# Exploration of Emerging Adult Virgins' Difficulties

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Abstract

Social clock theory posits that off-time transitions, such as virginity loss, are often socially reproached and stigmatized. Research suggests, however, that reasons for virginity in adulthood are heterogeneous and that some emerging adult virgins (EAVs) are struggling socially. To guide the development of interventions tailored to this population, it is important to understand their difficulties. Through individual semi-structured interviews, this study explores the difficulties and disagreeable emotions experienced by 29 heterosexual virgins aged between 20 and 29. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three main themes were identified: (a) difficulties related to society, (b) difficulties related to interpersonal relationships, and (c) disagreeable emotions experienced relative to late virginity. These results reveal that difficulties expressed by EAVs are intertwined and surprisingly, the most salient difficulty was related to lack of intimacy, rather than virginity per se. Theoretical and clinical implications are discussed, along with recommendations for future research.

#### **Keywords**

adulthood virginity, difficulties, emotions, thematic analysis, gender

# Introduction

For most western heterosexual individuals, first penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI) is the main marker of virginity loss and occurs, on average, between the ages of 16 and 18 (Boislard et al., 2016). Approximately 15% of individuals born in the 1990s are virgins in their early 20s, in all demographic group in the United States, representing the highest rate of sexual inactivity since 1985 (Twenge et al., 2017; Twenge & Park, 2019). According to Twenge and Park's (2019) national survey, this trend represents a slowed developmental pathway in which this generation is less quickly engaged in certain activities (e.g., sexual activities, drinking alcohol, and dating) than their predecessors. While an increasing proportion of emerging adults in the United States (Twenge et al., 2017; Twenge & Park, 2019) and other western countries, such as Canada (Lambert et al., 2017) and Switzerland (Meuwly et al., 2021), report never having had sex, research on late sexual onset and emerging adult virgins (EAVs, specifically, heterosexual individuals aged 19 or over who have not had PVI) remains scarce (Boislard et al., 2016; Fuller et al., 2019; Sprecher, 2021).

# Social Sexual Norms

According to social clock theory (Lehnart et al., 2010; Rook et al., 1989), important life transitions are easier when they

occur within a timeframe similar to one's peers. In fact, this cultural calendar, based on implicit social norms and historical context (Helson et al., 1984; Lehnart et al., 2010; Rook et al., 1989), specifies the age at which a social or personal experience should occur. Recent studies show that individuals who deviate from the norm regarding the age of first PVI—between the ages of 16 and 18 (Boislard et al., 2016)—either early or late, experience more challenges, and that, generally, the greater the sexual desynchronization, the greater the challenges (Fuller al., 2019; Haase et al., 2012; Lucas et al., 2019). Moreover, recent research has reiterated the relevance of this theory nowadays—especially for emerging adults—for whom the perception of important life transitions and their accomplishment can influence well-being (Pekel-Uludağlı & Akbaş, 2019).

The current implicit sexual norms that prevail in most western societies are influenced by the compulsory sexuality

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Emerging Adulthood 2023, Vol. 11(1) 121–132 © 2022 Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood and SAGE Publishing CC ① ③

Article reuse guidelines: sagepub.com/journals-permissions DOI: 10.1177/21676968211064109 journals.sagepub.com/home/eax

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paradigm (i.e., implicit norm that all adults are expected to seduce or be seduced and to engage in sexual activities; Gupta, 2017). Thus, "the old rule about remaining a virgin until marriage is passé, but it is unclear exactly what the new rules are" (Arnett, 2014, p. 94). According to Izdebski and Waż (2020), premarital sex, masturbation, oral sex, use of sex toys, discussing sex with people you meet on the internet and use of contraception during emerging adulthood are the "new rules." Emerging adults usually expect to have several romantic partners during their late teens and early twenties before settling down with one person for marriage in order to explore their options, falling in and out of love with different people, and gaining sexual experience (Arnett, 2014). Those who do not comply with these norms may experience stigma (Fleming & Davis, 2018; Fuller et al., 2019; Gesselman et al., 2016). Stigmatization is a process of social interaction by which any individual with an attribute subject to devaluation becomes unworthy, inferior, and marginalized (Goffman, 1963). As late virginity occurs within a normative framework in which all individuals are considered sexual (Gupta, 2017), virginity can be an attribute subject to devaluation (Gesselman et al., 2016), while an active sex life is valued (Fleming & Davis, 2018; Gupta, 2017).

Since most emerging adults are especially sensitive to social norms (Arnett, 2000), EAVs tend to have lower social esteem (Rossi et al., 2017). Social esteem is a comparative and evaluative attitude and encourages individuals to act in conformity with social norms (Brennan & Petit, 2004). Since EAVs do not comply with social sexual norms, some may have their first PVI without even wanting it or desperately seek to lose their virginity to assert their sexual identity, in order to be perceived by others as desirable (Gesselman et al., 2016) and achieve a certain social status (Kelly, 2010).

# The Difficulties of EAVs

Virginity can be considered as a protection against negative outcomes, such as sexually transmitted infections (STI) or unwanted pregnancies (Meuwly et al., 2021), or it can be considered as a source of pride for some EAVs (Carpenter, 2001). Virginity can also have positive outcomes, such as greater academic success, compared to their sexually active peers (Rossi et al., 2017). Although virginity can be positive, research shows that EAVs can face interpersonal difficulties (e.g., psychosocial adjustment difficulties and fewer opportunities to engage in romantic relationships (Fuller et al., 2019; Gesselman et al., 2016; Lucas et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2017)). The scarce literature on EAVs also suggests that, compared to their "on-time" peers, they are more likely to report distress, low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and stigma (Adamczyk, 2017; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Fuller et al., 2019; Gesselman et al., 2017; Haase et al., 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). They are also more likely to devalue themselves (Haase et al., 2012), internalize stigma (Carpenter, 2001), and be perceived as less attractive

(Gesselman et al., 2016) than their "on-time" counterparts. Adding to these difficulties is the decrease in the number of available partners as they age, as well as the stigma associated with non-normative behavior (Gesselman et al., 2016).

Due to the double sexual standard that is still prevalent in most societies, some of their difficulties may differ by gender (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Holland & Vangelisti, 2020; Lefkowitz et al., 2014). For example, EAV women may be perceived more positively than EAV men, because women are often stigmatized when they engage in sexual activities with multiple partners, whereas these behaviors may be expected and even rewarded in men (Budge & Katz-Wise, 2019; Crawford & Popp, 2003). By extension, the myth that men have more pressing sexual needs than women and that an active sex life is a sign of virility (Fleming & Davis, 2018) may make EAV men particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. However, a recent study also suggests that some EAV women may experience distress, because many report that their virginity keeps them in a vicious cycle: the stigma associated with virginity can compromise the development of a romantic or intimate relationship with a partner (Fuller et al., 2019). Even though mentalities are evolving, women's sexuality today is still perceived as acquired and closely linked to romance, while men's sexuality is seen as innate and necessary.

Difficulties may also vary according to the reason for their virginity. There are many reasons for sexual desynchronization and many trajectories (Bény, 2020). Some emerging adults are virgins because they have a life trajectory marked by an absence of romantic relationships (Lucas et al., 2019) or sexual opportunities (Richards-Shubik, 2015). For others, adult virginity may be a personal choice motivated by a desire to meet the right partner or wait for the right time or due to the apprehension of regret, rejection or betrayal following their first PVI (Fuller et al., 2019). Thus, the available evidence shows that, to varying degrees, EAVs are a vulnerable population compared to their peers who experience their first sexual encounter according to the current cultural calendar. When lack of sexual experience is the result of personal choice, the negative impacts, if any, are less pronounced.

# Support Available for EAVs

To cope with their difficulties, some EAVs seek professional support, because a resolved difficulty usually results in pleasure, satisfaction or some other form of well-being (Chaloult, 2008). To our knowledge, however, very little is known about the difficulties of this clientele, suggesting that any practice that does exist may not be evidence-based (Fuller et al., 2019). The lack of services tailored to EAVs' difficulties may explain the rising popularity of "pick-up artists" (untrained and non-professional) who provide advice and strategies to men for seducing women, "get [ting] rid of [the virgin's] burden," and having sex (for an example, see Kermit, 2009). Moreover, in the absence of empirical knowledge,

some male EAVs turn to manosphere spaces (Ging, 2017), such as Incel forums (Incel or "involuntary celibate" refers to men who would like to engage in sexual relationships, but due to non-conventional attractiveness, social anxiety, or lack of physical resources, are unable to do so; Donnelly et al., 2001) and other sources that advise them, for example, to conceal their virginity and eliminate their "women's emotional needs" (e.g., drama and fear of abandonment; Kermit, 2009, p. 139), as primary sources of information and support. Indeed, because of its saliency when searching the Internet for "late virginity", there is an abundance of information available on the manosphere for EAVs, even though it is not always accurate, especially since some "pick-up artists" and Incels affirm that the main goal of any late virgin man is to have sex, which will solve all their problems. Not only does this advice not take into consideration the EAV's personal experiences and emotions, but it may also reinforce their feelings of guilt by suggesting they are responsible for their virginity due to inadequate behavior, physical attributes or social incompetence, as well as the idea that women are to blame for their lack of sexual success (Maxwell et al., 2020).

While some sources of support seem to exist for male virgins, albeit not professional, few resources of this kind seem to be available for EAV women. Forums for Femcels (i.e., Incel women) appear to be one source of support (Kohn, 2020), but very little literature exists about them. In sum, although professionals who encounter EAVs probably use their expertise benevolently in the absence of research on the topic, the lack of empirical data on EAVs' difficulties limits the scope and quality of the services available to them. The aim of this study was to bridge this gap by examining the difficulties and disagreeable emotions experienced by EAVs. We assumed that the difficulties and disagreeable emotions experienced would not be the same for all EAVs since, according to the literature, difficulties seem to differ by gender. We also assumed that the (un)intentionality of virginity may have an impact on the difficulties and disagreeable emotions experienced.

# Method

# Participants

This research was conducted in the context of a broader qualitative study to identify adult virgins' psychosexual profiles, the DiverJe research project.<sup>1</sup>

The sample includes 29 participants (15 men, 14 women) aged 20 to 29 (M = 24.04, SD = 2.62) who self-identified as heterosexuals and virgins. Our inclusion criteria were: 1) being 20 years of age or older; 2) born in Québec; 3) identifying as heterosexual or asexual; and 4) identifying as a virgin. Our only exclusion criterion was religion as a primary motivation for virginity. Since religious youth report less peer acceptance of premarital intercourse (Herold & Goodwin, 1981), delaying virginity seems to be a norm among this

group. As difficulties are expected to be less significant for this group relative to those who fall outside their peer norms, religiously motivated virgins were excluded. An additional reason was that several studies have already examined religiously motivated virginity (Halpern et al., 2006; Herold & Goodwin, 1981; Paul et al., 2000).

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the participants chose their own pseudonyms. The characteristics of the sample reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the city in which the study was conducted, Montréal. Few participants (n = 8; 6 women) reported having a religious affiliation. Some spoke only English (n = 3; 3 women) or French (n = 14), while others were bilingual (n = 9; 8 women) or trilingual (n = 3; 3 women). Most had or were in the process of obtaining a bachelor's degree (n = 25; 10 women) and were single and not dating (n = 25; 12 women). Only three participants (2 women) reported having been in a romantic relationship for less than a year, and one was currently single and dating. When questioned about their lifetime sexual experiences, most had experienced kissing (n = 26; 12 women) and masturbation (n =25; 11 women), while some had received manual stimulation (n = 12; 8 women) or oral sex (n = 12; 7 women) or given oral sex (n = 8; 5 women). One male participant reported having had anal sex. When questioned about the intentionality of their virginity, many participants (n = 14; 4 women) stated that their virginity was unintentional: they simply had not yet had the opportunity. Some (n = 9; 5 women) stated that it was a bit of both-intentional, to wait for the right person, but later unintentional, as they had not yet had any sexual opportunitiesand a few (n = 6; 5 women) stated that their virginity was intentional. All participants reported experiencing difficulties (M = 8 reported difficulties: SD = 2.12).

#### Procedure

The DiverJe research project received the approval of Université du Québec à Montréal's Institutional Ethics Committee. The recruitment and data collection first took place from June 2016 to June 2017. To confirm data saturation, a second recruitment and data collection was conducted from January to May 2020. Recruitment ended following the analysis of the 29th interview, as no new themes or subthemes emerged. Therefore, saturation was considered to have been reached after the 29th interview because the data became repetitive and no longer yielded enough new or different information (Fortin & Gagnon, 2016). The participants were recruited via posters displayed in public spaces and online in social media and through word-of-mouth. Interested participants contacted the research coordinator, who conducted a short telephone interview to ensure the inclusion criteria were met, provide more information on the study and set a time for the semi-structured interview. Eligible and interested participants could choose to be interviewed in their preferred language by either a male or female sexology or psychology student. Of the 29 participants, only three (all men) chose a

male interviewer. The interviews were conducted in French (n = 17) and in English (n = 12) in private rooms on the university campus (n = 24), at the participant's home (n = 2), in a café (n = 1) and online via Zoom (n = 2). The interviews ranged between 34 and 127 minutes (M = 80.59 minutes). Seven main themes were explored in the DiverJe study: (1) general life situation; (2) peer and family experiences and relationships; (3) sexual and love experiences and relationships; (4) virginity, identity and disclosure; (5) social representations of virginity; (6) self-perception and body image; and (7) internet use and current sources of support (e.g., forums, professionals, friends, and family). Although several themes were explored in the DiverJe Project, to achieve the objective of this study (i.e., to explore the difficulties and disagreeable emotions experienced by EAVs), five key questions were used for the analysis: (1) "How do you feel about your virginity?" (2) "What negative aspects do you see about being a virgin?" (3) "What challenges do you think virgin adults face? What challenges have you experienced yourself as a virgin adult?" (4) "Several participants we interviewed told us about the stigma they feel related to their virginity. How does this relate to your experience? Can you tell me about it?" (5) "Have you ever gone to a professional for support or listening related to your virginity?" (See the Supplemental Appendix for the entire interview schedule.)

With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety using NVivo 12.0 software, taking care to note the silences and emotions perceived during the interviews. After the interviews, the participants completed a short sociodemographic questionnaire. The participants (n = 25; 11 women) recruited from June 2016 to June 2017 received \$20 CAD in compensation, and the participants (n = 4; 3 women) recruited from January to May 2020 received \$25 CAD.

#### Data Analysis

To ensure scientific rigor, parallel blind coding was performed (Blais & Martineau, 2006). Three researchers independently developed two coding grids, and the convergence between them was verified. More specifically, after the first recruitment and data collection phase from June 2016 to June 2017, two researchers-cisgender emerging adult women-developed an initial coding grid that explored all seven main themes in the DiverJe project, based on empirical and theoretical literature, interview notes, and preliminary readings of the transcripts. This coding grid groups all the themes, subthemes, operational definitions, and sample extracts associated with each, with the aim of establishing a document to help standardize the coding. A team coding approach (Weston et al., 2001) was then used to develop a shared coding grid, which was subsequently tested and refined. The team coding approach (Weston et al., 2001) consisted of randomly selecting 10% of the material from the first 25 transcripts and having two researchers code it simultaneously to test the inter-rater

reliability (kappa coefficient = 0.8033; Fuller et al., 2019). Both the positive and negative experiences of our participants regarding their virginity were explored in this analysis. However, while coding these abundant data, it was observed that there was much more data on negative than on positive experiences, related to the difficulties experienced, as well as a lack of professionals for this clientele, hence the idea of this article.

After the second recruitment and data collection phase from January to May 2020, therefore, a thematic analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016) was conducted on all 29 transcripts, focusing on the difficulties and disagreeable emotions reported by the participants with regard to being virgin in emerging adulthood, which emerged as a main theme to explore in depth. This analysis was conducted by another researcher-a cisgender emerging adult woman-who had not seen the shared coding grid created by the two other researchers after the first recruitment and data collection phase from June 2016 to June 2017. Thematic analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016) was performed because of the descriptive intent of the study, without generalizing the themes to all EAVs. Thematic analysis consists of systematically identifying, grouping, and examining the themes addressed in a corpus (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). To identify all the themes relevant to the study's aim, theorizing induction was used: the themes emerge through the words present in the transcripts. A vertical reading of each transcript was performed first, to immerse the researcher in the collected data and the study objectives, before a systematic summary of the remarks by theme. This vertical reading allowed memos to be created for each participant, to highlight their salient characteristics. Then a horizontal reading was performed, specifically targeting the questions of interest to us.

After all the themes and subthemes relevant to the study objective were identified, the shared coding grid developed by the two researchers after the first recruitment and data collection phase from June 2016 to June 2017 and the coding grid developed in the second recruitment and data phase were compared to identify any overlap (Blais & Martineau, 2006). The comparison was made by the last researcher, who performed the thematic analysis, by looking at the operational definitions of each identified theme and subtheme in the two coding grids (Blais & Martineau, 2006). Overall, the majority of themes and subthemes (81.25%) converged. The main differences were that the first coding grid did not detail the different fears associated with virginity (e.g., fear of being disappointed and discredited) and did not identify the subtheme "sadness." The second coding grid did not identify the subthemes "psychological distress" and "sexuality postponed." To achieve consensus and reinforce the themes and subthemes, further analysis and discussion were conducted with the principal investigator of the DiverJe research project. The subtheme "psychological distress" was not retained, since the coded excerpts did not appear to represent distress, based on the operational definition used, and nor was "sexuality

postponed," as it had an operational definition very similar to another subtheme, "feeling excluded/rejected." This paper presents the themes and subthemes relevant to the present study's research objective. Finally, to examine whether gender, age, and intentionality of virginity influenced the occurrences of the themes, the distribution of participants in each theme and subtheme has been explored with the graph option of NVivo 12.0.

# Results

Three main themes of EAVs' difficulties were identified: (a) difficulties related to society, (b) difficulties related to interpersonal relationships, and (c) disagreeable emotions experienced relative to late virginity (see Table 1 for a summary of themes and subthemes, from most to least prevalent).

#### Difficulties Related to Society

This theme covers four subthemes that describe societal difficulties: (1) difficulty being acknowledged; (2) difficulty being treated equally; (3) difficulty being accepted as they are; and (4) difficulty finding accessible professional resources.

#### Difficulty Being Acknowledged

Nearly half the participants (n = 14; 8 women) mentioned the difficulty of being acknowledged. According to them, people should be aware of the existence of adult virgins in their

Table I.	Subthemes Illustrating EAVs' Difficulties and Disagreeable
Emotions	, From Most to Least Prevalent.

Subtheme	Number of Participants Reporting This Subtheme out of 29 (Number of Women)
Difficulty related to intimacy	28 (13)
Difficulty being accepted as they are	25 (14)
Difficulty feeling competent	24 (12)
Difficulty being treated equally	23 (12)
Difficulty belonging	22 (11)
Difficulty finding accessible professional resources	21 (12)
Fear of sex outcomes	15 (8)
Difficulty being acknowledged	14 (8)
Shame	11 (6)
Jealousy	6 (2)
Fear of being discredited	5 (2)
Frustration	5 (4)
Sadness	4 (2)
Regret	3 (2)
Resignation	3 (1)
Fear of running out of time	3 (3)
Fear of disappointment	2 (1)

twenties and that not all heterosexual people have experienced PVI, because they are generally not recognized as existing in western society:

"You know, nowadays you don't expect that [...] You almost assume about a person that they've already had a first time [...] You shouldn't assume that everyone around you has done it" [free translation] [Mindy, 22, F].

# Difficulty Being Treated Equally

The majority (n = 23; 12 women) also reported that the virginity label often devalues them as individuals, prompting them to report difficulty being treated as equal and granted the same social esteem as others. For Amanda (28, F), her virginity label is like a "*red flag*" that people try to "*avoid*" because they perceived EAVs "*not on the same level*." Thus, virginity, although invisible, seems to be a devaluing characteristic, as suggested by Goffman's (1963) definition of stigmatization, and hence that EAVs may be perceived as inferior to people who have experienced an PVI. It is noteworthy, however, that some participants experiencing this difficulty, like Jade (26, F), are aware that, despite how others perceive virginity, essentially, their virginity, "*it's nobody else's business*" and that virginity "*doesn't reduce their value*".

# Difficulty Being Accepted as They are

Most of the participants (n = 25; 14 women) also indicated the difficulty of being accepted as they are, without being pressured to lose their virginity, given advice on how to do so or having to justify themselves. Sarah (22, F) pointed that she had to "explain" and "justify" herself why she is a virgin to the people with whom she could have a potential love affair. Some participants also mentioned that they felt a certain pressure from their family, their friends and even people less close to them (e.g., work colleagues). While this difficulty applies to the adult's immediate circle, it also extends to health professionals. For example, one participant, Audrey (26, F), commented that her doctor considered her virginity to be a significant source of stress for her. This participant also reported that her doctor was indirectly sending her the message that it would take a boyfriend and a sexual relationship to make her happy. However, Audrey was comfortable with her virginity and reported experiencing fulfilled sexuality, even without PVI. Thus, some professionals do not seem to be sensitized to adult virginity.

Furthermore, it seems that aging allows to better cope with this difficulty, as mentioned by Julien (29, M): "By the time you're in your late twenties, the impact is less than before. I still don't talk about it for fear of what the consequences might be, but at the same time, it would affect me less than before, than if I were a young adult or in my mid-twenties" [free translation].

#### Difficulty Finding Accessible Professional Resources

Other participants (n = 21; 12 women) expressed the difficulty of finding accessible professional resources for listening and support, as reported by Julien (29, M), "because it's something you don't dare talk about" and "that's the big problem, to be visible, yet still be confidential" [free translation]. In fact, the main reason for this difficulty is that while most of the participants knew that psychologists, psychotherapists or sex therapists existed, they did not know that they could get listening and support from them or did not know how to reach them without revealing too much. However, a few participants (n = 4)reported being unaware of the existence of trained professionals, such as sex therapists, who could help them navigate their difficulties. For example, several participants expressed ideas similar to this participant in relation to sex therapists:

"They would probably have answers to my questions or something like that, but at the same time, I felt personally that they wouldn't understand me. [...] I felt like they're gonna be "well...uh, go ahead, have sex" [laughs] No! [laughs] In my head, I'm like "No, you don't understand. It's not so easy" [Stephanie, 24, F].

The fact that professionals' resources are not sufficiently visible and known to EAVs was the top reason expressed by our participants for not seeking help, followed by fear of being judged and not welcomed by professionals. This difficulty seems to be related to the difficulty of being accepted as they are, as explained in the previous example. Some participants have had bad experiences with professionals.

This theme therefore reflects the difficulties that EAVs can experience in general in western societies. When the occurrence of each of its subthemes was looked at according to the gender and intentionality of the virginity, no difference was found, but age seems to have some influence in the intensity of the reported difficulty.

This theme illustrates that EAVs may be viewed by some people as having a characteristic that devalues them as individuals, even to the point that some people do not know that such a person could exist. These difficulties seem to relate to prejudice about virginity in adulthood. The following themes and subthemes show the effects that this can have on their interpersonal relationships and on their selfview.

# Difficulties Related to Interpersonal Relationships

Another theme concerns subthemes related to interpersonal relationship difficulties: (1) difficulty belonging; (2) difficulty related to intimacy; and (3) difficulty feeling competent.

# Difficulty Belonging

Several participants (n = 22; 11 women) noted the difficulty of belonging and feeling included, reflecting the loneliness reported by many in their peer group:

"When I try to reach out and be like, 'Hey, I haven't seen you in a while. Let's arrange something' or whatever, like, it's usually put off because they automatically assume it's gonna be boring" [Amanda, 28, F].

This difficulty was more marked in the early twenties for some participants, like Fanfan (23, M) because he has "the impression that if they had known I was a virgin, they would have rejected me even more at that time. And nowadays, I don't care at all [...] even though I'm a virgin" [free translation]. This suggests, once again, that EAVs have a characteristic that devalues them compared to their friends who have experienced a PVI.

# Difficulty Related to Intimacy

Almost all the participants (n = 28; 13 women) indicated the desire to be in a relationship before first PVI, emphasizing the importance of love and commitment for virginity loss. This was the most salient and prevalent difficulty, since 28 out of 29 participants mentioned it. As a matter of fact, virginity did not seem to be a major issue for these participants. Rather, it was the fact of not having a connection with a partner. The participants' transcripts echo Sternberg's definition of romantic intimacy (2006) as involving self-disclosure, connection, deep commitment and trust with a partner. The participants pointed that they would like to experience their first PVI with a loving partner rather than with a person without a commitment: "You know just having a connection with someone and so... If it was just to have a quickie, that'd be super easy but I want the connection, I want more than just the sex so [deep sigh]" [Elizabeth, 29, F].

Mallory (26, F) also noted that she feels "more pained about not having intimate relationships and that kind of intimacy with someone, more so than the actual virginity." Elaborating on the subject, she stated that: "Actual virginity, I don't really care. It's more like the intimate relationship that comes with sex and dating and all that stuff that is more like problematic."

# Difficulty Feeling Competent

Finally, many participants (n = 24; 12 women) indicated the difficulty of feeling competent in seduction, love and sex. More specifically, many reported that practice could help them more than theory or readings, like Apollon (22, M) who commented that "Books and pamphlets aren't going to work. It takes a lot of practice. It takes like workshops, or it takes like

role-playing to get out of my comfort zone and show me that I can do it" [free translation].

It is worth mentioning, however, that some people had this difficulty in their early twenties but grew to feel more comfortable with their sexuality:

"At the beginning of my twenties, [...] I used to be very shy and insecure about my body and everything, so it took a while before I was very comfortable with sexuality [...] now that I'm twentynine, I'm very, very comfortable with sexuality and everything that comes with it so, like, if I would see myself twenty and twenty-nine, there's a huge difference, for sure" [Elizabeth, 29, F]

Thus, this theme shows the difficulties that some EAVs can experience related to interpersonal relationship. When the occurrence of each of its subthemes was looked at according to the gender and intentionality of the virginity, no difference was found, while age seems to qualitatively influence how the difficulty is experienced. All these difficulties experienced in relation to society or interpersonal relationships seem to generate various disagreeable emotions relative to late virginity.

# Disagreeable Emotions Experienced Relative to Late Virginity

EAVs experience several disagreeable emotions related to their virginity that can, at times, be difficult to manage: (1) sadness; (2) jealousy; (3) shame; (4) regret; (5) frustration; (6) resignation; and (7) fears. These disagreeable emotional experiences could be the result of the difficulties expressed above.

# Sadness

Four participants (2 women) reported sadness because they had not experienced PVI. Jade (26, F) noted that "someday, it sucks" because she wants to "discover it" and she feels like she's "missing out on some part of the human experience." Some participants, such as the one cited here, mentioned that they had experienced this emotion in their early twenties but no longer experienced it at the time of the study:

"Obviously, for a big part of my life, I suffered from it, but today, I can't say that I suffer from it. Because right now I'm living with it just fine" [free translation] [Chantecler, 25, M].

# Jealousy

Some participants (n = 6; 2 women) indicated being jealous of their sexually active peers, that it is as if they are "messed up, in a way, not being able to attract women, not being able to do something which other people can do without even trying," like Joey (27, M) reported. This same participant noted that he

was "kind of jealous" because he "puts like 98% effort while other people just put 2% and they can get there."

#### Shame

Many participants (n = 11; 6 women) felt ashamed, perceiving themselves as abnormal for not yet having experienced PVI. Missy (25, F) indicated that "*it's kind of shameful to have to say that you're a virgin at 25*."

#### Regret

A few participants (n = 3; 2 females) voiced regret over not having taken advantage of sexual opportunities in the past, like Missy (25, F) who "sometimes wish" that she "had done it."

#### Frustration

Five participants (4 women) reported frustration, mostly due to being rejected by potential partners because they were virgins:

"I think with age my frustration has increased in terms of other people, because, like I said, when I was younger, it was, like, 'Chill, like, nobody really cares that much.' But then you're 25, and people don't wanna date you if you're a virgin" [Viah, 25, F].

#### Resignation

Others (n = 3; 1 women) expressed a sense of resignation and powerlessness, believing their situation will not improve:

"In my eyes, the older I get, it's like it's not going to happen. I want to but...it's weird. Because when I was 15, I was going, 'Yeah it's going to happen at 16.' After, it was, 'Uh, at 17, 'Uh, 18' [...] And it keeps going older. I'm just, 'Oh, I'm 21,' 'Oh, I'm 22,' 'Oh, I'm... 25'" [Missy, 25, F].

# Fears: Overcome the Fears Associated With Adult Virginity

Several participants voiced fears associated with their virginity: (1) fear of disappointment; (2) fears of sex outcomes; (3) fears of being discredited; and (4) fear of running out of time.

# Fear of Disappointment

Some participants (n = 2; 1 women) feared being disappointed with their first PVI and that it would not meet their own expectations (e.g., that it will be a beautiful experience, that it will be with a respectful person and, ideally, their romantic partner, that both people involved will have fun, and that it will be, overall, as wonderful as what they hear), leading them to avoid sex thereafter. JB (20, M) noted that he feels like he's going to "be disappointed," and if he is, "all those ideas that he had over the years, well, they die, and maybe the idea of sexuality is going to be indirectly affected" [free translation].

# Fear of Sex Outcomes

Nearly half of the participants (n = 15; 8 women) feared the possible outcomes of PVI, such as an unintended pregnancy, the pain associated with PVI, a breakup with their partner, going to hell or contracting an STI.

# Fear of Being Discredited

Five participants (2 women) also feared being discredited due to their virginity. For example, Mindy (22, F) was studying to become a sex therapist and she was afraid that her expertise would be questioned if people knew she was a virgin and that what she will say *"will be of less value"* [free translation] that her colleagues who have experienced a PVI.

# Fear of Running Out of Time

Last, three participants (3 women) were afraid of running out of time if they want to marry or have children. This is the only difficulty named exclusively by female participants. Amanda (28, F) reported the older she gets, she feels "*like the clock is kinda running out for different things*. *Like, for having a family, having kids*."

Thus, this theme highlights that EAVs experience several disagreeable emotions related to their virginity that can sometimes be difficult to manage. When the occurrence of each subtheme was looked at according to the gender and intentionality of the virginity, no difference was found, as opposed to age as for the other themes and subthemes.

# Discussion

Although the number of EAVs is increasing and some of them experience difficulties, this is the first study, to our knowledge, that specifically focused on their difficulties and disagreeable emotions. Although virginity can be considered as positive, especially when it is intentional (Meuwly et al., 2021), our results illustrate that EAVs may face issues common among other sexual minorities, such as difficulties related to society (e.g., stigmatization) (Herek, 2007; Meuwly et al., 2021) and disagreeable emotions (e.g., shame) (Herek et al., 2009; Meuwly et al., 2021). Some difficulties are specific to late virginity, however, such as social acknowledgment and acceptance. This discussion focuses on three main findings: (1) intimacy is EAVs' most expressed difficulty, (2) the three main themes of EAV difficulties we have identified (i.e., (a) difficulties related to society, (b) difficulties related to interpersonal relationships, and (c) disagreeable emotions experienced

relative to late virginity) seem to be intertwined, and (3) gender and intentionality of virginity cannot explain difficulties, but age does seem to have an influence: the youngest EAVs in our sample (aged 20–22) reported qualitatively experiencing the difficulties as being more challenging than the older participants, suggesting that self-acceptance increases with age.

First, the most frequently expressed difficulty is that of having an intimate relationship. Though "pick-up artists" and some Incels, often the main source of support and information for EAV male, affirm that the main goal of male EAVs is to have sex, our findings rather suggest that the lack of intimacy is perceived as a greater difficulty than the lack of sexual experience for both male and female virgins in our sample. This finding reflects a growing body of research showing that adult virginity is often related to feelings of social inadequacy and unmet relational difficulties throughout life (Donnelly et al., 2001; Lucas et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2017). A study by Donnelly et al. (2001) revealed that adult involuntary celibates have often missed the earlier dating and sexual experimentation opportunities that typically precede coupledom in young adulthood and that individuals who reach adulthood without previous dating and sexual experiences report feelings of missing out and fears of never "catching up." More recently, in a 10-year quantitative longitudinal study, Lucas et al. (2019) found that social withdrawal in childhood had cascading effects on late virginity through lower social integration and fewer romantic opportunities. Our study adds to this body of literature by shedding light on the distress associated with the lack of connection and romantic intimacy among EAVs, regardless of the intentionality of their virginity and their gender.

Second, the three main themes found in our corpus seem to be interrelated. For example, the difficulties of being treated equally and of belonging seem to stem mainly from the stigma related to adult virginity (Gesselman et al., 2016). It is possible that this stigma is the product of the social construction of virginity, characterized by sexual norms conveyed in the majority of western societies (Gupta, 2017). More specifically, given that sexual onset usually occurs between the ages of 16-18 for heterosexual youth (Boislard et al., 2016) and that emerging adulthood is characterized by an emphasis on romantic relationships and sexual experimentation (Arnett, 2000), social representations of adult virginity can be relatively negative (Boislard et al., under review). This stigma can also lead to interpersonal consequences, such as social devaluation by peers. Devaluation by peers generates feelings of aversion, avoidance and tension during social contact (Bos et al., 2013), further contributing to the social isolation of stigmatized individuals (Feinstein et al., 2012). Because stereotypes are often internalized by stigmatized individuals (Goffman & Kihm, 1975), they are more susceptible to developing low self-esteem, sensitivity to rejection or fear of social exclusion (Fuller et al., 2019; Gesselman et al., 2016; Herek, 2007). Moreover, this internalized stigmatization is negatively related to emotional well-being; they may experience shame, depression and even anxiety. These

emotions, in turn, influence self-esteem and the development of psychological disorders (Herek, 2007). Having lower self-esteem tends to decrease a person's social skills, and lower social skills can lead to social isolation for the stigmatized person (Feinstein et al., 2012). In addition, according to Baumeister et al. (2005), when the fundamental need for social belonging is unmet, social development and well-being may be compromised (e.g., difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships and exhibiting less emotional and social self-regulation). Moreover, in line with previous research, having little or no social affiliation can lead to loneliness, vulnerability and feelings of social inadequacy, which could in part explain their interpersonal relationship difficulties (Lucas et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2017). The sense of social inadequacy could lead-to even lower self-esteem and wellbeing (Harter, 1999; Orth et al., 2018), a trend that has also been found in adult virgins' early life trajectories (Lucas et al., 2019). Last, difficulties related to interpersonal relationships could also partially explain the range of emotions experienced by EAVs about their virginity, since romantic relationships generally have beneficial effects on mental health and subjective well-being (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Third, contrary to our expectations, gender and the intentionality of virginity could not explain any of the difficulties, since all participants reported difficulties in the various themes. Difficulties are generally as present in male and female participants, other than that three female EAVs were afraid of running out of time. The reasons for their virginity (intentional, unintentional, some of each) also did not appear to quantify the level of difficulties experienced by the participants. Surprisingly, the difficulties experienced by EAVs in their early twenties become less salient in late emerging adulthood. As they aged, they seemed better able to accept their virginity and to feel less pressure to "lose" it. The transcripts of the participants aged 23 and over revealed a form of acceptance, as demonstrated by some excerpts in the results section, even though the same difficulties were reported by older and younger EAVs. This finding runs counter to social clock theory (Rook et al., 1989), which posits that difficulties will become increasingly salient as age exceeds the average age at first PVI. Rook et al. (1989) mentioned, however, that older individuals have access to more resources and report having less interpersonal conflict than younger individuals. Perhaps older EAVs have developed more coping strategies or have invested in other life domains, which can alleviate distress. For instance, research has shown that they are more likely to report greater academic success, compared to their sexually experienced peers (Rossi et al., 2017). Success in other developmental tasks in emerging adulthood could explain lower distress among the older EAVs in our sample. However, it is important to take this result carefully, given the small sample of this study.

# Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Despite the sample's diversity in terms of religion and spoken languages, the results of this study are limited to Montréal's

cultural context and to heterosexual virgins aged 20-29 years and living in urban settings. The findings may also only reflect the experiences of adult virgins who were comfortable disclosing their stigmatized identity to a stranger (Fuller et al., 2019). Also, our results should be interpreted with caution since they do not imply that all EAVs experience difficulties and that we probably have a selection bias in our sample: the participants who wanted to share their experiences in a research interview could have been those who had more negative things to mention than positive. In addition, because the interviews were conducted by emergent adult researchers, it is possible that certain participants may have felt less comfortable with an interviewer close to their own age when reminded of past interactions with peers (Fuller et al., 2019). Future research should further examine definitions of virginity among individuals with diverse sexual debut experiences and who live in rural settings. Despite these limitations, this study had many strengths. The use of a team coding approach, interrater reliability and parallel blind coding ensured a high level of rigor and consistency in the study's analyses (Blais & Martineau, 2006). Our findings contribute to the visibility of and awareness about adult virgins and to the advancement of knowledge on adult virginity (Fuller et al., 2019). Finally, this study represents an important first step in understanding the difficulties of an overlooked population in view of designing future research-based services.

# Implications for Practice

This study revealed that many EAVs face personal and interpersonal challenges, but that very few in our sample have sought professional help to navigate them. As mentioned, the fact that available professional resources are not sufficiently visible and known to EAVs was the top reason mentioned by our participants for not reaching out, followed by fearing being judged and not welcomed by professionals. Consequently, it is important to increase professional awareness of this population's difficulties and lived stigma, and to encourage them to confront their own beliefs and biases. Professionals working with EAVs should explore their clients' love and sex lives without implying that virginity is a problem that needs to be fixed. They should also normalize the idea that adult virgins in their twenties exist and that "not everyone is having sex" (Mullaney, 2006). Future research should explore the perceptions and experiences of professionals who have encountered EAVs in their practice.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights that EAVs express a variety of difficulties related to society, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of disagreeable emotions, and that these three main themes occur along with one another. Although some difficulties seem to be specifically related to their virginity, most difficulties expressed by EAVs are common among other sexual minorities. The most salient difficulty was related to lack of intimacy, rather than the virginity itself, and surprisingly, the youngest EAVs in our sample reported qualitatively experiencing the difficulties as being more challenging than the older participants. More research on emerging adult virgins' needs is required.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank the persons who generously participated in this project, as well as Melissa A. Fuller, M. A., Geneviève Brodeur, M. A., and Chloé Cherrier, M. A. for their valuable contributions to this research. The authors also wish to thank David Lafortune, PhD, for his reading of a previous draft of this manuscript, and Léa Séguin, PhD and Wendi Peterson for their linguistic revision.

#### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and 430-2016-00949.

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#### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

#### Note

1. DiverJe: DIversity of Virgin adult traJEctories.

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