

Female College Students Perceptions of Virginity and Oral Sex

Margaret Bergeron, PhD, RN

Anderson College of Nursing, University of North Alabama
Florence, Alabama

Abstract

Limited research exists on perceptions of virginity and oral sex among female college students. The majority of research studies on female college students focus on virginity related to participation in only vaginal sex. This research is part of a larger qualitative descriptive study which explored female college students' perceptions about the factors which influenced their participation in oral sex. Sixteen female college students ranging from 18 to 24 years of age participated in semi-structured interviews. Primary data included verbatim transcripts, demographic data and sexual health questionnaires. All participants had engaged in oral sex. Defining virginity emerged as a main theme from the thematic data analysis. Overall findings provide insight about views regarding oral sex and virginity status among college aged women.

Keywords: oral sex; virginity; female college students; perceptions

Introduction

Oral sex involves oral arousal to the vagina, anus, or penis. Oral sex was the most commonly reported sexual behavior among 42,549 U.S. undergraduate students in a study on sexual health disparities, with 72% of participants who reported oral sex participation (Buhi, Marhefka, & Hoban, 2010). Jozkowski and Satinsky (2013) examined heterosexual sexual behaviors in a sample of 970 undergraduate students and discovered 86.9% had engaged in performative oral sex and 88.2% had engaged in receptive oral sex. Higgins, Trussell, Moore, and Davidson (2010) surveyed 1504 undergraduate students and found that 83% reported they had experienced oral sex. In a study of sexual health risk among 29,952 sexually active female college students, approximately 94% of all sexually active females had engaged in oral sexual activity (Lindley, Barnett, Brandt, Hardin & Burcin, 2008).

Evidence suggests young adults have redefined oral sex as a behavior which does not constitute or classify as a sex act (Hans, Gillen, & Akande, 2010; Lindberg, Jones, & Santelli, 2008). This change in the meaning and classification of oral sex for young adults has occurred over the last few decades (Hans et al., 2010). Among young adult females, oral sex was viewed as a common and acceptable behavior with limited risk of contracting an STI or becoming pregnant (Malacad & Hess, 2010). Oral sex may be viewed by young women as a way to maintain virginal status.

Literature Review

Research with female college students has revealed that they do not believe oral sex is the same as vaginal sex in terms of intimacy and virginal status (Chambers, 2007; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008). Female college students have indicated that participation in oral sex maintains one's status as a virgin because they consider oral sex to be an abstinent behavior (Hans & Kimberly, 2011). Female college students have reported that oral sex is simply not as intimate compared to vaginal sex, and therefore, not sex (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008). One explanation for this perception of oral sex as less intimate than vaginal sex stems from the common belief among college students that oral sex simply does not classify as sex (Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008, Hans et al., 2010).

Definitions of sexual behaviors can provide an increased understanding of why college students consider certain behaviors as "sex," or "not sex." Sewell and Strassberg (2014) explored definitions of "having sex" among 267 male and 327 female heterosexual undergraduate students and found three main themes related to what constituted full definitions of sex. These themes were as follows: degree of sex, sexual situation, and type of sex. Degree of sex related to behaviors that were deemed as "close to but not real sex," sexual situations related to behaviors that were "sexual, but not sex," and type of sex such as "a form of sex, but not penile-vaginal sex." Findings suggested gender differences about definitions of sex among undergraduate students. These gender differences with sex may relate more to why certain behaviors fit with the female definition of sex, compared to the male definition of sex (Sewell & Strassberg, 2014).

Factors specific to the sexual situation can influence how college students define sexual behaviors, such as oral sex. College students may differ in which factors influence how they choose to define a specific sexual behavior.

In a study which explored individuals' definitions of sex, a sample of 51 female and 49 male college students were asked to write about one of four types of sexual situations related to personal sexual experiences and behaviors (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). The sexual situations to be described were categorized as the following: almost but not quite sex, just barely sex, uncertainty about if the experience was sex, and disagreement about whether the experience qualified as sex. Findings showed that oral sex experiences were reported as "not quite sex" by 22 of the participants, with 5 of those 22 participants writing "oral sex is not sex." Oral sex was reported by 13 other participants as "just barely sex," yet all of these 13 participants also wrote that "oral sex is sex." Inconsistencies with definitions of sex and factors which influenced these definitions were found. One female participant in the study wrote that an experience counted as "an act of sex" depending upon her sharing the experience with others. The participant wrote that she only tells people about her vaginal sex experiences, not her oral sex experiences, when asked questions about with whom she has had sex. However, this same female participant also expressed that "it's all sex in the end" (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

Certain narratives by young women in the study also revealed inconsistencies with labels attached to specific sexual behaviors, such as oral sex. One female participant wrote her definition of sex included "even just seminal fluid involved," yet she defined her own oral sex experience as a "blow job" but considered it "not quite sex." This same woman who did not identify a "blow job" as sex also checked "no" related to a question about if she had ever had sex and checked "yes" to being a virgin. Peterson and

Muehlenhard (2007) found that many of the respondents in their study were motivated to label their sexual experiences as “not sex,” even when the experiences constituted the definition they listed as “sex.” The most common motive for women to label experiences as “not sex” was the ability to maintain personal classification of themselves as virgins (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

Other studies regarding the classification of sexual behaviors related to virginity and abstinence behaviors among college students also demonstrated ambiguity and conflict. In a 2010 study of 477 college students, only 20% of the participants believed that oral sex constituted having sex (Hans et al., 2010). In the study by Hans and Kimberly (2011), 454 college students were surveyed about sexual behaviors and found that the majority believed that oral sex maintained virginity status and was consistent with abstinent behavior.

Methods

The design of this study was qualitative descriptive inquiry. Prior to the start of the study, the researcher submitted the study protocol, informed consent form, flyer, and all data collection instruments to the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval. The target population for this study was female college students aged 18 to 24 years. The inclusion criteria for the study’s sample included the following: 1) female, currently enrolled at the university; 2) age 18 to 24 years old; 3) single, never married; 4) able to read and speak English; 5) must be willing to participate in individual interviews about personal sexual behaviors and 6) must have participated in oral sex. Purposeful sampling was utilized with this study in order to select participants, but only after the completion of a screening process. The screening determined if potential female participants had previously participated in oral sex, because only those who have engaged in oral sex were enrolled in the study.

Maximum variation sampling was also applied, which allowed for more exploration and increased comprehension in participants with preselected criteria (Sandelowski, 2000). The preselected criterion with screening was age, because the researcher wanted good representation from all ages within the set inclusion criteria of ages 18 to 24 years. The researcher also sought to include variation among sexual orientation and race as criteria, which was sought through the inclusion of different recruitment sites to maximize differences with potential participants. A total of 16 female college students were enrolled in the study. This enrollment number met the typical sample size for qualitative descriptive design studies range of 3 to 20 participants (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009).

The primary method of data collection with this qualitative study was the use of individual semi-structured interviews with participants. All 16 of the interviews were conducted in a private conference room in an isolated campus building. Anonymity of all participants was protected by the researcher’s request for participants to use an alias or the random four digit code during the interviews.

The demographic and sexual health questionnaire data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 23 (IBM Corporation, 2015). The qualitative data included the 16 individual interviews that were analyzed using thematic data analysis methods aided by NVIVO 11 Starter version (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2015). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 20.3 years. The majority were White/Caucasian ($n = 12$, 75%), heterosexual ($n = 13$, 81.4%), and more than half ($n = 11$, 68.8%)

identified that they were single. The mean age for initiation of oral sex was 17 years with a range from 12 to 21 years old.

The majority ($n = 13$, 81.9%) of the participants indicated they did not consider themselves to be virgins and all 13 indicated they had participated in vaginal sex. Three (18.9%) of the participants considered themselves to be virgins, yet had engaged in oral sex but not vaginal sex or anal sex. The majority ($n = 13$, 81.3%) of participants had engaged in vaginal sex. Six (37.5%) of the participants had engaged in anal sex. Half of the participants had engaged in oral sex in the last 30 days and six (37.8%) of those eight participants reported they were currently in a relationship that involved oral sex. Two (12.6%) of the participants who had engaged in oral sex in the last 30 days indicated they were not currently in a relationship which involved oral sex. Approximately 63% ($n = 10$) of the participants had 3 or more lifetime oral sex partners; one participant indicated a total of 30 lifetime oral sex partners. Three participants (18.8%) indicated that they had engaged in oral sex with someone they had known for less than 24 hours.

Findings resulted from thematic analysis, which reflected the young women's perceptions about oral sex and their oral sex experiences. The theme, "defining virginity," was related to the young women's beliefs about virginity and participation in oral sex. The participants differed in their beliefs about loss of virginity with participation in oral sex.

The participants also differed on oral sex participation and virginity status. All of the participants in this study indicated on the sexual health questionnaire and during the interview that they had engaged in oral sex. Three of the young women reported that they had only engaged in oral sex, but not vaginal or anal sex. Despite having engaged in oral sex, the three young women maintained that they were virgins. They believed the act of vaginal penetration during sexual intercourse equated to the loss of virginity. Ava expressed, "Uh, well in my personal opinion how I define sex is like, vaginal penetration." In a separate interview, Olivia made a similar statement:

I think a lot of people don't really um, think of oral sex as sex, like what you think of like, personally. I still consider myself a virgin in that sense because I haven't had penetrative sex yet, but um, I have had oral.

Another young woman, Lily, had similar beliefs. She explained, "I personally believe that [you are still a virgin] because you can't have a baby from having oral sex and you can from having vaginal sex." In another interview, Grace stated, "I guess I don't picture it as, I don't like picture it [oral sex] as sex, I guess." During the interview she also remarked, "I consider oral sex much different than vaginal sex." When asked to explain this statement she continued, "I was raised very strict, so I kind of pictured oral sex as not, (long pause) not so bad."

Only two of the young women, Avery and Emma, believed that a person who had participated in oral sex was not a virgin. Avery explained, "technically no, you haven't had sex, a typical definition of penetration...if you haven't done that, then you might consider that to be virginity kept. But, I think it is the same as vaginal sex." Emma explained:

I just feel like that [oral sex] is crossing a boundary that is the line. I mean, a lot of people think of losing your virginity as you have ruptured whatever is down there...but I feel like if you have gone to the line of [oral] sex with someone, then you have crossed that line. Sex is sex.

Religion related to virginity status was mentioned by a few of the women. This factor is relevant considering the study was conducted in the southeast, commonly known as the Bible Belt. Sophia, who identified as not a virgin on her sexual health form, described how she engaged in oral sex and was able to maintain feeling “pure.” She shared:

I wanted to be a virgin until like I am married...you know, it [oral sex] was something that I could still, you know, kind of be an angel and I can still be pure...you know, we didn't have to worry about getting pregnant.

Another young woman, Grace, felt a person could have oral sex and still be a virgin. She described how she never received oral sex in order “to keep [her] innocence or something.” She explained that she did not receive oral sex from her boyfriend until after they had engaged in vaginal sex. Grace shared, “I guess letting him on me, maybe I did kind of feel like it would take away...like my innocence or something...that's why I didn't feel comfortable until after we had vaginal sex.”

Several of the young women felt that they could not give a simple answer about virginity status related to participation in oral sex because they thought being a virgin was individualized.

Claire was open to the idea of different views about virginity, that each individual determines how he/she views virginity. Anna also expressed this sentiment, “it really depends on them, I wouldn't want to give a definition for someone else to go by, it is pretty much all on what they think.” Anna felt that virginity status was something that each woman defined for herself.

Hailey, who identified as a virgin, discussed the importance of why she felt that virginity status was individualized. She strongly stated, “I define virginity as something somebody claims for themselves...I worked as a volunteer [at a crisis center] and one of the things we told victims of sexual assault or abuse is that nobody can take your virginity. That is something you give.” Hailey believed that each person should define their own virginal status and should be comfortable when they choose to “give” their virginity to someone.

Participants' perceptions about virginity differed regarding a woman's participation in oral sex versus vaginal sex. The majority of young women in this study believed that a woman could engage in oral sex and still classify as a virgin. Findings suggest that because young women believe that oral sex is not the same as vaginal sex, virginity is preserved. Consistent with existing research, some of the young women in this study viewed participation in oral sex as a way to stay “pure” and maintain one's status as a virgin, because there is no vaginal penetration (Bersamin, Fisher, Walker, Hill, & Grube, 2007; Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2009; Esbaugh & Gute, 2008; Fahs, 2016; Hans & Kimberly, 2011).

Only two of the participants differed on their opinions of virginity with oral sex and believed that if you engage in oral sex, you are no longer a virgin. Although this is a limited number of participants, this is an important finding because these two participants believed that oral sex still constituted as a sex act, and for that reason a loss of virginity. This finding was consistent with previous work of Hans and Kimberly (2011) who also found that a minimal number of college students felt that oral sex did not maintain virginity.

Several of the participants had a difficult time defining the term virgin because they felt that young women had different conceptualizations of what it means to be a virgin. These findings suggest that some women acknowledge the importance of personal beliefs and self-concept related to virginity status. This was

consistent with findings in a study (Sprecher & Treger, 2015) of virgins at a Midwestern university that found women typically support personal beliefs, such as religious involvement and moral upbringing, as reasons for maintaining virginity. However, Sprecher and Treger (2015) only addressed virginity as related to vaginal sex, not oral sex.

Conclusion

The findings of this study on oral sex and views about virginity have important implications for sexual health education. In order to design and implement an educational intervention, it is imperative to first explore the existing perceptions about sexual behaviors. The findings provide insight on how young women view oral sex related to virginity. Findings from this study suggest that the majority of college aged women believe that oral sex is not sex, therefore virginity is kept.

Most sexual research addresses vaginal sex, with oral sex often viewed as a type of comparison sex (Lefkowitz, Vasilenko, & Leavitt, 2016; Wood, McKay, Komarnicky, & Milhausen, 2016). Minimal attention has been given to the oral sex experiences of young women (Buhi et al., 2010; Chambers, 2007; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). More research is needed on young women's perceptions about virginity and oral sex, as well as how individual differences may exist with attitudes about oral sex and virginity among young women.

References

- Bersamin, M. M., Fisher, D.A., Walker, S., Hill, D.L., & Grube, J.W. (2007). Defining virginity and abstinence: Adolescents' interpretations of sexual behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, 182-188. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2007.03.011
- Buhi, E. R., Marhefka, S. L., & Hoban, M. T. (2010). The State of the union: Sexual health disparities in a national sample of US college students. *Journal of American College Health, 58*(4), 337-346. doi:10.1080/07448480903501780
- Byers, E. S., Henderson, J., & Hobson, K.M. (2009). University students' definitions of sexual abstinence and having sex. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 38*, 665-674. doi: 10.1007/s105-007-9289-6
- Chambers, W. C. (2007). Oral sex: Varied behaviors and perceptions in a college population. *Journal of Sex Research, 44*(1), 28-42. doi:10.1080/00224490709336790
- Eshbaugh, E. M., & Gute, G. (2008). Hookups and sexual regret among college women. *Journal of Social Psychology, 148*(1), 77-89. doi:10.3200/socp.148.1.77-90
- Fahs, B. (2016) Methodological mishaps and slippery subjects: Stories of first sex, oral sex, and sexual trauma in qualitative sex research. *Qualitative Psychology, 3*(2), 209-225.
- Hans, J. D., Gillen, M., & Akande, K. (2010). Sex redefined: The reclassification of oral-genital contact. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 42*(2), 74-78. doi:10.1363/4207410
- Hans, J. D., & Kimberly, C. (2011). Abstinence, sex, and virginity: Do they mean what we think they mean? *American Journal of Sexuality Education, 6*(4), 329-342. doi:10.1080/15546128.2011.624475

- Higgins, J. A., Trussell, J., Moore, N. B., & Davidson, J. K. (2010). Young adult sexual health: Current and prior sexual behaviours among non-Hispanic white US college students. *Sex Health*, 7(1), 35-43. doi:10.1071/sh09028
- IBM Corporation. (2015). *IBM SPSS statistics for windows, version 23.0*. Armonk, NY: IBM Corporation, Inc.
- Jozkowski, K. N., & Satinsky, S. A. (2013). A gender discrepancy analysis of heterosexual sexual behaviors in two university samples. *Journal of Community Health*, 38(6), 1157-1165. doi:10.1007/s10900-013-9728-3
- Lefkowitz, E.S., Vasilenko, S.A., & Leavitt, C. E. (2016). Oral vs. vaginal sex experiences and consequences among first-year college students. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45, 329-337. doi: 10.1007/s10508-015-0654-6
- Lindberg, L. D., Jones, R., & Santelli, J. S. (2008). Noncoital sexual activities among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 43(3), 231-238. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2007.12.010
- Lindley, L. L., Barnett, C. L., Brandt, H. M., Hardin, J. W., & Burcin, M. (2008). STDs Among Sexually Active Female College Students: Does Sexual Orientation Make a Difference? *Perspectives on Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 40(4), 212-217. doi:10.1363/4021208
- Magilvy, J.K., & Thomas, E. (2009). A first qualitative project: Qualitative descriptive design for novice researchers. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 14(4), 298-300. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6155.2009.00212.x
- Malacad, B. L., & Hess, G. C. (2010). Oral sex: behaviours and feelings of Canadian young women and implications for sex education. *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care*, 15(3), 177-185. doi:10.3109/13625181003797298
- Peterson, Z.D., & Muehlenhard, C.L. (2007). What is sex and why does it matter? A motivational approach to exploring individuals' definitions of sex. *Journal of Sex Research*, 44(3), 256-268.
- QSR International Pty Ltd. (2015). *NVivo qualitative data analysis software, Version 11*.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 23, 334-340.
- Sewell, K. K., & Strassberg, D. S. (2014). How do heterosexual undergraduate students define having sex? A new approach to an old question. *Journal of Sex Research*, 52(5), 507-516. doi:10.1080/00224499.2014.888389
- Sprecher, S., & Treger, S. (2015). Virgin college students' reasons for and reactions to their abstinence from sex: Results from a 23-year study at a Midwestern U.S. university. *Journal of Sex Research*, 0(0), 1-13. doi: 10.1080/00224499.2014.983633
- Vannier, S. A., & O'Sullivan, L. F. (2012). Who gives and who gets: Why, when, and with whom young people engage in oral sex. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(5), 572-582. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9745-z
- Wood, J. R., McKay, A., Komarnicky, T., & Milhausen, R. R. (2016). Was it good for you too?: An analysis of gender differences in oral sex practices and pleasure rating among heterosexual Canadian university students. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 25(1), 21-29. doi: 10.3138/cjhs.251-A2