kind of crossed a line and now I'm ruined.” She didn't feel any closer to her boyfriend and he didn't stop pressuring her, so it wasn't long before they broke up. For years afterward, she felt unworthy of saying “no” to sex she did not want in subsequent relationships.¹¹

In contrast, all three of the nonvirgin men who saw virginity as a gift felt that their gifts had been reciprocated by their (female or male) partners. None

¹⁰ A fifth woman in the gift group lost her virginity when she was raped by a friend.

¹¹ Two other gifter women, neither of whom cited movies, told more classic versions of the tale, in which they were dumped almost immediately after giving their virginities to the boyfriends they loved. This lack of reciprocation left them feeling sexually disenfranchised as did Dana.

of them told stories of watching the person to whom they wished to give their virginity run off with someone else. Only one of the three, Andrew Lin (19, Asian American, heterosexual), mentioned a movie, *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), which depicts virginity largely as a stigma, and that he retrospectively linked to his virginity-loss experience, insofar as his partner/girlfriend was “older [by one year] and I was in high school. Like Mrs. Robinson or something.”¹² Fernando Garcia (21, gay, Cuban American), a virgin gifter, reported using a movie to deflect questions about his sexual status.

I was never ashamed to say ... that I am a virgin. I just say that I'm saving myself for Luke Perry. [LMC: Is that from a movie?] *Clueless*. It's a line from the movie *Clueless*. Where she [Cher] says, “I'm saving myself for Luke Perry.”¹³

The nominated films likewise feature three gendered scripts that present virginity as a stigma. Movie heroes who interpret virginity as a stigma—such as Rick and David in *Last American Virgin* and Joel in *Risky Business*—typically lose their virginity without sexually discrediting incident. Those who conceal their virginity are seldom discovered and when a woman is aware of a man's inexperience, it does not mar the encounter. In *Sixteen Candles* and *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984), male virgins are even revealed as masterful lovers. However, if Damone's inept encounter with Stacy is interpreted as evidence of his virginity, then *Fast Times* offers a script in which a male virgin's inexperience compounds his shame. Movie women who see virginity as a stigma suffer all manner of trauma, from abandonment to unintended pregnancy. *Fast Times*'s Stacy is a case in point, though once she's realized the importance of love, she winds up happily dating Mark. Similarly, in *Little Darlings*, tough-girl Angel is surprised by her emotions when she loses her ostensibly stigmatizing virginity to bad-boy Randy (Matt Damon), leading her to push him away (and to hide her virginity loss from wealthy rival Ferris (Tatum O'Neal). Before the movie ends, however, Angel and Randy reconnect in a more romantic fashion.

The stories of the people I interviewed differed from these movie scenarios in crucial ways. The four women who approached their virginity as a stigma all favorably recalled their virginity-loss encounters and had actually benefited from cultural stereotypes about women's sexuality. Emma McCabe (24, heterosexual, white) recalled being influenced by *Fast Times*, especially a scene in which Linda uses a carrot to show then-virgin Stacy how to perform fellatio. Such images were one reason that Emma incorporated oral sex into her earliest sexual encounters: “I'm sure this also had its root in the media representation, that to be a good sexual partner was cool. And so ... to give a good blowjob was like, an ego rub for me, you know?” Like Stacy, Emma

¹² Referring to the much-older woman with whom protagonist Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) loses his virginity. Andrew's experience did not resemble *The Graduate* in other respects, however. He gave his virginity to a girlfriend for whom he cared deeply; although she returned his affection, Andrew decided to end the relationship after a pregnancy scare.

¹³ A prime example of intertextuality: in one of many virginity loss-related plots on *Beverly Hills 90210*, Brenda Walsh (Shannen Doherty) “gave” her virginity to Dylan McKay (Luke Perry).

was able to lose her virginity fairly rapidly once she elected to do so by propositioning a male friend. But unlike Stacy, Emma didn't feel the need to conceal her virginity—she wasn't hiding her age and she felt relatively secure that few people would see her virginity as a stigma—nor was she rejected or impregnated by her lover.

Eleven of the 14 men who saw virginity as a stigma had trouble-free experiences like Lewis (Robert Carradine) in *Revenge of the Nerds* and Pee Wee (Dan Monahan) in *Porky's*, though none were revealed as sexual superstars. Kendall James (28, African American, gay) believed that popular teen movies had taught him (while still a virgin) that:

Virgin was not cool to be. I mean, you've got *Porky's* Everybody wants to go see it and one kid's a virgin and he's a dork and you know, everybody has that kind of mentality I think almost every teen-like movie, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, every kind of, teen high school thing, was about getting laid or not getting laid, and what an idiot you were for not getting laid.

Kendall (who also cited *Once Bitten*) lost his virginity in an encounter he described as highly reminiscent of a teen sex comedy. He got into a playful wrestling match with his friend's older sister, then: "Wrestling and erections and curiosity and" Before he knew what was happening, they were having sex on the living room floor. Of the seven men who actively concealed their virginity from sexual partners, four were revealed as virgins or sexually inexperienced. Don Coulter (32, white, heterosexual), who named *Sixteen Candles* as an influence, was relieved that his girlfriend reacted sympathetically, reminiscent of the tale of the geek. "She didn't admit to [thinking I was a virgin]," Don said. "She was really good about that. She's like, 'Don't worry. Just come back tomorrow and we'll do this again.'" But the other three felt ridiculed or dismissed by their (female) partners in ways that closely resemble the story of *Fast Times*'s Damone. Dan Levy (28, white, heterosexual), who nominated *Porky's*, described his virginity-loss encounter as "fumbling," quick, and devoid of pleasure for his older girlfriend. Her frustration was apparent, he said, and "[w]e never had sex again Because I was a disappointment to her."

Although none of the cited movies showcases a rite of passage scenario, each contains elements that permit a "passage/process" reading. My interviews with people who favored this metaphor are instructive. Matt Bergquist (24, white, heterosexual), who grew up believing that "[l]osing your virginity is at least partially defined by the experience you gained about sex and relationships"—in other words, a learning process—explained how movies like *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Porky's* left him feeling "maybe more culture pressure than peer pressure, watching movies and videos where people who seemed to look ... younger than I were losing their virginity." Matt lost his virginity when he was 16, with his girlfriend of 6 months. They had already engaged in "the whole gamut, up to oral sex" and "finally decided to have sex, I think it was because ... we were both convinced that this was love and this was it." After their first experience of vaginal sex—"in the back of mom

and dad's station wagon" (reminiscent of *Sixteen Candles*' geek)—they remained together, and sexually active, for another year, until they "went off to college in different places." Matt's interpersonal script contains elements of the gift scenario as depicted in *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*—he lost his virginity in an enduring love relationship (albeit not for the reasons that gifters did)—as well as elements of *Porky's* stigma scenario—he did not value his virginity—and the process script. Though he did not cite *Fast Times*, Matt's experimentation prior to virginity loss ("Playing around as much as I did before I had sex" such that "having sex, intercourse, was [only] a slightly different ... experience") resembles Stacy's step-by-step search for physical pleasure. It appears that women and men in the process group may have constructed process scenarios by drawing on different plot lines from multiple movies.

Several GLBQ respondents—who, as a group, were disproportionately likely to favor the process metaphor (Carpenter, 2005)—reported using movies with same-sex virginity-loss plots to make sense of what were, for them, the intertwined processes of coming out and losing virginity. Amy Solon (20, white, lesbian), a virgin, interpreted virginity loss as a step in growing up: "Grown ups have sex. I am young. If I had sex, would I be a grown up?" Although she had long recognized her attraction to women, she had begun what she called the "steps" of coming out just a year before our interview.

It was a matter of being able to say it It was a matter of not feeling, not making myself feel sick [by thinking about sex with women] Then I actually allowed myself to be attracted to women, which was like the third, last, like, "wow!" step.

Movies like *Incredibly True Adventure*, she said, were helping her to take that process further.

Movies are so cool for that. Movies where girls kiss girls are excellent! Well, for a lot of reasons, but [laughs]. They are so good. Like I, 'cause you know ... I can watch that movie, and like, assess the "ugh" factor in my stomach.

Amy hoped that after she became sufficiently desensitized, she would be able to start dating women and to act on her romantic and sexual desires, from kissing all the way to virginity loss.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis has revealed three distinctive ways young people use virginity-loss movies: prospective, retrospective, and comparative (incorporating both prospective and retrospective elements). It has also demonstrated, through concrete examples, various ways in which cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts for virginity loss are linked.

The observed discrepancy between the depiction of virginity loss in movies and movie viewers' understandings of virginity loss is more apparent than real, insofar as most (if not all) virginity-loss movies are open to multiple

interpretations. Consistent with the work of Radway (1984), McKinley (1997), and Steele (2002), my research indicates that young women and men are active consumers of virginity-loss films, attending to certain scenarios (even peripheral ones) and ignoring others. People who interpret virginity loss as a step in a process may use movies in particularly creative ways, extracting bits and pieces from different plot lines, often in multiple movies, and reframing gift and stigma scenarios to reflect a process orientation.

As Shively (1992) and Ward *et al.* (2002) have shown, interpretations of movies are patterned in complex ways by the interpreters' social locations. My analyses indicate that people attend to particular scenarios depending on their gender and on their interpretation of virginity. Of the 28 study participants who nominated movies, 22 cited films in which a same-sex character shared their view of virginity loss (or something akin to it). For example, Dana cited *Pretty in Pink* and *Sixteen Candles*, in which girls see virginity as a gift; Dan named *Porky's*, in which men see virginity as a stigma; and Amy nominated movies featuring same-sex encounters that she hoped to emulate someday. The counterexamples I observed make sense when placed in context. For instance, Andrew shared the experience of *The Graduate*'s Ben Braddock in that he lost his virginity with an "older" woman, and Fernando campily identified with *Clueless* heroine Cher's desire to "save myself for Luke Perry."

Although many study participants' interpersonal scripts resembled cultural scenarios available in nominated films—this was especially true of people who told "ideal" stories—many did not. Discrepancies were patterned by gender. When movie plots depart from ideal scenarios, women who see virginity as a gift and men who view it as a stigma tend to have positive experiences (e.g., Andie, the geek), while men gifter and "stigmatized" women tend to have negative experiences (e.g., Gary, Stacy). In real-life interpersonal scripts, however, negative experiences were disproportionately common among gifter women and stigma-group men (e.g., Dana, Dan) while positive experiences were disproportionately common among stigma-group women and gifter men (e.g., Emma, Andrew).

Do such discrepancies carry any consequences? Presumably, people whose own experiences followed a more positive trajectory than the cultural scenario with which they identified would be happier than people for whom the reverse was true. Men and women who had imbibed movie plots with improbably happy endings may well have found it more difficult to deal with nonideal personal experiences. For example, Dana and Dan appeared not only to suffer from ill treatment by their partners, but also to berate or punish themselves because their virginity-loss experiences did not work out the way they were "supposed to." Conversely, it is possible that individuals who had dissatisfying virginity-loss experiences might retrospectively identify with movies that resolved stories like theirs in more ideal and satisfactory ways; I did not hear such stories from any of the "retrospective" movie-users in my study, however.

Taken together, my findings suggest that young women and men use virginity-loss movies as “roadmaps” for navigating their sexual relationships (as Gagnon and Simon would predict) and to make sense of, describe, and/or justify their experiences retrospectively. My research also points to the possibilities that teens use films to learn about virginity loss and to fantasize (prospectively or retrospectively) about different kinds of virginity-loss experiences (as Shively and Steele found).

That said, because I interviewed study participants only once, typically retrospective to virginity loss, I cannot make *definitive* claims about causality. Most of the people I spoke with used films prospectively—they nominated movies that they saw while virgins, and that they felt affected their expectations and/or decisions—although many made retrospective use of films as well. (The questions I asked may have contributed to this pattern, insofar as they expressed an interest in “learning” that occurred prior to virginity loss.) However, without knowing what metaphors for virginity people favored before seeing particular films, I cannot determine whether virginity-loss films primarily reinforced (rather than produced) their understandings. Nor, although I explicitly asked whether respondents’ beliefs or evaluations of their experiences had changed over time, may they have been aware of such changes (or their impact). Another limitation involves the degree of detail in the data. Because my study focused broadly on virginity loss, questions about mass media formed only a small portion of the interviews. For example, I did not ask detailed questions about people’s reactions to or uses of specific movies (e.g., “With which character did you identify and why?”). Interviews focused specifically on movies or media could further illuminate how young people use virginity-loss movies.

Two additional limitations affect the present analysis. First, because people learned about virginity loss from media other than films (e.g., Emma cited the gift-theme teen novel *Forever* as well as *Fast Times*), developing a comprehensive picture of the relationship between “mass mediated” cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts for virginity loss would require examining all the media that influenced each person. Brown *et al.*’s (2006) research is commendable for surveying teens about four types of media. Second, I have largely assumed (and participants’ comments indicated) that people nominated movies with which they agreed; however, more participants may have been influenced by movies that depicted virginity in ways they found abhorrent, ridiculous, or unrealistic than was apparent from the interviews. Incorporating participants’ extended discussions of media use, where possible, would help shed light on this issue.

Future analyses could also consider other kinds of patterning, such as between specific “critical moments” in movie plots and interpersonal scripts (e.g., lying to parents, site of virginity loss). A prospective study (e.g., following youth through grades 7–12) would also expand our knowledge of the relationship between mass media and youths’ understandings and experiences of virginity loss.

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