

Masculinity and Virgin-Shaming Among College Men

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Abstract

This project explores “virgin-shaming,” a phenomenon whereby an individual is called out or made fun of for lacking sexual experience among college men. To investigate this phenomenon, interviews were conducted with 10 men enrolled at one university. Analysis revealed three key findings. First, having sex is often held as a marker of status or achievement of hegemonic masculinity. Second, virgin-shaming is found in social spaces more concerned with upholding masculine norms. Third, virgin-shaming can be used both as an invocation to reassert one’s masculinity and, relatedly, a taunt to encourage others to start having sex. Results highlight how virgin-shaming not only creates stratification within some groups of men but also perpetuates male dominance within society more broadly.

Keywords

virgin-shaming, virginity, masculinity, higher education, manhood acts

This article explores and documents how college men experience and navigate acts of “virgin-shaming,” receiving criticism or being belittled for their virgin status. The general historical precedent of post–World War II American men has included seeking to lose and celebrating the loss of virginities. Emphasis is placed on possessing enough sexual prowess to please and attract partners, which introduces a sort of social and interpersonal anxiety around heterosexual initiation and using sex with women to protect a sense of masculinity (Mundy, 2006). Cultural artifacts, including films popular and influential with young men such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *American Pie*, make light of anxieties specifically around the issue of male virginity and virginity loss, usually depicting them in a humorous manner (Caron & Hinman, 2013). Studies

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have shown that men feel shameful and anxious about their status as a virgin (Carpenter, 2002; Sprecher & Regan, 1996). To date, little research has focused specifically on how other men might take advantage of this stigma to improve their own social standing. Furthermore, as the field of men's studies grows, it is important to study such a culturally relevant phenomenon that has implications for how we analyze young men's responses to these messages in their own social environments. Contemporary gender relations reflect changing cultural norms around sexual behaviors and experiences; understanding how young men make sense of and act on cultural expectations around sexual behavior has important implications for gendered relationships and behaviors. As such, this project was designed to provide insight into how men deploy and experience virgin-shaming. Through in-depth interviews with 10 men at one university, we explore the social situations through which virgin-shaming becomes seen as an appropriate mechanism for regulating other men's behavior. By framing virgin-shaming as a manhood act (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), we are able to document how the performance of hegemonic masculinity among college men through virgin-shaming reinforces contemporary norms of gendered hierarchies among men and between women and men.

Background

Defining Sex and Virginity

Previous research indicates that people's definitions of sex, sexual activity, virginity, and virginity loss can be ambiguous and often vary from person to person. Both Carpenter (2001) and Sanders and Reinisch (1999) found that most people in their U.S.-based samples agree that penis-in-vagina intercourse would constitute sex and the first act of this kind would count as virginity loss. Whether or not "sex" occurs during other activities, including oral sex, anal sex, and acts between two members of the same biological sex, was found to be less well-agreed upon. Thus, to say that someone "had sex" cannot be taken to mean any particular act or set of acts without further clarification from the person claiming to have had sex (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Likewise, disagreement existed among respondents in the United States as to what would constitute virginity loss more specifically, including factors such as the genders of the partners involved and the voluntary or involuntary nature of the sex act (Carpenter, 2001). Palit and Allen (2016) found four components of young men's experience of virginity: physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. Nonvirgins in their sample described loss of virginity as a physical experience achieved through penetration, whereas virgins held a more expansive understanding of what the loss of virginity could entail (e.g., any intimate sexual acts between two people that were intended to cause orgasm; Palit & Allen, 2016). Overall, research that focuses on sexual debut presumes that sexual debut can be equated with virginity loss, implying that the first experience of penis-in-vagina intercourse is the simultaneous moment of sexual debut and virginity loss. The literature on sexual debut that we engage below must be read with that caveat in mind.

Social Status of Virginity and Sexual Debut in Men

Being a virgin is considered a contemptible status among young men as they develop into emerging adulthood (Carpenter, 2009). Much scholarship has focused on delaying sexual debut among young women (Diaz & Fiel, 2016; Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017); this focus might largely be due to the deleterious effect an unintended pregnancy can have on young women's life chances. However, little scholarship has theorized and directly examined the causes and consequences of delayed onset of young men's sexual debut. For example, Sprecher and Regan's (1996) research on college students highlights the paucity of theorizing around men's sexual debut relative to women's. It was found that men differ significantly from women in several aspects of reasons for delaying sexual debuts. Men are more likely to refrain from sexual activity due to fear of inadequacy or incompetence; by contrast, women are more likely to wait for reasons such as not currently having a suitable partner and fear of pregnancy (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). Conversely, much early scholarship explained men's differing sexual behaviors, including sexual debut, as connected to biological processes among adolescents: The increasing levels of testosterone and the onset of secondary sex characteristics led young men to engage in sexual activity (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). This lack of a social explanation for men's behaviors is a defining characteristic of early empirical work examining men's sexual debut.

Using a life-course perspective, Donnelly and colleagues (2001) studied virgins in an online community of self-ascribed involuntary celibates; she found that the virgins often feel and experience being "off time," meaning late or entirely absent for expected life transitions, such as virginity loss, which in turn affects their life trajectory. As they miss these transitional events at the more "normal," culturally prescribed time frames, their life trajectories branch off from those of their peers who do have sex "like everyone else," and barriers resulting from this branching off—such as shyness, isolation, and feelings of self-inadequacy—continue to reinforce their trajectory as virgins, perpetuating the status (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, & Dillard, 2001).

This trajectory away from sexual relationships can lead to experiences of social stigma associated with virginity status (Carpenter, 2002; Palit & Allen, 2016; Sprecher & Regan, 1996). Young women and men may both be anxious about their virginity status, but young women are more likely than men to see virginity as something of which they should be primarily proud or happy (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). While young women may interpret their virginity as a "gift," young men are more likely to view virginity as a stigma (Carpenter, 2002), given that the loss of virginity is noted as a developmental rite of passage (Palit & Allen, 2016). Although young men valorize virginity, they focus on the meaning and significance of the first sexual experience rather than virginity as a social status (Palit & Allen, 2016). The relative social status of the virgin is low status in social groups and thus being a virgin is perceived as something largely unwanted among college-aged men (Palit & Allen, 2016). This stigma is directly connected to the cultural expectation that men should be the more experienced sexual partner in heterosexual relationships. This is evidenced by Caron and Hinman (2013) when analyzing situations reported by college students in which a man lost his

virginity to an experienced woman. Men often reported feeling embarrassed about their virginity status, leading some to either avoid or delay its disclosure. Many female respondents reported feeling embarrassed at being the more experienced partner due to their having internalized the social norm that men “should” be more experienced (Caron & Hinman, 2013). As stigma underlies young men’s status as virgins, it likely plays a fundamental role in the social experience of virgin-shaming, through shaping men’s self-perceptions and others’ perceptions of them.

Stigma is important in context of virgin-shaming because of the association of sexual experience as a “manhood act” (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Virginity represents a lack of “proof” of masculine identity, whereby such an identity is proven by a “manhood act,” like having sex. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) made the claim that “manhood acts,” acts whose performance is required for an individual person to be labeled a “man,” reproduce an unequal gender order, leading men to try and achieve dominance over one another. Drawing on Pascoe (2007), Schrock and Schwalbe used the phenomenon of boys’ objectification of and violence against women, and the imperative to feel and express sexual desire for girls, as examples of manhood acts. Without such manhood acts, there is no membership in the privileged gender group of men, even if an individual possesses a male body; the full privileges and membership depend on conforming to and performing these manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). As gender is produced through social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987), being seen as a man occurs, in part, through these manhood acts that act in some ways as signals of membership in the privileged group. As a result, those who have performed the manhood acts will have better access to a more powerful position of masculinity; virgin-shaming could serve to highlight one’s own manhood acts, or could even become a manhood act itself. This could propel men into a more secure power position by its use, disincentivizing virginity-related masculinities and ostracizing those who express them.

Men whose masculine statuses are socially threatened might, as compensation, emphasize a particular attribute of theirs or even outright lie as a defense against the threat (Cheryan, Cameron, Katagiri, & Monin, 2015). In Cheryan et al.’s (2015) study, men were found to deliberately fabricate objective information—attributes such as height and, relevantly, number of sexual partners—in response to accusations of inadequate masculinity. Threats to identity were not primarily combated with assertions of masculine preferences, but through distancing themselves from feminine, out-group preferences while making a case for group belonging based on their supposed behavior (Cheryan et al., 2015). Virgin-shaming, then, might be used to highlight one’s own personal attributes of having had sexual partners, to signify belonging to the male group. This would be a stark comparison to a target, who would be accused of lacking such partners; the effect is distancing this target from the hegemonic group by nature of this “feminine” trait and silencing this potential individual masculinity.

Power and Exploitation

When considering how masculinity is performed, it is important to look at the positions of power of those involved. People in marginalized social positions are

disempowered by others in a higher position of power (Carpenter, 2002; Pascoe, 2005; Phillips, 2007). Phillips (2007), studying bullying and “punking” in a high school setting, found that power politics existed in instances where relationships of a certain kind existed among power identities; a boy of “upper” power status might consistently pick on “lower” status boys, this role only being reversed in general when someone of the lower status wished to usurp status from another. These relationships led to either engaging in abusive behavior against someone else or inciting the behavior against oneself, depending on the status occupied. Similarly, in Pascoe’s (2005) study of the “fag discourse,” high school boys hurled the term *fag* at other boys who were seen as lacking in power. Carpenter’s (2002) study highlighted the extent to which adult men’s own framings of their virginity loss reflected their relative position in their social community, where the least powerful men were most likely to attribute stigma to their own virginity loss. Faris and Felmlee (2014) found that in school settings increasing proximity to the center of a social network increased one’s chance of being targeted, until one reaches the very top of a social hierarchy.

Power does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, the bullying and the fag discourse occurred in social settings; an audience was a necessary component of the phenomena. The point of these activities was to increase social standing either by making evident someone else’s lower position or actually lowering someone else’s position so as to increase one’s own status (Pascoe, 2005; Phillips, 2007).

Collective Actions, Policing, and Enforcement of Masculinity

The literature highlights how certain behaviors among males reproduce masculine norms, with a group of such norms being termed *hegemonic* for its domineering and pervasive nature. Hegemonic masculinity is not generally theorized as a passive construct. Messerschmidt (2016) and Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) posited its construction as a process that can actively and purposefully adapt to threats without strict rules or protocol behind such adaptation; this allows hegemonic masculinity to maintain dominance and control. In theory, hegemonic masculine ideals reproduce themselves within a group; through this reproduction, they suppress alternative interpretations of masculinity. If an individual holds an incompatible version of masculinity, he is ostracized. As such, two types of men can have standing in a hegemonic masculine environment: first, those who either hold the hegemonic ideals themselves and second, those who suppress their deviant masculinities to conform in social settings. The threat of ostracization posed by hegemonic ideals in turn ensures that only the hegemonic ideals are expressed (Bird, 1996).

The men interviewed and observed by Bird (1996) confessed to having beliefs that differed from the hegemonic ideals, but explained that they needed to keep quiet about those beliefs, and felt that because of those beliefs they were not “true men.” Grazian’s (2007) research revealed that the college students who engaged in “girl hunting” chided each other for failures to hold up hegemonic ideals, like the constant objectification of women. In both cases, hegemonic masculinity reproduces itself and in doing so silences dissenting masculinities.

Social, cultural, and economic contexts shape the construction of norms around masculinity. On one college campus studied by Boswell and Spade (1996) with a very strong Greek life, the fraternities that were identified as being high risk for rape incidents were also those ones that displayed greater gender discrimination, a sexual double standard, and more explicit performance of masculinity by the objectification of women. By contrast, lower risk fraternities showed many signs of men and women being on an equal footing conversationally and socially. The social space determined a fraternity's high or low risk, not necessarily its individual members (Boswell & Spade, 1996). One study (Wilkins, 2009) investigating the masculine perceptions of members of two campus subcultures, an evangelical Christian organization and a network of goths, found that these groups were able to hold and even promote masculinities alternative to the form considered dominant on that college campus. Their behaviors would have been looked down upon in campus sexual culture more broadly. Within these particular subcultural spaces, however, men had somewhat more freedom to perform their own masculinities (Wilkins, 2009).

The maintenance of hegemonic ideals involves male camaraderie. Reproduction of hegemonic norms is often a group activity shared by all the nonmarginalized men involved. This activity ranges from preparation for a night of clubbing to "checking out" girls as they pass by. Some of the behavior that falls under maintenance of the norms is not aimed directly at the objectification of women in itself, but rather at having one's friends see one's participation in the behavior, which in turn affirms one's own masculinity. Any deviation will result in sanctions from more hegemonic peers (Bird, 1996; Grazian, 2007). For example, Pascoe's "fag discourse" was usually a group activity as the activity of shifting the status onto others affirmed the masculinity of all participants (Pascoe, 2005).

The Present Study

Previous research has documented three key insights. First, virgin status among men is generally looked down upon both by the virgins themselves and other men, socially disempowering virgins. Second, masculine-oriented behaviors can involve a great deal of power and exploitation in the name of status. Third, masculine behaviors are often hegemonic in nature and tend to sustain and reproduce themselves while also creating tightly knit communities among pockets of its adherents and simultaneously putting down nonconforming masculinities.

Virgin-shaming seems related to "punking," bullying, the "fag discourse," and instances of suppression of nonhegemonic masculinity. Virgins, by the very definition of the term, could not be taken very seriously by their peers in any attempt to objectify women, a key tenet of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, any constructions of masculinity that normalize virginity, if an individual is surrounded by hegemonic norms, are inevitably suppressed, either by external sanctions from one's friends for failing to go "hit on" that girl or by one's own shame in being a virgin. Being a virgin becomes a stigma, whether or not the virgin holds the status to be stigmatic. This stigma, spawned from failure to objectify women, puts the virgin in a marginalized position, which then

attracts the focus of men who want to boost or affirm their own masculinities by exploiting the lower status of someone else. Any boy or man concerned with social status is quite likely anxious about his virgin status.

Previous research has also highlighted the significance of the social space within which manhood acts like virgin-shaming occur (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Pascoe, 2005; Wilkins, 2009). Young men's experiences of virgin-shaming, either as the one performing the shaming or the recipient of the shaming, likely differ based upon the social environment where the behavior occurs. Stigma may be felt greater when more men are around, for example, or if the social space is defined as a masculine space.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of virgin-shaming among college men. The specific research questions investigated were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do college men make sense of virginity, either their own or others?

Research Question 2: Under what circumstances do college men invoke virgin-shaming?

Research Question 3: How is virgin-shaming experienced, both by those invoking the shaming language and those who are the targets of the shaming?

Research Question 4: How does the institutional setting of college shape interpretations of virginity for men?

College is a social space characterized by pockets where hegemonic masculine norms are dominant (Bird, 1996; Boswell & Spade, 1996). Understanding the virgin-shaming process in these social spaces can illuminate the ways hegemonic masculinity is enacted and enforced among men. Men who are virgins and those who are not can provide insight into how virgin status is used as a means to socially stratify men, much in the way that fag discourse does among adolescents (Pascoe, 2007). Thus, the key contribution of this study is to document how virgin-shaming as a social process contributes to the reproduction of social stratification among men.

Method

The data for this study were collected through one-on-one interviews with 10 men enrolled in a public, mid-Atlantic, metropolitan-area university. After approval from the first author's Institutional Review Board, recruitment was conducted by posting flyers on public bulletin boards across the university's campus. The sample was limited to men of 18 years of age or older; men were not required to be virgins, but flyers did mention that virginity would be a theme of discussion. The identity of "virgin" is one that can be assigned to individuals by others, invoked by an individual or both (Mullaney, 2001). As noted above, defining sex and virginity is complicated. As such, although this study drew upon literature using varying definitions of sexual debut when studying individuals, we allowed participants to self-define virginity throughout the interview process. Ten men in total were interviewed. All participants were born in the United States, with many having moved to the area of the university from other

parts of the country, one identified as bisexual, one as gay, and the rest as heterosexual; one had declared his trans* status several years prior to the interview.

Interviews were semistructured and lasted between 30 and 60 min. They began with questions around childhood and family life, inquiring as to parents' views on gender and sex and any relevant religious influences. Participants were asked about social aspects of high school, such as the cliques, networks, and organizations with which they were affiliated, if at all, and the nature of sex-education classes offered, if at all. Similar questions were asked about their experiences at university, including their reasons for choosing their university. Participants were also asked a series of questions about their own virginity status as well as the extent to which they had seen or experienced virgin-shaming on their university campus. These interview prompts provided insight into the four research questions.

All interviews were audio recorded. The interviewer also took direct observation notes during the interviews. The interview transcripts and direct observation notes were manually coded using thematic analysis to look for common themes. After initial coding, focused coding led to the emergence of three themes regarding college-aged men's experiences with virginity on a college campus. For example, the first level of coding highlighted the extent to which men were virgins and had experienced or witnessed virgin-shaming at all, providing broad understandings of how space and place shaped discussions around virginity. At the second level of analysis, coding became more focused, examining the social spaces where men had encountered virgin-shaming, to include how men responded to the virgin-shaming and the social ramifications of virgin-shaming in interactions more broadly.

Findings

Of the 10 respondents, four self-identified as virgins at the time of the interview. Six men in total in some form experienced or witnessed virgin-shaming; of those, two had directly experienced virgin-shaming. Five men had reported witnessing virgin-shaming in their social groups, while only one participant reported they had employed virgin-shaming against another man.

These diverse backgrounds provide a rich set of experiences from which respondents drew during the interviews. Three major themes emerged from the interviews that suggest how virgin-shaming is situated in the social landscape of the men's lives: the role of sex as masculine status, social groups as context, and the uses of virgin-shaming as manipulation or influence.

Sex as Status

Consistent with previous research, having sex (that is, not being a virgin) was afforded a privileged masculine status (e.g., Pascoe, 2005). Respondents almost unanimously spoke of sex in terms of it being an "achievement," "milestone," "norm," and other such language around its central importance in marking masculine status. Carter relayed the story of a high school friend whose goal, or "personal Everest" as Carter

described it, was to have sex with 100 girls; the last time Carter met with this friend, the goal was very nearly reached.

The sense of importance around sex for young men was directly connected to sex with women as a manhood act. Such a notion of masculinity is exemplified in the following excerpt from one of the interviews:

Interviewer: Okay, why is it important [to be able to inspire desire in a girl]?

Clarence: I think from some masculine idea, it's just kinda like that same bit of like being the cowboy, like you can shoot a gun really well and get the ladies sort of thing, so where's the ladies part? If you take a guy and he's done a lot of random stuff in his life, and now one of his almost goals or fixations is like I want to try dating now, or whatever form of experiencing women, and so, I don't know what kind of experience he takes with him except his knowledge of classic masculine image and wants to attempt it, like throw out a random pickup line, because that's all he really knows how to tackle this task with . . .

Clarence has experienced pressure to have sex insofar as he identifies as a man; "classic masculine" images are imposed on him, images of men ideally being "cowboys" as naturally finesse with courting women. Necessarily, the cowboy possesses abilities, whether they be marksmanship or seduction, and these abilities contribute to the definition of what it means to be a man. As such, Clarence perceived a broader norm of sex as a part of and as required for masculine status.

Clarence also described how, as a guy, it was often assumed that he had already been having sex. During one encounter with some boys at high school when the topic of sex was brought up, rather than making his virgin status known, he kept it hidden; the boys continued the conversation under their own assumptions of his conformity to their expectations. Clarence did not interject because "it would have been harder to explain why I was still a virgin than why I had slept with ten girls." In this social space, possession of virginity is something that needs to be justified against the dominant expectations to avoid loss of status; such justifications might take the form of a religious commitment to purity, in which case a male virgin might be excused as he is sticking to a principle.

The focus on ability as an element in masculinity leads to an unfortunate conclusion for male virgins; insofar as men are expected to desire and esteem sex, the lack of sexual experience, without a sort of justification, is seen as a lack of ability, specifically here to procure the objects of one's own desires. In the context of the specific genre of masculinity being described, possession of virginity would violate the norms around being a man. In effect, what this means is that virgins can be excluded from masculine homosocial discourse, especially when discussion topics fall upon girls and sex.

I always felt uncomfortable adding to the conversation because I was a virgin, make sense? So we're talking about girls, this is in between dating and sex, talking about girls and then, I had always felt uncomfortable because in the background there's this, "Oh, this is coming from a virgin, you're not proven" or whatever. (Chuck)

I was usually just listening to them, because not having any such experience myself, what kind could I really contribute to that conversation? (Micah)

Not being able to fully participate in the conversation has implications for social status within the group. Virgins, as we shall see in somewhat more detail in a later section, are not fully welcome in this area of discourse, given that they have not “proved” themselves as men and as being knowledgeable about the topic being discussed.

A common trope among the interviews was the possibility of lying about virginity status to bypass this social control; two respondents admitting to actively lying or hiding their status as virgins. As seen above, Clarence did not actively lie about being a virgin, although he did not outright expose that fact either, and purposefully played upon others’ assumptions of his having already fulfilled his masculine requirements. Given the social pressure, he reported experiencing intense pressure to lose his virginity as fast as possible.

[A friend] had been like dating a couple girls, but not a lot, and then this other kid had like random drunken sex with a couple girls so like I definitely felt like, not lesser, but just they had all done it, so I just gotta do this to get it out of the way. (Chuck)

I remember in high school it was almost like, almost as if trying to include me in the conversation, and if I can call myself one of the cool guys, like they wanted probably to include me in their perspective and conversation or whatever, so they’d ask me something random like, anything from who are you interested in to how many girls have you had, or something . . . (Clarence)

These feelings were not entirely permanent; however, the extent to which young men felt pressured had much to do with their own personal gendered beliefs and the masculine social spaces in which they lived.

Virgin-Shaming Within a Social Context

The social environment of the college setting provided opportunities for young men to perform masculinity through virgin-shaming in many ways. The use of virgin-shaming seemed to be connected to the perceived gender of the space; that is, the more hegemonically masculine the social space, the more likely that virgin-shaming would occur. The spaces where virgin-shaming was absent included spaces where sex was not talked about at all or just briefly. Examples of such spaces are Model United Nations, anime clubs, and honors societies. Given that sexual status seemed to have little bearing in these groups, it is unlikely that virgin-shaming would occur, given that no one would necessarily know or, given the setting, care to make a public, potentially unprofessional, or discourteous comment about someone’s status as a virgin.

I remember one time it happened in volleyball practice, it was an offhand comment, and there were like four of us waiting in line for the drill . . . I probably joked about something, [and] he came back with that, the virgin thing, which is always under the belt, even the

group was like, "Really, that is just not appropriate." No one really cares unless everyone was like ganging up on you or something. (Chuck)

The above conversation occurred in a university-level volleyball group where the teammates were not intimately connected. In such a setting, sex was not very openly discussed, and when it was, especially with something as extreme as virgin-shaming, the group held a negative reaction to this breach of etiquette.

The open discussion of sex is not sufficient to produce a social environment conducive to virgin-shaming. Rather, certain norms must be held to shape such an environment. Sebastian is a self-identified member of a Wiccan fertility cult; given rules about secrecy, Sebastian could not disclose everything about his group, but he did say that, as this is a fertility cult, sex is a main focus of discussion and even action. Heterosexual sex between a man and a woman is of particular importance, given that such intercourse is potentially productive of offspring. What is interesting is that Sebastian identifies as homosexual and so does not engage in heterosexual sex; nonetheless, he is accepted in the group. He summarized the pervasive attitude as, "Do you, boo." What this means is that, despite the norms around sex and heteronormativity that might be held personally by most of the other group members, fellow members are not policed about strict possession and fulfillment of these norms. This demonstrates that the non-virgin-shaming social groups can be spaces where sex is still a factor, even a very large factor, in social life, but where members are not held to standards with respect to having sex.

There is something of a selection effect in who ends up joining a given social group: Men who are more lenient and tolerant of other sexualities would not be as likely to spend extensive time in the same networks with people who are less lenient. For example, "If I had met a guy who was bragging about girls," says Chuck about his high school friend group that arose around video games, "we would have had nothing in common, so we wouldn't be friends." Chuck was less likely to associate with the types of guys who are more overtly hegemonically masculine, and so in this group, Chuck was not likely to be virgin-shamed. John also experienced a similar situation with his high school social network:

It wasn't like if you didn't have sex, it's not like you were the low person on the totem pole, it's just kinda like, whispers in the background, like, "Oh, he has and she hasn't," that's the extent they took it, it's not like anyone would come out in public and say, "You suck because you haven't done it."

Sex, though widely discussed, was not held on such a high pedestal, such that one would be breaking norms around masculine identity by being a virgin.

Social spaces in the university setting were found to be significantly less prone to incidents of virgin-shaming. Clarence describes members of university settings as possessing a "healthier perspective," in that they understand peer pressure and coercion to be distasteful.

Anyway, in college, pressure to have sex, no, I think most people don't pressure it, like a lot of my friends, I think they have like a healthy perspective, a lot of them have

girlfriends. For instance, one of them is like, no difference, he doesn't judge me on it whatsoever, it's a non-factor.

Micah, a member of the Secular Student Alliance on campus, describes the nature of that organization:

What the SSA does is that they're a place where secular and religious people can come together and communicate freely and openly, just because the general mission of that body, people treat each other with a general sense of respect, people are on an equal footing, if you will.

Insofar as college campuses have many of these sorts of organizations with the same sense of purpose and tolerance, requirements for men to have sex to be seen as men can tend to decrease in importance, reducing occurrences of virgin-shaming.

This is not to say that *all* university spaces are free of virgin-shaming. In fact, quite a few can be characterized as spaces where sex is held as a hegemonic masculine requirement and thus where failure to have sex, that is, being a virgin, breaks fundamental norms about being a man. Zach, a member of a small fraternity called Beta Rho, recounts how virgins might be viewed in this social space.

Interviewer: In your particular frat, have you seen anyone get made fun of for being a virgin? Even in the slightest way.

Zach: Yeah, it's the concept of, like, you're not a real man yet, you don't know what you're doing, you're still, yeah, you haven't had sex, it's like you're missing something, you're not doing what you should be doing, you're not like fulfilling your role of masculinity. Or if you're having sex that's not heteronormative, you're less of a man . . . you're a virgin, that makes you terrible or whatever, it's just like, almost a pity like, why not? Why are you not doing it? Even if it was just a personal choice, yeah, I think it would be shamed, "Why are you not doing it," they just wouldn't understand why you wouldn't want to be having sex, so it's more like, "What's wrong with you?"

Apparently in Beta Rho, having heteronormative sex is a central part of what it means to be masculine, and this masculinity is held as the only acceptable masculinity available; deviance, either by remaining or a virgin or by engaging in nonheteronormative sex, is viewed as inferior, incomplete, and a breach of the norms. Virgin-shaming can then ensue. As a concrete example of this type of atmosphere, Zach describes "The Shed":

We have a shed in our back yard, like to listen to music in it or hang out in it, and there are all these terribly misogynistic pictures of women all over the walls, like with guns. I'm just like, this is so misogynistic, I hate this . . . I feel like none of us even like them, we just put them up there to assert our power and assert our dominance and assert the need to be like, "Aww yeah, women, they're so great." So it's everyone's goal to have sex in the shed, I'm just like, "Whyyyy? How is that an achievement?" It's disgusting in

there, that's the least romantic place you could ever bring anyone, it's cold, it's gross, smells like weed one hundred percent of the time . . . Why would you want to have sex in there? That's terrible. And it's just like it's supposed to make you a man or something. It's just so like, "Who can I get, who can I tick off as a tally mark, who can I fuck and then leave?"

Zach described several individuals who identified as nonheterosexual, but only in private; besides each other, Zach was the only frat member with whom they felt comfortable sharing this information. These three individually did not feel that their masculinities were threatened by the nonheteronormative sexualities, but, overall, the two closeted men did not feel that their true sexualities would be received well by the fraternity as a whole, as their being queer was not fully compatible with being a brother of this fraternity. Zach, as a trans*man, felt his sexual experiences were not afforded the same social respect:

It's like they don't see me as a guy, because I'm not doing heteronormative things, I'm not doing the penis in vagina thing, so it's like I feel like I'm judged as less of a guy because of my body, definitely, and the ability to like physically dominate, penetrate someone. I feel that's a big thing. They don't know where to judge me, because they don't know where to base where my masculinity comes from, because it's not the same as theirs.

"Because it's not the same as theirs" conclusively points to a collective, group-level "consensus" as to what masculinity is, and any deviations from this are frowned upon, even called out, in the case of virgin-shaming.

Fraternities like Beta Rho are not unique social settings. Although virgin-shaming seemed to occur less frequently among these men in college than in high school, the men were quick to recount other competitive situations where it occurred. Competition can be for the highest quantity or best quality of girls "scored" with. Carter told me of a football player on his team who, as everyone showers together, was known to be, as he put it, "not blessed." This was the focus of a great deal of heckling. Ultimately, this football player never seemed truly bothered by this, as he apparently had a great deal of success with girls.

Carter: I think the fact that he was getting sex regularly, he couldn't care less, he was racking up higher numbers than any of the other guys, so he would just fall back on that all the time.

Interviewer: What do you mean he'd fall back on it?

Carter: Well, you know, "I got so and so," you know . . . I remember the girl he dated the most in high school, gorgeous, she was on the hottest girls in school without a doubt, and everybody knew even when they weren't "together," they were still *together*. And it wasn't just her; he got some premium females that were there, so he'd always fall back on it. You know, "It gets the job done, I still get this and this, and who are you sleeping with? No one. Exactly." So that's how he'd fall back on that.

From this high school football player's point of view, and apparently from those of his peers at large, having small genitalia meant little so long as it "got the job done" in fulfilling masculine norms, that is, in having sex with women. Boasting a high quantity and quality of women slept with put him in a comfortable power position within the social setting; although he received his fair share of jokes at his expense, he could always play the "You aren't having the same amount or quality of sex that I am" cards. Connecting genitalia size to sexual exploits emphasizes the expectation of having sex; the overall conversation privileges experiences of young men who are sexually active and serves to silence those who are not, effectively shaming virgins. Emasculation did not occur when genitalia size was question; it could only occur if someone had not had sex, reflecting the hegemonic social norms of this particular peer group.

Carter: [Sex] is one of those things that you've done and, I would want my friends to have sex too, because I did it and I enjoyed it . . . I think the expectation was there, and if you weren't fulfilling that expectation, you were slacking, you were not up to standard or . . .

Interviewer: Up to what standard?

Carter: The standard that, you know, everyone's doing it, some *x* amount of people have done it, these people are doing it all the time, like, what are you doing, where are you at? Why are you not performing?

It is easier for these hegemonic masculine norms to perpetuate themselves in modern high school settings, which are closed, homosocial, and where competition is a daily factor, like those observed by Pascoe (2007) and Phillips (2007). Sports teams and fraternities are analogous social settings at the college level. However, across the broader campus, competition may be less prevalent. What is consistent is the influence of hegemonic masculinity in policing norms and silencing alternative masculinities. At the university level, it appears that only particular spaces with that hegemonic influence would produce virgin-shaming.

Virgin-Shaming as Manipulation

The data suggest that manipulation is a key way that virgin-shaming was enacted and experienced among college men. Of the six men who experienced, directly witnessed, or enacted an episode of virgin-shaming, four explicitly described how virgin-shaming was intended to manipulate other men's behaviors. Virgin-shaming was used as manipulation in social interactions to reinforce specific norms around masculinity in the college setting.

The first use of virgin-shaming, cited by two men, was to silence virgins in conversations around sexual topics. In the above example with Carter and the football player, any others' attempt to attack the football player for his lack of endowment was met with a rebuttal against their very masculinities, to the effect that they were not achieving the same fulfillment of masculine norms around sexual conquest as was he; Carter said, "You might be sleeping with somebody, but they're not as hot as the girl he was

with right now.” This quip effectively shuts down any opposition, as it targets the core of being a man, which was used as a weapon against the football player in the first place. Chuck experienced a situation where, rather than participating in masculine jockeying, he was attempting to help a situation with friends:

We would be talking about girls and I had liked dated three or four girls before I had ever had sex, and so I would try to give advice for whatever they were doing and [they would say], “This is coming from a virgin,” you know, so I’m like, “God damn it, this is good advice,” so that would always be used definitely in a bad way.

Chuck felt uncomfortable adding to any discussions around sex or girls, as he was vulnerable to being shut down and alienated right in the middle of the conversation, having his input nullified, regardless of whatever wisdom his input might have contained.

A further potential use of virgin-shaming was to alter behavior by manipulating “virgins,” either identified or imaginary *a la* the “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2005), into engaging in masculine social activities. Four men cited this desire to change others’ behaviors as the motive for virgin-shaming. When Chuck was asked whether, when virgin-shamed, he had ever seen a coercive motive behind such an action, he replied, “In specific situations, like I think one time I didn’t want to go to some party and drink, and they were like ‘you’re a virgin, you should come,’ I ended up going, didn’t have sex.” His friends, despite not fully approving of his deviancy, might be read as attempting to fill the void between him and themselves by participation in masculine activity, going out to a party and drinking with the goal of having sex.

Not only was virgin-shaming reported to have been used coercively to manipulate guys into going out to party as above, but it was also used to socially move the virgin in the direction of losing his virginity.

Interviewer: So when you’ve seen people in your frat get made fun of for not having sex, was there ever a sort of coercion of, like, hey, you need to come out with us, or something?

Zach: Mhmm, but also things like, I’ll give you her number, I’ll invite her to the party, I’ll leave you guys alone . . .

Zach affirmed that there could be an invitation to go out accompanying the virgin-shaming, but the other examples he listed indicate that the fraternity brothers were attempting to actually help virgins lose their virginity status, or at least hold out the possibility of sex to entice the virgin to engage in this activity. Consequences would ensue for declining the invitation, such as holding the label of “being a virgin” and being seen as further failing to engage with the group’s masculine norms, and so being on a different plane socially.

As the only respondent who admitted to having made fun of another guy for being a virgin, Mason described his intent as evening out these social planes, such that the virgin could ascend to his own level and then they could be equals. He explains, “once

I had crossed the threshold [of virginity], I was just doing the same thing as other people did to me, like, 'Oh, you should be on the same level as me.'" Mason described social predecessors as having virgin-shamed him, and in turn he planned to carry on this performance of hegemonic masculinity so he can experience a sort of camaraderie with his male friends.

Discussion

Virgin-shaming among young men is a process whereby young men are stigmatized (Carpenter, 2002; Sprecher & Regan, 1996) for not having performed a key manhood act for displaying masculinity in American culture: sex with a woman. Therefore, among the key contributions of this article are to document the experiences of men who have been the recipients of virgin-shaming as well as to highlight the social conditions under which virgin-shaming occurs.

Theory around hegemonic masculinity remains a useful lens with which to assess virgin-shaming. This study's findings fit with current literature (Bird, 1996; Pascoe & Bridges, 2016) on hegemonic masculinity, showing how individual masculinities are suppressed by a more monolithic hegemonic masculinity. Insofar as sex denotes ability, virgins embody sexual inability for men, and so they embody a failure to conform to hegemonic norms around having sex; they become policed and are targeted for their deviancy, suppressing whatever alternative masculinity and sexuality they carry with them. The praxis behind virgin-shaming is similar to some of the behaviors within male nightlife outings (Grazian, 2007); virgins are invited, or perhaps coerced, into collective, performed masculinity by an outing to a party, bar, or perhaps even by losing their virginity status by going to one of these venues. It seems that this occurs to "make whole" the hegemonic group by including the virgin member in the camaraderie and perhaps even "promoting" him up from the rank of virgin by aiding him in achieving sexual debut. Sex—and the volume or "quality" thereof—is used as a mark of distinction by which more experienced men define themselves as such, as well as further set themselves apart from the virgins, creating a divide between those who embody fulfillment of the norms and those who embody deviance from them. Manhood acts are required for membership in the male group, and as sexual exploits constitute such a manhood act, those who perform them have performed a prerequisite of being a "man." Pointing out one's successes and others' failures to perform these acts via virgin-shaming helps one attain a privileged status. Consistent with previous research, men recognize that virginity is a stigmatized status (Carpenter, 2009), as their very identity as men is called into question. Some young men in this study employed lying about one's own virgin status and number of partners slept with to avoid loss of this in-group status and any consequent loss of privilege (Cheryan et al., 2015).

Virgin-shaming, as is the case with hegemonic masculinity as a whole, is not a blind reaction or triggering of some social programming (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). It is reflexive and is used as a tool by active participants in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing gender inequality, and providing an example to others of what masculinity "should" look like. Virgin-shaming fits as a "compensatory manhood act"

(Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 287) to counter selective threats to masculinity and retain the economic and social benefits of that status. The hegemonically masculine group maintains and creates dominance and control using virgin-shaming as one potential active response to any group threats or deviation posed by virginity-based masculinities. Maleness is performed and one's status as belonging to the sex category of man is reaffirmed through these social interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As long as sex as status is held as a part of hegemonic masculinity, male virgins will continue to be stigmatized and shamed while sexual exploits will continue to be commended and held as a standard of "normality" by which men in these social settings will be either privileged, based on an ability to conduct these exploits, or oppressed, as a result of inability or indifference toward conformity via engagement in sex. The enforcement, reproduction, and maintenance of hegemonic norms perpetuate the current power hierarchy, putting virgins in problematic social positions. At the same time, to effectively participate in hegemonic masculinity, one needs friends with whom masculinity can be performed collectively, hence the social invocations used to influence male virgins to action; such "conversion" also reproduces the norms which they value so highly. In this way, virgin-shaming strengthens and reinforces the beliefs and attitudes that not only stratify men but that are also partially responsible for gender inequality more broadly.

Such mechanics only pertain to certain social groups, such as Beta Rho described above. Other groups were shown to avoid or stifle attempts at virgin-shaming; this had the effect of keeping the group from policing and reproducing those norms of hegemonic masculinity. Boswell and Spade (1996) considered the physical aspects of social environments and gatherings when looking at college fraternities although they ultimately found that a fraternity's risk of a rape incident was directly influenced by group- and environmental-level norms. Certain subcultures and groups will show no signs of virgin-shaming by virtue of norms and practices held by the group as a whole. Wilkins's (2009) study showed that a religious Christian group and a network of goth individuals avoided certain "mainstream" norms around sex that are typically held in more hegemonic groups. Our findings join these in documenting how virgin-shaming is just one part of policing gender norms. Virgin-shaming is socially contextual. It occurs based on the characteristics—the extent to which the norms thereof are hegemonic—of the social setting in question. When observing a given group of men, the extent of virgin-shaming could tell a great deal about the group's adherence to hegemonic masculine norms. Any attempt to study and disrupt the reproduction of harmful gender norms should be mindful of this important distinction.

Our study not only contributes to the broader understanding of interactional dynamics among men but also has broader social implications. One such implication is the connection to public health. Early initiation of sexual activity has been linked to risky sexual behavior which is in turn associated with various negative health outcomes (Kaestle, Halpern, Miller, & Ford, 2005; O'Donnell, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2001). As virgin-shaming involves peer pressure to prepone sexual debut, the findings of this study are relevant in designing and evaluation of prevention programs that aim to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and risky sexual behavior.

Limitations

The sample of 10 men in this study included only self-identifying men enrolled at a particular university, thus limiting the respondents' experiences to those of a certain age and education. Their experiences are illuminating but may be limited due to their geographic proximity to one another. Expanding this line of inquiry to young men in other colleges and universities as well as outside of the educational system will provide further insights into how social environments shape interpretations of virginity.

Given that this is an exploratory study, many questions regarding virgin-shaming specifically remain to be answered by future research. Respondents were not asked to identify by race, and so it is rather unclear how race, along with foreign nationality, might play a role in determining where virgin-shaming appears and how it is used. As seen with middle school immigrant Latino boys (Mora, 2012), race and nationality influence boys' perceptions and understandings of their own masculinity, influencing their views and practices in school. In addition, young men's class status could cause them to try to achieve masculine ideals in other ways such as rebelling against educational authority (Morris, 2012); we had no direct information about class status and cannot make claims as to how social class is operating in these college men's interactions. In addition, few respondents openly identified as being religious in any significant capacity at the time of interview; religion and class, like race, have the ability to shape social environments (Morris, 2012; Wilkins, 2009) in ways not covered here that might be particularly conducive to or resistant to virgin-shaming. Furthermore, how does trans* status influence men's own understandings of virginity and the experiences of virgin-shaming in social interaction? And finally, this project focuses on homosocial settings. More work is needed on how virgin-shaming is experienced in heterosocial environments with both men and women present and participating is needed.

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