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Like a Virgin: Comparing Cross-Cultural Virginity

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Recommended Citation

Tejada, Anastasia M., "Like a Virgin: Comparing Cross-Cultural Virginity" (2020). *Communication Senior Capstones*. 16.

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Like A Virgin:
Comparing Cross-Cultural Virginity
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ABSTRACT

Studies have been conducted about the social construct of virginity inside the United States and cross-culturally. Investigations comparing the United States with these other cultures are limited and focus on the United States as the ideal representation of virginity in men and women. I aim to expand upon the current research provided by adding a new perspective to the analysis. The objective of conducting this analysis is to provide a global perspective defining the connotations of virginity cross-culturally. This study focused on the cultural, religious, and societal impacts on virginity collected through qualitative methods in the cultures of Arab-Americans, Latinx-Americans, and Malawi villages. The concluding evidence supported the theory that although there are specific gender expectations tied to each culture's version of virginity, in an overarching analysis, the core ideals are too similar to be ignored. Overall, all of the cultures represented in this study viewed women's virginity as a gift and the women as sexually submissive to men. While male virginity was seen as a failure to men's masculinity and the men themselves must be a modern day Casanova.

In Yep's article 'The Violence of Heteronormativity', he argues, using analysis gathered from Haperin, the United States' societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality does not apply globally to other cultures and therefore, cannot be considered equivalent to Western values. "Can the same modern category be applied to a Native American *berdache*, an adult male who has adopted many female characteristics since childhood and is married to an adult male in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony? It is evident from this discussion that the category of the modern homosexual had limited conceptual space and cannot be meaningfully used transhistorically or cross-culturally" (Yep, 2003, 39). Yep's point is with the majority of previous research collected in the United States demonstrating the performance of what we may consider a 'modern homosexual', we do not reflect the culture, societal norms, or opinions across the world. I aim to apply this same sentiment in my analysis of intercultural comparison regarding virginity across several communities around the world, more specifically Arab-American men and women, Latinx-American men and women, and Malawi girls and men who have completed the initiation ceremony. While I expect to find patterns or common conceptions, I am in no way suggesting the United States holds the correct opinion and other communities must follow suit with the U.S.'s way of thinking. My main goal is to find similarities and differences between the United States and the chosen communities as a way to better understand the values and ideals tied to each population. The analyzed data will highlight the rhetoric tied to virginity internally, before compared alongside the observations of virginity in America.

There is some controversy surrounding the definition of virginity. Many argue anal, oral, or other sexual acts can be considered as a de-virginifying moment. For the purpose of this paper, I will be defining sex resulting in a loss of virginity as the penetrative act between a heterosexual, cis-gender couples. There will be discussions surrounding the personal and social

meanings constructed around virginity but only in relation to the sexual experience thus described. In order to focus this paper as well as provide an in-depth analysis, I will be adopting a heteronormative view of virginity; although, future studies would benefit the general public with a broader analysis including other genders and sexualities.

The intersectionality involved in analyzing gender and sexuality must be applied to other social constructs, such as virginity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The central question guiding the analysis is what are the similarities and differences between the United States' ideals and opinions surrounding virginity compared to other cultures?

Due to the overarching popularity of American popular culture and values, I found it plausible other cultures may feel influenced by the United States' ideals and values regarding gender, sexuality, and especially virginity so it was imperative to ask if any of these cultures changed their outlook due to Western influences. If so, which parts of their society have changed and which have not? While I feel as though the United States has a more persuasive presence on global cultures, it was only fitting to ask what is the other cultures' opinion on the United States' actions surrounding virginity?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH:

The concept of virginity has been studied through the lens of culture, religion, and society in multiple perspectives throughout communication and gender research. However, there has yet to be an academic analysis comparing the concepts of virginity cross-culturally. To first understand the foundation of the collected research, this section will provide background surrounding the three cultures that will be compared to the United States: Latinx-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Malawi men and girls.

Latinx-Americans:

Garcia (2009) reports Latina women approach their first sexual experience with two things in mind: love and caring. These two words affected the way these women approached their sexual identity and attitude for the remainder of their lives. Cultural factors such as gender, age, class, race, and ethnicity provide varying meanings from the general publics' first sexual encounter; however, Latina women tend to describe their experience similarly. Sex education affected these women's outlook on their own virginity seeing as they were informed positively regarding their bodies and own personal pleasure. Their virginity was a gift, and therefore, must be given to a man who fit their criteria. All of the Latina women renounced abstinence as well meaning but impractical. Their first time should be special but they had no desire to wait until marriage.

The generational divide between the young Latina women and their mothers and grandmothers was due to opposing views on the standards regarding virginity and marriage. Many of the younger women empathized with the context surrounding their family's worldview but were convinced their sexuality would no longer be treated as a scandal. "In other words, when they evaluated their mothers' expectations of them, they would highlight how their social world was different from that of their mothers (as young women) and therefore, not subject to the same level of control" (Garcia, 2009, 606). The more threatening message conveyed by the family was the probability of abuse by a spouse once the matter of virginity was discussed. Virginity, however, was no guarantee of respect and some women in the study recounted stories of virgin women dealing with abuse from their husbands.

One thing all participants made a point of emphasizing was their judgment of white women's immoral and loose sexual behavior. One participant went as far as to insinuate white women had no care about their virginity and would sleep with anyone and everyone. Those Latina women cited good reasons for their choice to lose their virginity: they were in love and

their partner cared about them. Due to these factors, all of the participants' perspectives ensured a positive outlook towards their own sexuality.

Truth be told, little information regarding Latino men's sexuality and virginity could be found. Whatever previous research had been completed centered on condom use and high pregnancy rates. The article *Sexual Values Among Latino Youth: Measurement Development Using a Culturally Based Approach* managed to compare condom use to male gender roles and analyzed the effect they had on each other. Low acculturation is defined as the main reason why many Latino men may be delayed in their initiation of sexual intercourse as well as their education of sexual intercourse. Among Latino men there is a presumption that condoms and other forms of birth control do not prevent AIDS and some in turn relate that to a lack of pregnancy prevention as well. (Deardorff, et al., 2008)

Previous studies argue the gender roles concerning young Latino men (strong, authoritarian, independent) may have some effect on their sexual behaviors. These norms imply the men have little to no impulse control when it comes to sex as well as an expectation to be experienced and skilled in sexual intercourse. These values rely on contradictory rules that insist Latino men must not discuss sex with women, as it is disrespectful. The lack of communication mixed with a need for skills in sexual expertise and limited education results in low condom use and higher rates of pregnancy. (Deardorff, et al., 2008)

Arab- American:

Abboud, et al., (2019) contested western democratic power systems suggest women should act freely in accordance with sexual choices in their sexual culture. Due to misinformation gathered from warped worldviews about the Arab world as well as white feminist discourse, many Arab women feel as if their culture is misrepresented as a risk to gender equality, open sexuality, and

the modern world as defined by the West. “I feel I am lost between the East and the West. I feel I identify with neither the Western cultures nor the Eastern ones. So, I am very confused” (Abboud, et al., 2019, 1109). Abboud et al., (2019) emphasized the need to alter the conversation from virginity to Arab women’s sexuality and sexual needs.

The study gathered qualitative research surrounding three subgroups of Arab women residing in the United States: women who would lose their virginity once married, women preferring to remain virgins until marriage, and women who had already lost their virginity.

Although many young women sited love as a factor in their virginity loss, it did not provide as an acceptable excuse in their culture. This societal pressure and fear resulted in many women undergoing virginity restoration. Two factors tended to change the circumstances surrounding socially inappropriate behavior: reputation and the change in geographic location (from an Arab country to the United States). “The power of al-nas [community gossip] in America is that it means that one’s behaviors implicate one’s entire family as well as an entire ‘Arab people’ in the United States. The concept of al-nas reinforces the implication of one’s family within acts of transgression, cultural loss, and Americanization and thus expands the stakes placed on young adults’ desires, actions, and behaviors” (Abboud et al., 2019, 1113).

Even when discussing male virginity in the Arab world we cannot do so without the connection to female virginity. Al-Mutawah (2005) explained in the family, it is the male’s duties to ensure the women remain pure to prevent dishonor to the family. When involved in a partnership of potential partnership, Arab men must take into consideration the standards for women. “...even in a romantic relationship where the educated and politically informed Arab man still deals with the issue of virginity and women’s sexuality as his code of honor, which in a way removes the agency from women and turns them into subjects for men” (Al-Mutawah, 2005, 102). The

women he plans to marry must be a virgin, which disqualifies divorcees and women who have had their virginity taken in a multitude of scenarios. Similarly, women that defy societal norms, as a way to protest the gender politics or an Arab feminist, were met with harsh criticism and punishments; although, men were participating in the same endeavors. Any debate over female sexuality is considered disloyal to the culture and is not tolerated.

The Arabic men have little to think about in regard to their own virginity and many are encouraged to seek out sexual relationships before marriage. The only warning comes from the possibility of insulting the woman's family, which could result in attempted killings; although, it is far more common for an honor killing to occur which results in the death of the woman. Even in analysis of Arab men's virginity, it still revolves around the virginity of their female counterparts and family. From childhood, women's virginity is considered a "gift" for men, "wrapped carefully for their master" (Al-Mutawah, 2005, 156).

Malawi men and girls:

In Malawi, once a young girl receives her period for the first time, around age 12, she is eligible to participate in the initiation ceremony. According to Johnson (2018), current initiation rites center on counseling young girls to carry the responsibility of the village and family. A strong theme of continued education is present throughout the ceremony, as it is believed to produce a more fruitful future. Education was not the focus of these rites just a few decades ago. "On the practice of 'removing the dust' (*kuchotsa fumbi*), in which young initiates were told that in order to shed the dust of initiation and be beautiful once more they must engage in sexual intercourse after their ceremonies" (Johnson, 2018, 796), was rejected from the learning requirements of current initiations. This adaptation from early marriage and childbirth to education was to prevent poverty and to ensure the stability of the village. Both the men and the women in the

village insist the women hold the greater responsibility when it pertains to health, social roles, and social reproduction.

Female initiation is an urgent necessity impressing upon young girls the village's morals, importance of education, and sexual and personal expectations. The majority of villagers felt strongly when discussing the need for education for the young girls of the village; the initiation provided essential preparation and social importance beyond the cause for tradition. When the girls finished the initiation they were taught the phrase, "If you catch a disease, you have failed school; if he makes you pregnant, you have failed school" (Johnson, 2018, 796).

Sex and sexuality are still a big part of initiations. Through games, songs, and role-play, the girls are taught to embody the performance of women and female sexuality. The duka dance demonstrated to the girls how to move their hips and pelvis during sexual intercourse to increase her partner's pleasure. The need for mutual pleasure was undervalued when it came to choose between female sexuality and the importance of societal responsibilities. Initiation is a tool used to prevent the redefining of adult femininity or from those who may stray from their duty to get married.

Initiation rituals have changed in multiple ways, mostly through some government prompting; although, many state the changes were superficial and a cover to appease the public. Missionaries and post-Independence politicians hope to end the initiation ceremonies in fear of criticism from the rest of the world. However, they are met with resistance from the villages and the Catholic Church, which has endorsed several rituals on their properties in Africa. The traditional initiation rites are still viewed in a nostalgic light while the modern ceremonies are taking hold in youth and elders alike. (Johnson, 2018)

Erlank (2009) informs just as the female initiation focused on several themes the girls must learn and perfect, male initiation prioritizes three key aspects: the practice of sexual intercourse, the secrecy surrounding the initiation, and the relationship between the men and pain. Guardians tested the men on their knowledge of proper customs and sexual conduct. While it is mandatory for the men to remain virgins at the time of the initiation, ukumetsha, or thigh sex, is encouraged among men and women to ensure they would not be inexperienced with their marital partner. The main aspect of the initiation relied on the circumcision of all of the participants. A subject of intense debate seeing as though the circumcision would be performed by a guardian, not a medical professional, as well as completed with no anesthesia.

Christianity and colonialism challenged African Christian's views toward the traditional male initiation practices and yet, the need for more traditional customary practices prevailed. African Christians felt at war with the traditions of their village and the traditions of their faith. In order to ensure a compromise, the ceremonies were allowed to proceed granted the circumcision was administered by a practiced minister instead of a guardian. If a boy were to be circumcised in a hospital, it would be considered against the custom since he has no relationship with the pain and therefore, cannot become a man. Men who undergo anesthesia to perform the circumcision surgery are considered cowards in their village. "If you are not circumcised through custom in the mountain, you are not regarded as a man. You are a social outcast" (Erlank, 2017, 256). Just as girls were encouraged to 'remove the dust', the men were told to wash away the stain of boyhood through sexual intercourse, usually a widow or their wife, if they chose to get married after the ceremony.

United States:

Before analyzing the research, a brief standing regarding U.S. virginity opinions and ideals is required. The main ideal supporting the structure of virginity in the United States can be best described by Blackburn and Stamper (2019); “The sexual double standard states that men are supposed to be sex-driven, romantically unattached, and initiate contact with women. Women, on the other hand, are not driven by their sexuality; rather, they are passive objects of desire. This double standard can lead to different signals of desire, and consent between women and men may result in ‘conflicting expectations’ and ‘sexual signals’ from potential partners.”

Men report more positive reactions regarding their first sexual experience while females admit guilt. Only women experienced mental struggles and confusion tied to their virginity and sexuality. Fear of criticism, mainly from other women, once a participant engaged in intercourse created a hostile community for women. One female participant even chastised her friends for sleeping with their boyfriends at a young age, citing they were not “emotionally and mentally mature enough” (Cooke-Jackson, et al., 2014, 294). Backlash from female virgins against sexually experienced women is not the only aggression surrounding this issue. Just as women are told their virginity is a gift, losing one’s virginity is also viewed as a rite of passage. Therefore, virgins are more often than not viewed as immature, naïve and not yet women.

Similarly, men’s virginity is viewed as an issue needing a resolution. Many of the male participants stated a pressure to lose their virginity before they were ready. “While not explicitly stated, many male participants implied that part of the pressure likely stemmed from traditional masculine gendered roles where sex was seen as a commodity” (Cooke-Jackson, et al., 2014, 298). Overall, American men and women are given contradictory connotations surrounding virginity. “By framing virginity as ideal and sexuality as deviant, or even as ‘normal’...supports engrained ideologies, socializing teenagers on how to view sex, often by sending conflicting

scripts” (Blackburn and Stamper, 2019, 50).

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH:

To begin to sift through the mountain of information provided earlier, reverting back to the research questions would allow for an outline of the analysis provided.

Research question one focused on the similarities and differences regarding the selected cultures compared to the United States. While there are specific beliefs and traditions that separate Arab-Americans, Latinx-Americans, Malawi villages, and the United States from each other, the overarching themes remain similar.

Arab-Americans hold the same traditionalism Americans do regarding virginity in women. Women are expected to remain virgins for as long as possible; a woman should remain a virgin either until the woman is married, in the case of Arab Americans, or until she has found the right man, in the case of Americans. Many American males relish the idea their partner only had sex with them; therefore, there is nothing to be compared to and no expectations needing to be met. “Whether men say that female virginity is important or not, they behave as if it is” (Sohn, 2017, 1090). Not only does this refer to sexual partners, it is also a wide held belief when regarding females in the family. Arab men note a duty to protect their sisters and daughters from the loss of their virginity. While many Arab men chose to take vengeance on the perpetrator that caused their family member to lose her virginity, more likely it would be the woman who would be punished. (Al-Mutawah, 2005) The United States follows this model to a tee. Women are slandered when it is revealed they are no longer ‘pure’. The only difference regarding female virginity between the two is the female perspective regarding their virginity. American women grew up in a culture where media broadcasts female sexuality 24/7. While there is still an apparent double standard tied to virginity, many women feel confident enough to challenge those standards on a global stage. (Blackburn and Stamper, 2019) Arab women, even

in the United States, are still aware of their culture's expectations and pressure. While many of the Arab women interviewed explained their religion was not a driving factor in their decision to remain a virgin, their culture and family definitely were. (Abboud, et al., 2019)

The Latinx community was similar to the Arab community, and by extension the United States, with how male virginity was regarded. Male virginity in these cultures was considered nonexistent. Latino men were stereotyped to be hyper-masculine and sexually proficient as they were reported to have low sexual control. Gender expectations resulted in many Latino men to feel pressure to perform sexually as well as disregard their own personal safety and their partners to live up to expectations. (Deardorff, et al., 2008) Arab men were encouraged to engage in sexual relations with whomever they pleased, as long as they were aware they might make some girl's family angry. (Al-Mutawah, 2005) American men felt pressured to have sex as soon as possible due to competitiveness among men as a result of gender roles. (Cooke-Jackson, et al., 2014) All men were encouraged, to the point of being coerced, into sexual relationships as soon or as young as possible.

Latin women had an opposing view of their virginity compared to Arab women and American women. While many Latina women reported a desire to remain virgins for as long as possible, it was not due to culture or family, but instead personal criteria required of their partner. These women understood the context surrounding their mothers' and grandmothers' decisions to remain virgins until marriage but, ultimately, due to geographical location as well as a changing era, did not believe abstinence until marriage was effective. (Garcia, 2009) American women view their virginity as an important decision, even characterizing it as a rite of passage. (Cooke-Jackson, et al., 2014) In the documentary (Mis)Representation, it is noted most girls lose their virginity by the age of fourteen. (Newsom, J. S., 2011) Latina women inferred more

thought and planning went into the decision to lose their virginity. (Garcia, 2009)

African men and girls from the Malawi villages grew up with different views about virginity and their sexuality. When a girl got her period for the first time, she was invited to participate in the initiation rituals her mother and her grandmother had completed before her. This tradition preaches embracing your sexuality and your position in the community. The girls in the village were encouraged to embrace their sexuality even though it was still a performance for their sexual partners and less about their own sexual pleasure. (Johnson, 2018) Men usually go through their own version of the initiation from ages fifteen to twenty-one. In the Malawi culture men have a more active role in their own virginity compared to the passive opinions of virginity in Arab, Latinx, and American cultures. Their initiation is an in-depth, week-long lesson, teaching the men everything they need to know to lead the village and to be sexually active. The intensity of their cultures' expectations regarding masculinity is one thing all of these cultures do have in common. Male participants in these initiations are required to feel the pain of their circumcision to become true men. (Erlank, 2017) American men feel the pressure of their peers, the beginning of toxic masculinity. (Cooke-Jackson, et al., 2014) Arab men are in charge of the family; their decisions affect him. (Al-Mutawah, 2005) Latino men are expected to be sexually experienced macho men. (Deardorff, et al., 2008) Malawi men are expected to feel physical pain to become a man while the other cultures experience emotional, mental, or psychological struggles instead of physical. While the themes are overarching cross culturally, each community has minute differences that result in a different interpretation of what virginity means to them.

The second research question wanted to note whether or not Western influences inspired any of the cultures to change their outlook as well as the specifics of what had been changed.

Western influences played a large part in the change in virginity perceptions. Arab women and Latina women blatantly stated geographic location factored into their personal connotative definition of virginity. This change in location resulted in less fear surrounding the repercussions of losing one's virginity. It became less of a family, cultural, or religious decision and instead became a personal one. (Abboud et al., 2019; Garcia, 2009) African Christians and western missionaries worked to change African initiation rituals as they were viewed as child rights violations for a long time. Girls were expected to sleep with any man they could and get pregnant as soon as they got back from the ceremony, age did not matter. Men died due to unclean circumcision tools and lack of medical professionals on site. Eventually the girls' initiation focused more on education importance; although, many argue the switch was a result in a change of culture from inside the Malawi community. (Johnson, 2018) Medical professionals performed men's initiation rites but anesthesia is still not administered. The change in male initiations directly correlates to Western forces inserting themselves into the Malawian traditions. (Erlank, 2017) These changes resulted in a decrease in poverty rates, longer lives, and less sexually transmitted infections. Eventually, these changes were seen as less of a colonization of Malawi's customs and more of a cultural shift in the villages. The circumcision ceremony remained the same and therefore, held the same meaning for the participants as it did their parents. (Johnson, 2018; Erlank, 2017)

Finally, the last research question focused on the opinion regarding the United States' values surrounding virginity.

Arab and African women and girls were less vocal on their opinions regarding American values regarding virginity. Latina women were vocal about distancing themselves from American women. When a researcher asked a participant if she felt she had adopted an

Americanized way of thinking towards virginity, she was met with a vocal no. “I guess it’s different to me cause I grew up here, but at the same time, it’s not like I want to be like them crazy-ass white girls . . . virginity doesn’t mean anything to them, it’s like, ‘whatever!’” (Garcia, 2009). Arab women did comment on the causality with which sex was portrayed in the United States but never made comments on American virginity. (Abboud, et al., 2019) Although no women remarked on American virginity, a comparison between Malawi women’s sex education and Americans lack there of was enough to draw assumptions that Malawi girls believed American women to be unintelligent when it came to their sexuality. (Johnson, 2018) Arab women remarked men were not constricted to the same rules regarding sexual relations as women were but otherwise, no other participant commented on male virginity in their culture or another culture. (Abboud, et al., 2019)

None of the men in any of the articles commented on male virginity in United State’s culture or any other. The analysis of their own virginity was limited and, when mentioned, focused on their involvement in women’s virginity or the expectations of a sexual partner. (Al-Mutawah, 2005; Erlank, 2017; Deardorff, et al., 2008)

CONCLUSION:

When analyzing virginity, the academic community must take into account the intersectionality affecting societal norms such as culture, religion, and race. The primary question in the analysis of this study was; what are the similarities and differences between the United States’ ideals and opinions surrounding virginity compared to other cultures? Only after an in-depth analysis of all of the cultures I could focus on what changes had occurred due to Western influences and opinions. Finally, I was able to ask what opinion the selected cultures had on American ideals about virginity. Collectively, women across all cultures viewed their virginity as a personal

identity. They assigned emotions to their virginity that transformed it into something tangible they could give to their partners. Female virginity and sexually is a double edged sword, blaming women for loose morals and calling them prudes or teases when they are not adhering to male fantasies. Male virginity is viewed as an insult to masculinity, seeing as sexual experience is valued in a partner. Although there is no stigma surrounding the loss of male virginity, gender roles and masculine competitiveness pressure men to lose their virginity as soon as possible. Virginity is a social construct that is deeply ingrained into societies cross-culturally that begins our connection with gender and sexuality.

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