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**Multiple dimensions of peer influence in adolescent romantic and sexual relationships: a descriptive, qualitative perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

Adolescents undergo critical developmental transformations that increase the salience of peer influence. Peer interactions (platonic and romantic) have been found to have both a positive and negative influence on adolescent attitudes and behaviors related to romantic relationships and sexual behavior. The current study used qualitative methodology to explore how peers influence romantic and sexual behavior. Forty adolescents participated in individual semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach. The concept of peer influence on romantic relationships and sexual behavior emerged as a key theme. Youth described that platonic peers (friends) influenced their relationships and sexual behavior including pressuring friends into relationships, establishing relationships as currency for popularity and social status, and creating relationship norm and expectations. Romantic peers also motivated relationship and sexual behavior as youth described engaging in behavior to avoid hurting and successfully pleasing their partners. Future research should explore multiple types of peer influence in order to better inform interventions to improve the quality of adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** adolescent development, romantic relationships, sexual relationships, peer influence, qualitative

## INTRODUCTION

Peers play a significant role in influencing adolescent risk behaviors (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Described as complex, multidimensional and multidirectional, peer influence encompasses a range of behaviors including peer pressure, modeling of desirable behavior, and creating opportunities for behavior that would not happen in solitude, all of which can both positively and negatively influence behavior (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008; Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

Given that romantic and sexual behaviors are inherently social activities, it is important to understand the role of peer influence. Sexual behaviors are influenced not only by peers with whom a youth is sexually involved, but also by platonic friends who either discourage or augment the likelihood of certain behaviors (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008; Fortenberry 2003). However, research examining the link between peer influence and romantic and sexual behavior in adolescence is scarce (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008; Fortenberry 2003). This study uses qualitative methods to better understand how peer influence influences decision-making in adolescent romantic and sexual relationships.

### Peer Influence

In an attempt to highlight the complexity and multidimensionality of peer influence, Brown and colleagues (2008) developed a conceptual model which posits that as adolescents encounter peer influence, they engage in a cyclical, transactional process in which they experience and respond to (e.g. accept or reject) the peer influence; engage in subsequent attitudes and/or behavior; and establish peer influence for other peers (Brown et al., 2008). The most salient type of peer influence is peer pressure, which involves individuals or groups

explicitly influencing the attitudes or behaviors of others through overt methods (e.g., coercion, bullying, teasing, or explicit suggestion) (Brown et al., 2008). In contrast, more subtle and indirect components of peer influence, including peer contagion and behavioral reinforcement, capture more implicit components of peer influence (Brown et al., 2008). Peer contagion occurs when certain behaviors are modeled that intentionally or unintentionally sets a standard for peers (Brown et al., 2008). Similarly, behavioral reinforcement occurs when peers encourage or provide positive feedback through verbal and nonverbal cues in response to certain behaviors (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

As young people enter adolescence, one of their primary tasks is to gain knowledge and experience to help them navigate “the complexities of human social interactions” (Peper & Dahl, 2013, p. 135). To facilitate this, adolescents increase the amount of time that they spend with their peers, undergo critical social transformations to become more socially engaged, and engage in frequent social comparisons with the peers around them (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Gerrard, Gibbons, Stock, Houlihan, & Dykstra, 2006). Recent research in developmental science has demonstrated that adolescents undergo changes in their neural processing that affect their interactions with influential peers in a way that differs from both children and adults (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Forbes & Dahl, 2010; Pfeifer et al., 2011). For adolescents, the presence of peers stimulates the reward circuitry in the brain, enhancing the drive towards reward-seeking behaviors (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Sunstein, 2008). This enhanced effect of peers on adolescent decision-making and behavior highlights the importance of understanding peer influence (Forbes & Dahl, 2010). The salience of social comparison coupled with the neurodevelopment occurring in adolescence shapes adolescent behavior.

Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Relationships

Research also has explored the importance of romantic and sexual relationships in adolescent development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Furman & Simon, 2008). Many adolescents spend increasingly more time with romantic partners than parents and other peers and receive a majority of their social support within these relationships (Furman & Simon, 2008). The likelihood of having had a romantic relationship increases linearly with age and, by mid-adolescence, most individuals have been involved in at least one romantic relationship (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). These first romantic relationships serve as the primary context for young people to explore their sexual identity and gain sexual experience (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Furman, Ho, & Low, 2007). The majority of both male (56%) and female (70%) adolescents report that their first experience of sexual intercourse occurred within the context of a romantic relationship (Guttmacher Institute, 2014). Romantic relationships offer adolescents an opportunity to engage in and reflect on the outcomes of sexual behavior as well as to clarify personal sexual desires and values (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). As young people navigate romantic and sexual relationships, they gain experience, knowledge and skills that will shape their future romantic and sexual behavior.

#### Sex differences in adolescent development

Research exploring differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors between males and females have found them to be small and often insignificant (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Overall, research suggests that male and female adolescents have a similar age of sexual debut, although there are sex differences related to race/ethnicity suggesting that cultural conceptions of gender and gender roles influence sexual behavior (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2009). Similarly, research suggests that adolescent males and females can be equally physically aggressive in

sexual relationships dispelling the notion that one gender is responsible for initiating sexual behavior (Perry & Pauletti, 2011).

Despite the overall similarities between males and females, some important developmental differences emerge between the sexes in relationship to peer influence. During adolescence, females become more socially oriented, and therefore, spend more time in social situations and focused on socially related tasks (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Given this social inclination, females often become more preoccupied with romantic relationships and may engage in them with an intensity that can lead to anxiety and/or depression (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). This social inclination also leads females to communicate more with their peers about sex-related topics, which can facilitate a critical exchange of health protective information (Kapungu et al., 2010).

Adolescent males experience different messages around sexual socialization and gender roles that also influence their romantic and sexual behavior. Males generally have a more strongly defined male gender identity than females and can often be more avoidant or dismissive in their interpersonal relationships (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). This can translate to adolescent males being less attentive to or aware of the interpersonal dynamics in romantic and sexual relationships. This is reflected by male adolescents having less defined expectations for monogamy in the context of romantic relationships, which may contribute to cheating or other relationship threatening behavior (Bauman & Berman, 2005). This may also contribute to adolescent males reporting having more frequent intercourse than females (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). This divergence in gender roles can have significant effects on adolescents' motivations to engage in romantic and sexual relationships and the way the young people perceive and experience them.

## Peer influence in romantic and sexual behavior

Close friends, romantic peers, and broader peer contexts have been found to influence adolescent sexual behavior and adolescents' decisions to engage in romantic and sexual relationships (Ali & Dwyer, 2011; Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006; Kennett, Humphreys, & Schultz, 2012; Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008). In one study, a majority (42%) of non-sexually active youth reported feeling pressure from romantic partners or platonic peers to become sexually active (Potard et al., 2008). Generally, having sexually active platonic peers has been found to lead to more positive attitudes towards sexual activity, earlier sexual debut, increased sexual activity, and an increased number of sexual partners (Ali & Dwyer, 2011; Furman et al., 2007; Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000). Peer pressure appears to mediate the relationship between risky sexual behavior and individual differences (e.g. self-regulation and sensation seeking) (Crockett et al., 2006). Negative peer pressure in early adolescence, regardless of whether the pressure was related to sexual behavior, predicts an increase in adolescent sexual behavior across genders (Crockett et al., 2006).

Prior research provides little insight about the mechanistic aspects of peer influence on sexual outcomes or the casual pathways. One qualitative study highlighted clear distinctions between adolescents' motivations to engage in romantic versus platonic relationships and between how young people differentially experience peer influence in relationships with opposite sex friends versus romantic partners (Hand & Furman, 2009). In a more direct exploration of peer influence on sexual behavior, another qualitative study examined how peer pressure influenced the sexual behavior of youth at high risk of HIV infection in South Africa. These data highlighted that high salience of social belonging resulted in increased vulnerability to peer influence to engage in high-risk sexual behavior (Selikow, Ahmed, Flisher, Mathews, &



Mukoma, 2009). Expanding on the available research, this qualitative study contributes to the literature by exploring the role of peer influence in adolescent sexual development and looks beyond explicit peer pressure to capture some of the nuances of the role of peer influence in adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships.

## **METHOD**

### Participants

The data was collected during the spring and summer of 2012 in Northern California. Using purposive and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), 40 English-speaking youth, ages 15-19 years old, were interviewed. This age group was selected due to the fact that the majority of US adolescents (71%) report being sexually active by the time they are 19 years old and 77% of those sexually active youth experience their sexual debut between the ages of 15-19 years old (Guttmacher Institute 2014). Youth were recruited through urban community-based youth centers, community clinics, public libraries, and charter schools.

Of the 40 youth who participated in interviews, the majority (62%) were female (n=25) and the mean age was 16.7 years old (SD=1.4). Interviewees identified as White (25%), African American (15%), Latino/Latina (27.5%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (42.5%).<sup>1</sup> Fifty-eight percent of the youths' mothers and 45% of their fathers had a high school education or greater. Fifteen percent (n=6) of interviewees reported engaging in same sex romantic or sexual relationships, being sexually attracted to same sex romantic partners, or identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ). Not all youth who identified as GLBTQ had had a same sex sexual or romantic relationship, but nonetheless articulated their sexual orientation and/or gender identity as GLBTQ. Ninety percent of interviewees reported having been in some type of romantic relationship and 45% reported having had vaginal or anal intercourse. The interview

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<sup>1</sup> Total is greater than 100% as youth could identify multiple racial/ethnic categories.

guide included broad questions exploring factors that influence relationship and sexual behavior, and all youth identified peers as a primary source of influence. The study protocol and interview guide were reviewed and approved by the university's Committee for Protection of Human Subjects.

### Procedure

Young people under the age of 18-years-old provided written parental/guardian consent and signed written assents. Interviewees over age 18 consented for themselves. Each young person selected a location for the interview that they identified as private and safe. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was digitally recorded and transcribed. Interviewees received a \$25 gift card for completing the interview.

Youth completed a short demographic survey that asked about age, gender, grade in school, ethnicity, parental education and zip code. Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which included 20 open-ended questions with relevant probes about perceptions of participant's first romantic relationships, emotions related to romantic relationships and sexual behavior, and beliefs and perceptions about sexual behavior. Although prior research suggested that peers would emerge as a key factor influencing romantic and sexual behavior, the interview guide was constructed to be very broad so as not to "lead" interviewees' responses and to ensure that salient themes were generated by the youth themselves. Therefore, the guide did not include explicit questions about how peers influence romantic relationship and sexual behavior. Not all questions were asked of all interviewees and questions beyond the scope of the guide were included when relevant to particular interviews (see Glaser 1967).

One female researcher (the first author), who has expertise in qualitative methods and research, conducted the majority of the interviews (n=39). An alternate trained researcher

conducted one of the interviews. This research did not attempt to control for threats to validity in the design, but instead created a strategy to rule out threats to the interpretation of the data (Maxwell, 2005). Throughout the reflective data collection process, the interviewer employed tested strategies to bolster the integrity of the data presented here which included: soliciting feedback from interviewees on the themes emerging through the interviews (respondent validation); actively seeking out discrepant evidence and negative cases; and comparing newly emerging interview themes to previously collected data from this study (Maxwell, 2005).

### Analysis

Each interview was transcribed, verified and entered into HyperResearch (v.3.0.3). Following the interpretive design of this project, the first author coded the data. During the data collection and analysis process, the first author kept careful journals reflecting her thoughts and assumptions about the data and the interviewees, which allowed her to more objectively explore how these factors influenced the analysis. After coding all interviews, a number of key themes were revisited that arose from the data and aligned with existing theory on adolescent romantic behavior and sexual development. As the theme of peer influence emerged from the data, excerpts related to peer influence were extracted from the transcripts and recoded using classifications that had emerged from the original coding. In addition, all of the original transcripts were reviewed see if there were any additional places to code for peer influence. The demographic survey data were analyzed using Excel.

## **RESULTS**

All interviewees (100%) spoke about their peers and described how peers influenced their first romantic relationship experiences. When asked when they first became interested in having some type of romantic relationship, 85% of young people reported being interested before

entering high school (30% reported interest prior to middle school, and 55% reported developing an interest at some point during middle school). Key themes, outlined in the following sections, emerged related to the influence of friends and the influence of romantic partners. Themes were generally consistent across gender and sexual orientation, except for the theme of pleasing partners, which differed markedly by gender. In this section, quotes are identified by Participant Number and Table 1 provides corresponding demographic information for each respondent.

#### *Influence of Platonic Friends*

The majority of adolescents (60%) mentioned that their friends influenced their choice to engage in relationships. As outlined in Table 2, these factors both facilitated and inhibited romantic and sexual behavior. Most youth reported that peer influence was very significant in motivating their first romantic relationships. Romantic partners were significant in shaping relationship and sexual decisions and platonic friends also played a key role in motivating relationships. Reflecting on her first relationships, Participant 22 recounted, “Everyone was in a relationship...when you see someone has a boyfriend, you kind of want one too.” Participant 29 expanded on this theme describing, “ I really think that what we did in middle school was pretty naïve, like just trying to find somebody to – to be your boyfriend or girlfriend is just, you know, it’s pressuring yourself, and pressuring other people to do things that they don’t want to do, just so they won’t feel left out.”

#### *Peer Norms and Expectations*

Many youth (38%) talked about how romantic relationships were important for social status in middle school. Participant 25 recounted, “...back then, like everyone was getting uh, getting girlfriends and boyfriends. And it - it was sort of like the trend or something like that. And then, uh, uh, k-kind of felt peer pressure.” Participant 26 also described, “When everybody

knew you were, you had a girl or a girlfriend, or you were in a relationship, I guess you just felt, like prideful, like oh yea, I got a girl, like it's something to feel good about." Participant 21 described, "Everyone was in a relationship. Especially being that young, when you see someone has a boyfriend, you kind of want one too...I felt at that time, if I would have had a boyfriend, then people would have thought differently of me."

The overwhelming majority (90%) of interviewees had engaged in at least one relationship, and even those who were comfortable with the decision not to have relationships acknowledged the social pressure to do so. Participant 20 shared, "I think I'm pretty cool because I didn't, I haven't been in a relationship. And it's really hard for uh, people in high school or middle school because they are often so, they're surrounded by people who are in relationships." Participant 21, who, based on religious beliefs, had clear intentions not to engage in a romantic relationship prior to marriage, echoed this feeling of being left out. Despite being very clear and confident about her decision she shared, "Like all my friends talk about these guys and their boyfriends, you know. I want to have like a little bit of that."

Many youth (45%) described that friends motivated them to engage in their first relationships. The primary reason young people reported being interested in relationships was that their peers were interested in romantic relationships. As Participant 14 reported, "I think that what was interesting was that everybody wanted one [a relationship]." This sentiment was echoed in many interviews and highlighted here by Participant 26: "I just thought that being in a relationship was cool like, ok, all the kids, or everybody was in a relationship. It was like the thing to do and be, have a girlfriend, be in a relationship."

A key benefit that many young people (45%) reported gaining from being in a relationship was an opportunity to show the world the importance of their relationship. The

youth in this study described that engaging in public displays of affection (PDA) signaled to both those in the relationship and to peers observing the act the significance of a relationship and contributed to increased social status and self-esteem. This increase in social status in turn reinforced the behavior of engaging in PDA. Participant 27 stated, "...once you already have that person, you can already like, you know, show the world." Participant 15 recognized the importance of even the little signs of affection in signaling the strength of her partner's commitment, "Like, I felt just like good, him wanting to hold my hand and stuff when we were walking, so that I don't know, people would know we were together..."

#### *Positive influence from friends*

A number of adolescents (45%) reported that their friends provided a range of support that positively affected their romantic and sexual behaviors. Many youth served as advisors in romantic relationships and helped to identify positive partners. Friends were seen as resources for good information about sexual health and often served as good sounding boards when relationships faced challenges. For example, Participant 3 described advising a friend who had just had unprotected intercourse, "Like, um, the Teen Clinic is here to help us, you know – please don't like throw this awesome resource like away...". Friends were also viewed as a source of support and encouragement when people felt cautious about engaging in relationships. Participant 9 was motivated by observing the success of her friends' relationships, "I see how like friends are happy...I've definitely thought, oh, one day I want that." Participant 15 shared how a strong platonic relationship helped her make better relationship choices as she described:

"...I just didn't feel like the need to like just go out with them because I wanted attention. Just like having other relationships that you can go to – like I had my best friend. I just feel like she was more of like that person for me. Like a really

intimate person...In the future, I just...I just hope that I have a really good friend that will like help me not to feel like the need to like-go-you know, be with any guy.”

### *Negative influence from friends*

Almost half of the sample (48%) shared that engaging in relationships due to peer influence led to a range of negative outcomes. Many adolescents reported that they often felt awkward or uncomfortable in relationships that resulted from succumbing both to social cues from friends to engage in relationships and to explicit peer pressure. As Participant 13 articulated, “I think it was just peer pressure kind of thing, ‘cause everybody was getting into dating. And I just wanted to be part of it. But then I realized that I realized that it wasn’t...it wasn’t that fun. It was just peer pressure.” When describing her friends, Participant 5 said, “When I am interested [in someone], they’re all up in it and it’s just not fun for me...”

Similarly, youth reported that their friends were involved in helping them negotiate initiating romantic relationships. When reflecting on a romantic relationship that was facilitated by her peers, Participant 29 recounted, “I felt really uncomfortable...it didn’t really start because I wanted it to be...It was kind of like peer pressure and that kind of thing.” When asked why she chose to engage in a relationship she was not interested in she went on to describe a very negative and strained relationship that ended poorly with her ex threatening suicide. In reflecting on her motivation to engage in the relationship she explained, “...it’s my friends and I don’t want to disappoint them, and it’s kind of like, and I just went with it. And then – just awful. Yeah, it was awful.” Similarly, Participant 36 described how he felt badly upon finding out that his partner’s sister had motivated her to date him, “I didn’t feel that good. She said yes, cause her sister said so...[I felt] that she didn’t really want to go out with me.” Some young people

described specifically resisting when a friend tried to set them up because they didn't want to be motivated by their peers' desires.

### Romantic Partners

All adolescents who had experienced relationships talked about the ways in which their romantic or sexual partners influenced their choices and behaviors. The majority (60%) focused on how partners negatively influenced their choices and behavior and fewer (23%) described the positive ways that their partners impacted them. Many interviewees described engaging in unwanted sexual behavior as a result of peer influence. Participant 12 shared how explicit pressure from a partner led to unwanted sexual activity:

...like he was my first sexual relationship. And I was like – I told him no but he kept telling me, “Come on, come on, let's do it.” And like I guess – I guess I felt that pressure and I was like: oh, my God. And I can't even say no. Like it was hard for me to say no. And like to this day I feel – I feel sad about it you know. I wish he wasn't the first guy...I still feel like he shouldn't have been my first.

Participant 25 reflected how more subtle influence from romantic partners resulted in unwanted sexual behavior sharing, “...if, like, the other person doesn't really want it, but then they do it anyway just to, like, make the other person happy. That's sort of, like, being used I think, and that's, like, not really healthy.” On the positive end, young people described partners encouraging them to make better choices about friends or school. Participant 23 reflected how her boyfriend advised her: “...like not to hang out with the wrong people, not be with the wrong people, because they can make you make decisions that you will regret later.” Participant 37 also described that his current girlfriend pushed him to be more social at school stating, “...she led me to like, you know, go to Homecoming and, like, be more whatever,...maybe she's going to



push me into joining more clubs, doing better in school and help me 'cause, like, you know, it's just that, that key help that she, like pushes me and stuff."

#### *Avoiding hurting others*

A number of youth (45%) articulated that they were motivated to be in their first relationships because they wanted to avoid hurting the feelings of the people they were dating. Some young people expressed concerned that they would offend someone if they declined to go out with or date them. As Participant 11 summarized, "They were interested in me, and...I just kind of didn't want to say, 'No, I don't like you back.'...'cause I didn't want to hurt any feelings and, you know." Participant 10 echoed this sentiment of not wanting to hurt someone's feelings by saying, "I don't really think, um, I really wanted to be in relationships when I was um, like in them. But like, um, people, like ask me out so I like would feel bad, um, about saying like, no." Both males and females shared this concern about hurting or offending potential partner and often prioritized a partner's feelings over their own comfort or happiness.

#### *Public Displays of Affection (PDA)*

The majority of interviewees (60%) valued PDA as a way to show people the commitment in one's relationship and confer popularity to observers. Being willing to engage in romantic behavior in public was frequently described as an indicator that a relationship was going well. Participant 27 described, "If you're going to be with somebody, you shouldn't be embarrassed of letting the world know or just people see that you guys are together." Being willing to show physical affection to one another in public was often described as a distinguishing factor between committed relationships and more casual encounters and as Participant 1 described, PDA was a way of "...showing the world that I want to be with you."

Not engaging in PDA often was the source of problems and conflict in relationships. Some youth expressed concern when partners felt that the physical part of their relationship should be kept private. Participant 15 recounted the experience of a close friend who's partner refused to show any physical affection in public, "She was having a really hard time because like the guy she was going out with didn't really want to be around her. Like didn't want to like, let other people know about their relationship."

### *Pleasing Partners*

Once engaged in romantic relationships, more than half of the young people (55%) described a desire to please their partners. This desire emotionally and physically influenced their decisions about sexual behavior. Many interviewees described being explicitly aware of peer pressure from partners (e.g. partners overtly trying to pressure or coerce them), and others (38%) described the influence occurring within their relationships as much more subtle and implicit. Many youth felt that this motivation to please their partners was especially salient in relationships during early adolescence. In contrast to other themes from these interviews, this theme had clear gender differences, which are reflected in the summary below.

### *Female Perspective on Pleasing Partners*

Many of the females (52%) recognized the importance of balancing the needs of their romantic partners with their own desires. Some females (33%) described being motivated to please their partners by engaging in romantic or sexual behavior in hopes of creating increased emotional intimacy and security. Participant 17 summarized, "I think it brings security pleasing, pleasing, because it's like this [sex} is what they're asking for and this is what I'll give. And if I give, they won't go away. Or...they'll keep on, you know, being there." This young woman later realized that engaging in sexual behavior to please her partner did not ultimately serve her well.

She reflected, "...at first I felt, it felt good because I was like ok, he cares. He likes me a lot you know. Um, I'm , I feel loved...So at the beginning it was cool. At the end it was like now, I can't do this no more, you know." Similarly, Participant 2 described allowing an uncomfortable sexual encounter to continue because she was worried about "...what the other person is thinking or that I wouldn't want to ruin the mood. Or that maybe it will get better." Although this young woman had a very sophisticated understanding of the importance of advocating for herself in relationships, she went on to describe a feeling of comfort in attempting to please her partners. She reflected, "I like to hear what the other person wants or shares. Even if it's them leading something, um, I just feel comfortable. That it's about where they want to go and they're happy with it. I mean like they want to go there so if we get there, they'll be happy. So that all that is left for me to be happy to for us to both be happy." Her motivation to facilitate her partner's happiness often led to her to make sexual decisions that later felt uncomfortable and disempowering.

Participant 12 also reflected on the challenges she faced in advocating for herself in sexual relationships. In describing her motivations for engaging in her first sexual relationship, despite not wanting to have sex she said, "I guess I was scared that he would like leave me because I didn't want to do that [have sexual intercourse]. And I was scared that was going to either look for some other girl to do it with even though he's still with me, and I didn't want, I didn't want that to happen." She went on to describe her sexual encounters with that partner, "I don't feel like I'm enjoying this. Like I feel like I'm just doing this to make him happy."

Participant 24 also described sacrificing her personal wants and needs in a relationship in order to keep the interest of her partner, "I think a really common fear is having your partner lose interest in you. Like a lot of people tell me that if you wait too long, they're going to lose interest

in you so you want to keep it interesting. And that's probably why it's hard to speak up and that's not going to make your partner happy so you want to stretch it out."

### *Male Perspective on Pleasing Partners*

A small percentage of males (13%) described being motivated to please a partner to increase emotional security. In general, males were often motivated to please their female partners, unconvinced that young women could advocate for themselves. Many males (44%) reported pleasing their partners out of concern for their partners' welfare. Participant 38 reported that pleasing his partner significantly influenced his relationship decisions. Feeling more confident in his ability to protect his own feelings, than his partner's capacity to protect hers he stated, "So it's more about if she's happy, then I'm happy..." This motivation to please female partners was compounded by the social perception of men as sexual aggressors. Participant 33 was concerned that his partners could not communicate their own wants and needs in the context of the relationship. He described his inner dialogue during sex as, "Like when we're about to do certain things you know, it just in the back of my mind like...but I'm just like damn, does she even really like want this or is she just doing this just because like I'm doing this, you know?" This young man was striving to ensure that his partner clearly communicated her desires and preferences in an attempt to avoid behavior motivated by her desire to please. Participant 19 also reported being pleasantly surprised by a young woman who was sexually aggressive, but despite her initiating the encounter he expressed concern about her motivations: "I think a lot of things were going through my head...I was scared if she was ok with it. I was thinking about whether or not we would do it again."

Some of the young men (32%) also reported staying in relationships they had attempted to end because they saw the pain and discomfort the break-up was causing their partner.

Participant 34 reported that the emotional impact of breaking up had repeatedly kept him from ending relationships. Attempting to break up with one partner after two months of dating he described, “She was crying and stuff like that so I had to like, I felt really bad, so I like, took her back in.” While this relationship only lasted another 4 months, a later experience resulted in him dating a romantic partner for over a year and a half that he had attempted to leave 2 weeks after they started dating. Afraid of hurting his girlfriend’s feelings, he described a feeling of powerlessness and blame stating, “I mean, like she basically trapped me.” Recognizing his part in staying in the relationship, he reflected that the cost of trying to please her by staying in the relationship was very destructive for them both.

In addition to being concerned about how a break up would affect their female partner, males (30%) attempted to please their partners because they feared how the reactions of their female partners would personally affect them. Participant 35 described being motivated to stay in a relationship based on his partner’s potential reaction. He did not end the relationship despite knowing it was negative because of:

...her yelling at me. Yes, yes, that was it. I was scared of her... Well I wasn’t really afraid of her. I was afraid of what – I mean, I knew – I was afraid of what she would do afterwards. Cause she has-she has a-a-a f-fire-y temper... She could do a lot of bad things.

His fear of her anger and her disappointment resulted in him staying in the relationship where this young woman continued to yell at him, break his cell phone, and often derail his personal plans with her emotional outbursts.

## **DISCUSSION**

The themes identified in these interviews point to ways in which friends and romantic partners influence sexual and relationship behavior. These themes highlight ways that youth are responding to peer influence in relationships and point to opportunities for adolescent relationship and sex education programs to better address the complexity of peer influence. Past studies have demonstrated that peer presence and peer influence leads to sub-optimal decision making and increased risk taking across a range of behaviors (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; O'Brien, Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2011; Sullivan et al., 2012), while other research has argued that peer influence may have a more limited role in adolescent risk behavior (Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005). This current research suggests that peers are highly motivated to engage in romantic and sexual behavior as a result of peer influence and points to opportunities to interrupt the peer influence cycle when this influence is negative.

In alignment with prior research, adolescents described both the positive and negative ways in which friends and romantic peers influenced their behavior to initiate, maintain, and terminate romantic and sexual relationships. Youth talked both about responding to explicit, direct pressure from friends and romantic partners to engage in relationships or sexual behavior. They also discussed responding to more subtle peer influence, including behavioral displays (i.e. modeling of desirable behavior) and behavioral reinforcement (i.e. positive feedback encouraging behavior), which may not have been intended by the involved peers. Youth also described how peers served as sources of information about contraceptives and sexual health clinical services (Furman et al., 2007). This narrative research expands beyond quantitative measures which are inherently limited by preconceived framing, to capture more nuanced themes about the personal and social contexts that contributed to peer influence and sexual behavior.

Youth described that public displays of affection (PDA) convey a message about how people in romantic relationships should behave and that PDA was used as an opportunity to get behavioral reinforcement for romantic and sexual behavior (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). As reflected in these narratives, youth perceived PDA as an expression to one's partner that they are attractive and desirable. PDA also signaled to other peers that romantic relationships can be linked to popularity and other desirable outcomes. Most youth did not describe explicit pressure to engage in PDA, but many described engaging in PDA to validate an existing relationship in the eyes of their friends and partners. This external validation increased their perceived social status and the intimacy they felt in their relationships. Reciprocally, others observing their PDA perceived relationships to be desirable and were motivated to seek out relationships themselves. This behavioral reinforcement from peers that romantic relationships are positive and desirable motivated adolescents to engage in and sustain romantic and sexual relationships.

Similarly, adolescents described engaging in a number of behaviors to please their peers and romantic partners, which often resulted in negative outcomes. Some youth described initiating relationships out of fear of disappointing friends and partners. Once in relationships, many females described sacrificing their personal desires and needs in an effort to keep partners interested and engaged. This aligns with adult literature, which indicates that females experience sexual enjoyment by ensuring that their partners are sexually fulfilled and may engage in unprotected sex to create emotional intimacy within their romantic relationships (Higgins & Hirsch, 2008).

This research unpacks the "reciprocal, transactional process" (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008, p. 26) associated with peer influence by exploring the multiple ways that adolescents experience and respond to peer influence in romantic and sexual relationships. Some of the vulnerability to

peer influence that adolescents experience is a result of their social, emotional and cognitive development (Forbes & Dahl, 2010; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Pfeifer et al., 2011). This has been well illustrated in the abundance of recent brain development literature highlighting that peers have a unique influence on brain-behavior interactions during adolescence. Specifically, young people undergo developmental changes related to neuromaturation that affect their interactions with peers. Both the quality and characteristics of adolescent peer relationships have been found to be associated with variations in neural activation in regions of the brain associated with risk taking (Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, Miernicki, & Galván, 2014).

Neuroscience studies have demonstrated that the presence of peers can enhance an adolescent's drive towards reward-seeking behaviors regardless of risk (Chein et al., 2011; Sunstein, 2008). During a romantic or sexual encounter, the physical and emotional components of sexual intimacy stimulate the reward circuitry in the brain, and research shows that the presence of a peer further enhances this stimulation, which can enhance poor decision making (Chein et al., 2011; Sunstein, 2008). This intense pleasure stimulation contributes to the challenge adolescents face in engaging rational, premeditated thought processes when contemplating and engaging in sexual behavior.

Current research exploring the effectiveness of adolescent sex education programs show limited or short-lasting effects (Kirby, 2008). Helping young people anticipate and respond to the peer influence they experience when navigating romantic and sexual relationships holds promise for improving young peoples' experiences. In an effort to improve the impact of sex education, extensive efforts have been made to establish developmentally appropriate standards for sex education practices (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012). One component of the National Sexuality Education Standards (2012) focuses on exploring ways that peers can influence



romantic and sexual behavior. This component outlines that in 5<sup>th</sup> grade students should be able to *compare* the positive and negative ways friends and peers influence relationships, and by 8<sup>th</sup> grade they should be able to engage in more *critical analysis* of these influences (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012). It is not until 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade that the Standards outline that students should be able to analyze the influence peers may have “on whether or when to engage in sexual behaviors” (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012, p. 20). As highlighted through the research presented here, this analytical skill may come too late for some youth responding to earlier influence to engage in romantic and sexual behavior.

A better understanding of peer influence in romantic and sexual relationships from qualitative studies such as this one, combined with emerging work in neuroscience about the mechanism of peer influence, holds potential promise for improving sexual health education interventions. As youth approach and experience puberty, they would significantly benefit from an opportunity to explicitly identify the more subtle components of peer influence and explore its impact on their romantic and sexual behavior. For example, as highlighted in some comprehensive sexuality curricula, sex education should explicitly convey that romantic and sexual relationships are not successful when used only as a tool to gain social status and instead should be a source of personal support and pleasure. In addition, tailoring interventions to better address the gender differences that emerge and the specific influence of gender roles would help increase the impact of sex education programs. Similarly, giving youth tools to process and cope with feelings associated with observing PDA would help youth better think through their romantic and relationships choices.

One limitation of this study is that it asked adolescents to provide a rational description of their feelings associated with peer influence related to their relationship and sexual experiences.

As such, these interviews represent only the information that young people were able to recall and willing to explicitly describe. Some research has argued that self-report of peer influence during adolescence is not reliable and may not allow young people to describe the subtle ways in which they are being influenced (Jaccard et al., 2005). As a result, it has been proposed that self-reports provide limited insight into the ways peers influence romantic and sexual behavior. Despite this limitation, the complex ways in which adolescents described peer influence in these interviews suggests that their narratives deserve closer attention. A second limitation of this study was that due to the sample size, it was not possible to fully explore the different ways that individual characteristics including gender, culture/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economics affected perceptions of peer influence on romantic relationships. Expanding the research to focus specifically on these individual characteristics may uncover important differences between how different subgroups within the adolescent population experience and respond to peer influence. A third limitation of this study was that, due to limited resources, inter-rater reliability of the analysis could not be assessed. While this would have departed from the interpretative approach of this study (Maxwell, 2005), having a second coder may have helped further verify the reliability of the findings.

Further understanding of peer influence in adolescent romantic and sexual relationship may help strengthen the quality and impact of sex education programs and services. Future research should use a framework of adolescent peer influence informed by emerging neuroscience to integrate data from quantitative scales (such as peer influence scales) alongside context specific narratives such as those presented here to expand our understanding of peer influence on adolescent sexual behavior. In addition, developing methods to gain a better understanding of the multiple components of peer influence may shed important light on how

they differentially motivate romantic and sexual behavior. Furthering this line of inquiry may help better flesh out an understanding of why young people engage in undesired sexual activity or maintain emotionally harmful relationships in response to peer influence, even when they have appropriate knowledge about the related risks. This information could have important implications for the development of interventions that support youth in identifying and managing the effect of peer influence in their romantic and sexual relationships.

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Table 1

*Participant age, gender and ethnicity*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>LGBTQ</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>
#				
1	16	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
2	17	F	Y	Asian/Pacific Islander/Latino/Latina
3	16	M	Y	Latino/Latina
4	15	F	N	White/Caucasian
5	15	F	N	White/Caucasian
6	18	F	Y	White/Caucasian
7	16	F	N	Latino/Latina
8	15	F	Y	White/Caucasian/African American
9	18	F	N	Latino/Latina
10	15	F	N	White/Caucasian
11	16	M	Y	Latino/Latina
12	17	F	N	Latino/Latina
13	15	F	Y	White/Caucasian
14	17	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
15	18	F	N	White/Caucasian
16	18	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
17	19	F	N	Latino/Latina
18	19	F	N	Latino/Latina
19	16	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
20	15	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander

21	17	F	N	African American
22	17	F	N	African American
23	17	F	N	Latino/Latina
24	16	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
25	19	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
26	15	M	N	Latino/Latina
27	18	M	N	Latino/Latina
28	16	F	N	African American
29	18	F	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
30	18	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
31	16	F	N	African American
32	17	M	N	White/Caucasian
33	19	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
34	19	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
35	17	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
36	15	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
37	15	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander
38	15	M	N	White/Caucasian/African American/Asian/Pacific Islander
39	15	M	N	White/Caucasian
40	18	M	N	Asian/Pacific Islander

Table 1

Table 2

*Examples of effect of themes related to peer influence on romantic and sexual behavior*

## Platonic Friends

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Facilitating romantic and sexual behavior</u>	<u>Inhibiting romantic and sexual behavior</u>
Status & popularity	<p>“...everyone was getting girlfriends and boyfriends and it was sort of like the trend...And then...kind of felt peer pressure like...if I didn't like, right on the spot ask her to be my girlfriend, than like it'll be weird.” –#33</p>	<p>“...You get into a relationship...and everything's like oh I got...this cool girlfriend and I'm walking around campus with her and everything...but then, then like you start realizing it's not – having a girlfriend isn't all that.” – #40</p>
Peer norms	<p>“You feel like, uh, this is what normal people do in relationships. So you think that it's something that you should be doing. But even if you don't feel comfortable with it, you still do it because you think it's right”. – #20</p>	<p>“I think just maybe like the label on how everybody else would see us and how they would like expect us to be together and that just makes it awkward.” – #11</p>
Peer influence	<p>“I've heard like rumors like, ‘Oh my friend really likes you’ and I'm like ‘Well your friend should probably just talk to me then, or something.’” – #32</p>	<p>“I didn't really know if she liked me or not until ...my neighbor told me...she told me, ‘Oh, you should ask her out.’ I didn't like that, that she told me I should ask her out...I didn't want to do it because somebody else told me to.” – #27</p>

Table 2