

Sexual Learning: Adolescent Experiences of Setting Sexual Boundaries

by

Bianca Humbert

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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Timothy Black, Co-Supervisor

Dept. of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies

Dr. Jillian Roberts, Co-Supervisor

Dept. of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies

Abstract

This study explored 6 high school student's experiences of setting sexual boundaries. The significance of this study expands the findings and contributes to the existing literature on sexual learning by adolescents setting sexual boundaries. Qualitative methodology, narrative style semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used in this study.

Research findings point out that youths face significant challenges when setting sexual boundaries, such as, dealing with negative responses, having to maintain boundaries for an extended time, and managing emotional distress after consent is provided, but not followed by, a positive sexual experience.

Implications for future research would include an exploration of this research question with a larger and more diverse population. The goal would be to develop findings that could be generalized with a larger population. Further, the goal would be to engage in an increased dialog of sex-education for youths. The important areas to explore would include experiences of setting sexual boundaries, support a healthy integration of the meanings that are associated with these experiences, and to enhance strength-based practices of setting healthy sexual boundaries.

Keywords: sexual learning, adolescent, boundary setting, experiences

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

We are living in a hypersexualized world.

Recent developments within the #metoo movement and multiple news reports on sexualized violence in adult and youth population reinforces that sexuality is an ongoing concern within our society, leaving us with a negative connotation of sex. Further, it leaves many unanswered questions on how to help youths navigate these challenges. Sexual education in school settings has presented a challenging topic throughout the years (Garcia, 2015, Shipley, 2014). One of the challenges is the decentralization of the school sex curriculums in the different provinces, leaving Canadian students in some provinces, at an educational disadvantage. Ontario, for example, recently went through another change when Premier Doug Ford cancelled the 2015 sexual education curriculum, and reverted back to the curriculum implemented in 1998. On the other hand, the Awareness, Respect and Capacity Foundation, and the B.C. Ministry of Education, implemented SOGI 123 (sexual orientation and gender identity), as an addition to the school curriculum, providing teachers with free information on how to create safe spaces for students that identify as LGBTQ2SIA+ (Day et al., 2019). SOGI, however, is not a mandatory curriculum, but rather a three-step approach that requires school districts to ensure all students feel welcome and included, as well as represented within the school curriculum (Day et al., 2019). The first required step for school districts is identified as implementing changes to policies and procedures. There is strong resistance from religious and political groups within the province since SOGI was released. Statistics indicate that a change in how our society approaches the subject of sexuality is crucial to enhance the mental health of our LGBTQ2SIA+ student population (Day et al., 2019).

Organizations, school counsellors, and community groups identify an increase in sexualized verbal and physical behaviors in our communities and schools, with an earlier onset for sexual interactions (B. Stoochnoff, personal communication, September, 2018). Earlier onset of sexual interactions in youth is statistically correlated with an increase in sexualized risk taking behaviours (Baams et al., 2015). Communities and schools are trying to be proactive by inviting experts to brainstorm, and conduct informative lectures and workshops (M. Kirchner, personal communication, October, 2018). Within this fear based and sexualized framework, student voices are often ignored. The questions is how should sexual education take place, and how can we best integrate sexual education in the schools and in the community?

Purpose of the Study and Question

There is limited research in academic literature which explores youths' experiences with setting sexual boundaries. Most research focuses on specific sexual boundaries and what key components contribute to setting those boundaries. There is a significant gap in the literature that processes adolescents' experiences when setting sexual boundaries, or that tap into their responses when such boundaries are set. Further, there is limited academic research providing insight into the distinction between crossing sexual boundaries and boundary violations, how crossing sexual boundaries are experienced and could contribute to personal growth on the subject of sexual learning and overall healthy sexual development. This study hopes to provide new insight and knowledge to academic research on this important topic.

The results of this study will be presented to the school board 79, and will be presented to the schools from where the students' input was gathered. Hopefully, this study provide insights to schools and community agencies involved in educating and supporting youth on setting healthy sexual boundaries.

Information gathered are based on following question asked during the interview process, “Tell me about a time when you set a sexual boundary?”

Questions explored:

- Adolescents’ experiences when setting sexual boundaries?
- How are setting sexual boundaries perceived and responded to?
- How do youth learn about setting sexual boundaries?
- How do youth distinguish between crossing boundaries and violations?
- How do youth communicate personal sexual boundaries?
- How does social media contribute to this topic?

Researcher Context

This study utilized a qualitative methodology based within a social constructionist and psycho social developmental framework. This epistemology requires that the researcher is an integral part of the study, its process and outcome. Social constructionist theory holds the assumption that knowledge is created jointly through interactions and relationships with others (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Hence, understanding of the situation and the reality of it is a product of interaction imbedded in a cultural and social construct of oneself and the world around us (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Applying a social constructionist framework combined with a psycho social development framework, is specifically helpful in my inquiry with youth and implications for the practice of counselling psychology. Researchers express the benefit of applying a constructionist lens while working with youth, emphasizing the connection between youths developmental phases and their constructed views on the world and placement of self (Furman et al., 2003). This connection creates unique life stories, based on their developmental stage. Subsequently, values are applied to all our life stories created by interactions with others. As I

was a significant part of all aspects of this study, especially in the interview process, it is paramount that I express my own values, experiences and perspectives that influence and shape my understanding of the research subject.

I was born in Germany in the 70's, at a time when the *Sexuelle Aufklärung* (sexual clarification, disclosure, or enlightenment) was at its peak. It all begun with the *Antibabypille* (contraceptive pill) which came on the German market in 1961. Society experienced a shift, not in sexual morality, but in the way women self-determined their choices of family planning (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2015). This provided new opportunities for women to explore different professional development options not available to them before the pill. This shift continued and expanded until the late 60's, when Germany experienced a noticeable change in how sexuality was discussed and was brought to the for front of political and non-political agendas (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2015).

My early upbringing was marked by Oswald Kolle's movies, books and his push for a sexual evolution in Germany and Europe. He was known as the '*Aufklärer der Nation*', contributing to an ongoing controversy on how open sexuality can and should be discussed (Die Welt, 2020). Since the early 70's *Sexualkunde* (sex-education) was a part of the regular school curriculum, incorporating collaborative efforts with *Profamila* (equivalent with planned parenthood in Canada) during grade 8. Co-ed *Sexualkunde* was provided throughout my school years, which greatly influenced my belief that sexual topics can be easily and beneficially discussed in a co-ed class, despite their gender, biological sex, sexual identity or sexual interests.

I grew up with the idea that sexuality is something we should talk about, and actually do talk about. A Belgium study underlined this attitude by stating that positive parenting, that freely addresses topics such as sex, and supports autonomous decisions making, benefits positive

sexual behaviours in youths (Beyers et al., 2015). I viewed sexuality as a normal, integral part of my life and of most people's lives. Sexuality for me, includes a sense of sexual-self (awareness), and continues with the sexual exploration of self and others. Additionally, through my years of working as a Youth Worker, Youth and Family Counsellor, Sexuality Workshop facilitator, and in my role as researcher, I added Dailey's (1981) five separate, but interactive circles of sexuality to my complex understanding and approach to sexuality. These 5 aspects include, sexual intimacy, sexual sensuality, sexual health and reproduction, sexualization, and sexual identity, which influence and impact values and beliefs (Dailey, 1981). These 5 aspects are formed by the ecological system we are exposed to through our life span (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I acknowledge, that my upbringing in Germany (Macrosystem) at the time when the sexual evolution was at its peak, the positive portrait of sexuality in German social media platforms (Exosystem), the inclusive co-ed approach of how sexuality was addressed in schools (Mesosystem), and the openness to address sexuality in my home (Microsystem) impacted my overall approach and opinions towards sex (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Sexuality for me is a complex paradigm impacted by cultural, societal and personal (sexual identity, values and beliefs) aspects of the broader self, and therefore is unique to each person.

The motivation to choose my research topic was mainly derived from this personal approach to sexuality, in conjunction with three meaningful occurrences since I moved to Canada. First, the experience my stepson shared with me regarding the school systems approach to sexuality in Ontario. These experiences were marked by instilling shame and fear regarding sex, as well as preaching abstinence, and lacking an exploration of topics such as, consent, pleasure and intimacy. Second, my work as research assistant in 2014. I worked for two years on determining recidivism rates for juvenile sex offenders and explored protective factors, as well as

risk factors for these youth. Auxiliary data showed a high exposure to pornography on the one hand, and a lack of communication about sexuality with care takers, on the other hand. These three occurrences, combined with my current work in the Cowichan Valley as Counsellor and Sexuality Workshop Facilitator, I recognizing there was a rising number of verbal and physical sexualized violence incidents, which strongly drew me to my research question and motivated this study.

At this point, I would like to mention my viewpoint on youth, as a parent, educator, counsellor and self. I feel intrigued by the positive youth development approach, as stated and reiterated by Damon (2004). “The positive youth development perspective emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people-including young people from most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories.” (Damon, 2004, p. 17). This viewpoint goes beyond seeing youth as resilient, but also as inherently empathetic, purpose seeking humans, who can only be seen through the context of its community (Damon, 2004). This approach is aligned with my holistic view on human behaviour, which is contextual in nature, my strength-based approach as a clinician, and my belief that youths are inherently curious to explore the world and provide purpose for themselves and for their community.

Lastly, my native tongue is German. This can potentially have significant implications for my qualitative approach to this study. That said, it is noteworthy to explore Wittgenstein’s idea of the *‘language game’*, which recognizes the limitations of our world created by language alone, and points out the need to put language in the context of the user and how it may influence the situation (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). Each language holds different rules and shared conventions to explain experiences and the world around us (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). As

my first language was German and I did not grow up in Canada, I feel the need to bring awareness to the fact that I may apply some internal rules of language and concepts that are not based in the English language. Additionally, I need to bring awareness of my German language being imbedded in the narrative of my *'form of life'*, as of a counsellor. I created and identify with this narrative which determines how I view my participants, the interview, responses, and the world at large (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Wittgenstein emphasized, that the use of language and its interpretation lies within the person who uses it, and it is impacted by the system from which it is derived (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides descriptions of constructs and definitions of key terms (Adolescent, Experiences; Setting sexual boundaries; Crossing Sexual Boundaries and Boundary Violation). This is followed by an exploration of relevant research studies in relation to sexual boundaries, sexual development, and adolescent sexual learning approaches. The chapter also selects a few relevant identity development theories, applicable to adolescent psycho social development, such as: Erikson's Identity Theory; Berzonsky's Identity-Style Formation Theory; and Marcia's Identity Status Theory; and Wilber's exploration of the self-system, ending with a chapter summary.

Descriptions of Constructs and Definitions of Key Terms

This following section provides perspectives from which my study is taken, regarding important working definitions. One of the key constructs of interest in my study is boundaries; specifically, adolescents' experiences of setting sexual boundaries. As I will be referring to these constructs throughout my study, I provide working definitions for following key constructs: adolescent, sexual boundaries, experiences.

Adolescent

In Canada adolescents are considered youth between the ages of 13-19 (Government of Canada, 2010), and I ensured that my participants are within this age range. Further adolescent years are defined as a state of development and immaturity (Mirriam- Webster, 2019), making it important for this study to apply a developmental perspective to explore and outline possible developmental stages adolescents are experiencing.

Experience

Experience is described as a way to process and learn from observations and can derive from active participations in a particular activity (Miriam- Webster, 2019). In my study the particular activity I was curious about centered on adolescent sexual interactions; specifically setting sexual boundaries with others, and the process and learning derived from these experiences.

Sexual Boundaries

As stated in the previous section, I believe that there are five circles of sexuality, and I believe that boundaries can be applied to any or all of these five contexts (sexual intimacy, sexual sensuality, sexual health and reproduction, sexualization, and sexual identity (Dailey, 1981). I will be using Robboy's, working definition of sexual boundaries. She states that sexual boundaries are "... about knowing your limits and what you're comfortable with, and being able to advocate for yourself as needed. Whether having sexual boundaries is speaking up, walking away, or identifying and asking for your needs." (Robboy, 2020). Gabbard & Myers (2008) distinguish between crossing or violating boundaries. They state that crossing boundaries could indicate a step into discomfort for the purpose of growth or positive exploration. Boundary violations, on the other hand, are considered to be harmful, or possibly cause harm. The current study, in exploring adolescent experiences of sexual boundary setting, addresses both of these concepts.

Relevant Research Studies

Sexual Boundaries

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) outlined the prevalence and concern of sexual boundary violation in adolescents. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey states that about one in ten adolescents experienced sexual violence in a dating relationship. Further studies (Hickman et al., 2004; Jouriles et al., 2009) suggest that about 50% to 60% of adolescents experiences sexual harassment at some point in their adolescent years. Adolescent females are believed to experience significantly more severe mental and psychical challenges as consequence of sexual boundary violations (Hickman et al., 2004). Adolescents in general experience severe social and mental health challenges, with numbers increasing from middle school on (Taylor et al., 2014). This would suggest that possibly half of my participants have experienced a sexual boundary violation at the time of our interview.

One study that explored sexual decision-making, looked into the extent that adolescents set vaginal sexual boundaries (vaginal intercourse); looked at different categories of sexual boundaries that are most likely asserted (vaginal, oral); and hoped to determine to what extent sexual boundaries are based on sexual experience (Wolf et al., 2013). The findings indicate that some of the most frequently asserted boundaries were related to the youths' "maturity, commitment, trust, love, and marriage" (Wolf et al., 2013, p. 87). Safe-sex practices were less frequently a factor for sexual boundary decision-making. The research showed that males based their decision-making on the perceived attractiveness of their chosen sexual partner and the knowledge that getting into trouble can be avoided (Wolf et al., 2013). Further findings suggest, that sexually experienced youths were more likely than inexperienced youths, to base their decision on relationship characteristics and attractiveness. Decisions were less likely based on

feeling mature enough to engage in sexual activities or that they were wanting to wait until marriage. Most likely, adolescents set boundaries based on a perceived closeness of their relationship, rather than how long they were in a relationship (Wolf et al., 2013). The importance of this study is that sexual decision-making is highly impacted by social factors and also enhances with a youths' level of sexual experiences. Another study looked more closely into sexual decision-making and developed a decision-making model.

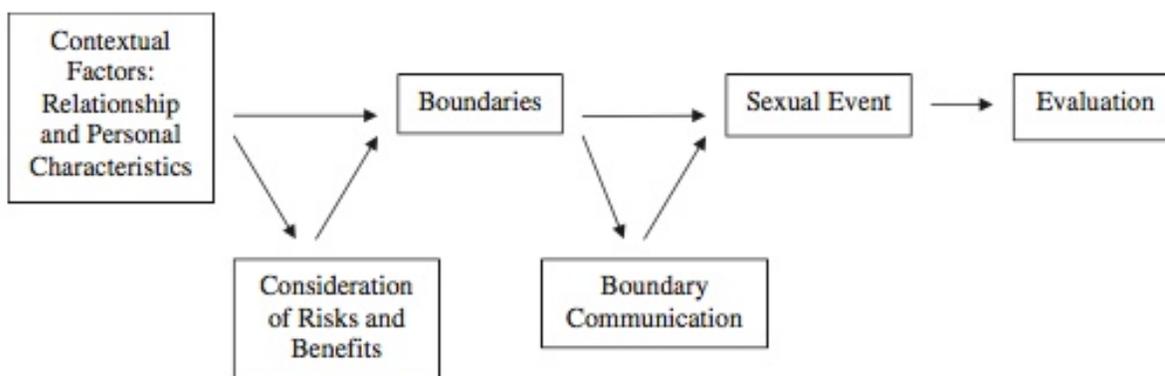
Clinical attempts to assess decision-making capacity in children and youth, such as the MacCAT-T state four characteristics that need to be met before considering making a decision about self. These characteristics are “(1) expressing a choice; (2) understanding; (3) reasoning; and (4) appreciation” (Grootens-Wiegers et al., 2017, p. 2). Fortunately, there are studies that incorporate contextual factors into decision-making models. One of these studies, that appeared closely related to my study, tried to investigate how adolescents make decisions regarding early sexual activities, and developed a model of sexual decision-making (Michels et al., 2005). They conducted 42 narrative interviews, using a grounded theory methodology, with mostly Caucasian 9th grade students from a suburban area (52% female), and stated that a high percentage of the youth (25%) come from a high socioeconomic status as their parent had a university degree. Further, it is noteworthy that 19 out of the 42 interviewed youths, had no sexual experience prior to the time of the interview, and additionally, that none of the 42 youths considered kissing, touching, or ‘making out’ as sexual activity (Michels et al., 2005). This shows a limited understanding of sexuality for all youths engaged in the study.

The study was from the perspective of interviewing adolescents in the creation of this model of early sexual decision-making processes. Michels et al. (2005, p. 583) outline six main themes within their decision-making model: “1) contextual factors (relationship and personal

characteristics); 2) consideration of risks and benefits; 3) boundary setting; 4) boundary communication; 5) the sexual experience; and 6) evaluation.”

Table 1

Illustration of Michel's et al. (2005, p.590) model of sexual decision-making



The first question asked was “Can you tell me, just generally, what sorts of sexual experiences you’ve had, if any? (Michels et al., 2005, p. 588).” Follow up questions, asked the participant to recall their first sexual experience, how they felt before and after, and questions about their thoughts on future sexual activities (Michels et al., 2005).

In the model, the first concepts Michels et al. (2015) point out are contextual factors. The authors outline the importance of the length and quality of the relationship, as well as specific goals (hobbies or career) and values (religion and reputations) that influence youths’ decision-making processes. Risks and benefits considerations were expressed as, fear of pregnancy, STDs, hurting parents, fear of getting caught, and (specifically for the boys) a fear of not knowing what to do (Michels et al., 2005). Regarding benefits, youth included relational enhancement, physical pleasure and curiosity. However, Michels et al. (2005) expressed that mostly contextual factors impacted youth’s process of weighing risks against benefits.

Boundary setting and boundary communication appeared to have been a significant

theme for all participants. The study described youth sexual boundaries as dynamic, changing over time dependent on relationship characteristic, age, or experiences of the youth (Michels et al., 2005). Girls and non-experienced boys tended to be rather vague regarding future factors for setting sexual boundaries (someday when I am age..., when married, during college, when I feel ready), while girls' current limits appeared clear (I do not want to have vaginal sex), also clear were boys' future contingencies for engaging in sexual activities (if I have a condom, if it is someone I am in a relationship with) (Michels et al., 2005). The authors clearly outline the importance for environmental and contextual factors for sexual decision-making, and also speak to a gender divide in how youth are exploring and are setting sexual boundaries.

In regard to boundary communication, Michels et al. (2005) expressed a two-step process for youth. First, they constructed their personal sexual boundary before sharing them with their potential sexual partner. It is interesting to note, that different ways of communication took place (direct and indirect), as well as time frames of communication. Some youth opted to express their boundaries before the sexual activity took place, whereas others negotiated in the moment of the sexual event. The study showed that in some instances boundaries are assumed and then not directly communicated (you could tell, I assumed, I did not think he wanted) (Michels et al., 2005). Michels et al. (2005) found in their study that sexual experience mainly presented themselves spontaneously, but that mostly (especially regarding the first experience) boundary communication has been discussed preceding the event. The last step of decision-making is evaluation.

The Michels et al. (2005) study found that all girls and half of the boys engaged in reviewing and contemplating the effects of their experiences to their sense of self and their relationship. The thought processes often impacted their future decision-making and future

sexual activities (Michels et al., 2005). The Michels et al. (2005) study focused on the whole decision-making process for engaging in sexual activities; it provides important insights into setting sexual boundaries and sexual boundary communication. It emphasizes the importance for youth to construct sexual boundaries that reflect their goals and values, and to communicate and discuss these sexual limits prior to the sexual event. This is important because sexual activities are reported to have been situational and of a spontaneous nature. Lastly, Michel et al. (2005) emphasize the dynamic context of setting sexual boundaries, and youths' needs and hopes to find congruency between their own and their sexual partner's personal sexual limits. Another study looked at the risk factors contributing to boundary violations and the response to unwanted sexual behaviours in youths.

De Bruijn et al. (2006) found that adolescent victims were more likely to struggle to identify and articulate their sexual boundaries and stated that adolescents who struggled to accept boundaries asserted by others, often hold traditional views on relationships and gender roles. Their research further suggests that youth who engage more often in risk taking behaviours are more likely to experience unwanted sexual interactions. This study extends from Wolf et al., (2013) study. De Bruijn et al. (2006) not only describe the extent of victimization but also explores the impacts on setting sexual boundaries, and the underlying factors of boundary violations.

Researchers agree that the adolescent years are marked by an increased exploration of sexual boundaries, one's own boundaries and the boundaries of others; offline, as well as online (de Bruijn et al., 2006; Koops et al., 2018). Subsequently, the increased frequency of such exploration, heightens the possibility for boundary violations and experiences of victimization and perpetration (de Bruijn et al., 2006). Another current concern is adolescents' use of online

sources to explore or express their sexuality.

Koops et al., (2018) research outlines a number of implications for sexual boundary violations and healthy sexual development through the use of webcams. They state that sexual boundary violations can be impacted by involuntary exposure to sexual online content of sexual imagery or activities, and by being coerced into sexual activity explorations (Koops, 2009). Recent research defines different categories of online sexual boundary violations of children and adolescents: 1) the online production, distribution and use of child pornography imagery or self-generated content that is abusive 2) involuntary exposure to sexual imagery or sexual solicitation 3) sexual boundary violations through the use of a webcam and 4) grooming adolescents into exploitive sexual practices or offline sexual abuse (Koops et al., 2018; Koops, 2009). Similar to grooming, “crapping” is an additional form of sexual boundary violation, as it coerces youth into performing sexual activities in front of a webcam, which then are recorded and distributed throughout the web, often without the victim’s knowledge (Koops et al., 2018). One of the challenges of depicting the act of intervening online grooming activities, is a lack of youths that report such violations, a limited knowledge on the context that leads youths to undress in front of a webcam, and the use of the darknet in which anonymity is easier to maintain for perpetrators (Koops et al., 2018). Koops et al. (2018) conclude that due to the lack of sexual experiences, children and adolescents are not equipped to detect and adequately handle online sexual boundary violations. They suggest more preventive practices, by 1) educating youth of possible abusive online situations and 2) to improve communication between caretakers and their youth to allow for proper support, guidance and possible adequate risk assessments (Koops et al., 2018). This study provided insight into the extent of online boundary violations, and emphasized a gap in our education system and society to properly address and educate youth on how to manage

and protect themselves in this hypersexualized online and offline world. This study stands as a reminder for adults to be aware of changes regarding the intensity of online exposure to explicit sexual imagery and content.

Sexual Development and Sexual Learning

In 2009 a group of health professionals from Australia identified 15 domains they deemed important for a healthy sexual development of children and youth; freedom from unwanted activity; an understanding of consent; education about biological aspects; understanding of safety; relationship skills; agency; lifelong learning; resilience; open communication; sexual development should not be “aggressive, coercive or joyless;” self-acceptance; awareness and acceptance that sex is pleasurable; understanding of parental and societal values; awareness of public/private boundaries; and being competent in mediated sexuality.” (McKee et al., 2010). When looking further into what knowledge youths gain from the current sexual health education, researchers state severe gaps within our sexual education curriculums. The Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) (2009) stated that youths do not gain sufficient knowledge and skills to engage in healthy sexual practices. Larkin et al., (2017) seeking their data from the 2006/2007 conducted by Pole et al. (2010), surveyed 1,216 youths assessing their learning and needs regarding sexual health education. The purpose of the study was to identify what youth are hoping to gain from sexual health education, and to determine possible needs (Flicker et al., 2009). Youths indicate that their sexual health education does not focus on sex-positive messages and often does not appear relevant for their needs, or state that specific content is taught too late (Flicker et al., 2009). As there is not much research in the current literature that explores what youths need or want regarding sexual health education, the survey reveals some topics youths would like to see addressed. Some of the topics

which they feel should be included in a regular sexual health curriculum are body autonomy, sexual pleasure, consent, the ability to explore safely sexuality, and being provided with the necessary skills and resources to limit risks (Flicker et al., 2009).

Based on the Toronto Teen Survey (TTS) (Larkin et al., 2017), the top three aspects youths like to learn about are: healthy relationships; HIV/AIDS; and sexual pleasure. The survey showed that less than 30% of youths learned about healthy relationships, and that most of the youth lacked a curriculum that addressed messages on positive sexuality and pleasure (Larkin et al., 2017). Further, the survey revealed that LGBTQ2SIA+ youths want to learn about sexual orientation and demonstrate a high need to add this topic in the sexual health education curriculum. Unfortunately, the 1998 Ontario sexual health curriculum does not address sexual diversity at any point, leaving LGBTQ2SIA+ youth's needs unaddressed and exposing youth to a heterosexual biased education system (Ontario Ministry of Health, 1999).

To make an international comparison: The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) in Germany conducts, every four years, a survey on youth sexuality with youths between the ages of 14-17, including their parents. Since 2010 the study added a focus on immigration families into their regular questionnaire. The study showed a different angle to sex education compared to North American literature. It presents data suggesting that most of the sexual education actually happens within a youths' home. 68 % of the surveyed girls and 44% of the boys stated that their mother was the most important person contributing to their sexual education (BZgA 2010). However, youths with a migration background reported lower numbers, with 48 % of the girls and 21 % of boys seeking information through their mother, suggesting a different approach to sexual education based on ethnicity, religion, or cultural background.

Also, the survey stated that schools continue to be an important source for sexual

education. It became apparent that peers gain significance when it comes to deciding whom to share and learn from about sexual health information. BZgA (2010) raises concerns that peers lack accurate information and can only provide limited support in gaining knowledge and skills. The survey indicated that youth are aware of this limitation and continue to seek opportunities to discuss their sexual health concerns with adults to fill knowledge gaps. Youths seek more information on healthy sexual behaviours, sexual body functions, and challenging topics such as abortion. BZgA (2010) identified topics that need to be added to the curriculum. For example, youths like to discuss negative message regarding sexuality in general, and wish to discuss more openly sexual orientation, pornography and sexual violence (BZgA, 2010). Further, the study emphasized the importance of collaborating with community partners in sexual health education to offer youths confidential opportunities to share their concerns, and separate sexual health information from school-based grading system. International comparisons can provide significant insights on how sexual education is approached and outline specific impacts on the society. Stated studies show some similarity on what youth like to address and talk about, and they also show different approaches taken to sexual education (e.g., parental influences). Further explored, international comparisons can provide learning opportunities to see what works well and what does not, or as observed in Ontario, what puts our youth at further risk. The next author looked specifically at the American sex education system and advocates for a multifaceted view on healthy sexual development.

Fortenberry (2014) takes a critical position on current sex education and advocates for a developmentally attuned definition of healthy sexual development for youth. Further, he provides crucial insights into developmental aspects of the sexual-self. First, Fortenberry remarks on the limited notion in the American education system that suggests that the main

component of sex is intercourse. He suggests a more complex view of healthy sexual development and sexual health integration for youth, that encompasses the complexity of “social interactions reinforced through the repetitive sexual experiences of emerging sexual bodies and sexual brains” (Fortenberry, 2014, p. 73). He remarks on the fact that all attempts to provide youth with sexual education misses the crucial point that it does not help to understand how sex is actually and healthily performed. He emphasizes the importance of experience and practice, and that only experience can lead to a comprehensive learning process (Fortenberry, 2014). Next, he expands on the complex aspect of learning and notes that sexual experiences are acquired through formal education, informal education, and subjective sexual concepts of sexual orientation, sexual interest and desires (Fortenberry, 2014). Hence, sexual experiences are acquired through multiple channels of learning within an adolescent’s life. These channels inform positive (arousal, pleasure), as well as negative concepts (shame) within the subjective sexual experience, influencing the ability and comfort to express the sexual-self (Fortenberry, 2014). He emphasizes that early sexual experiences influence our self-concept and internal reward system, affecting sexual behaviours and motivations beyond adolescent years (Fortenberry, 2014).

Fortenberry (2014) indicates that the adolescent years are a critical period for sexual learning. He points out that sexual learning begins with the awareness of one’s sexual desire for others. Ultimately, this comes with the need to be desired by others (Fortenberry, 2014). Functional and structural changes within an adolescent’s brain contributes to an adolescents emerging ability to meet the challenge to understand and interpret his own and others behaviours. This emerging ability to interpret oneself and others, is strongly linked and impacted by an adolescent’s state of mind and mental capacity. He/she/they need(s) to be aware of sexual

attraction, desires and arousal during sexual activities. Sexual scripts are often acquired through informal and formal education (peers, school, social media, online). Negative experiences can result in limited interpretation and integration of learned experiences (Fortenberry, 2014).

Fortenberry (2014) suggests more emphasis on promoting healthy sexual scripts in formal education to enhance the actual integration of the youth's unique learned sexual experiences. This way youth can benefit from cohesive sexual experiences and develop healthy sexual scripts into adulthood. The author suggests we take the developing brain into consideration when addressing sexual education with youths. He also emphasize the importance of experiencing and practicing sex in order to learn from it. This learning, if positive, can be integrated healthily and become a part of the sexual-self. The development of the sexual-self and the ability to distinguish between one's own and another's sexual-self, is strongly interrelated to identity formation.

Identity Formation

Interviewing youth on their personal sexual limits, requires them to have a sense of self separate from others, and a coherent or emerging understanding of his self-concept. Many theories attempt to explore the development and implications of the self. The following outlines a few theories that focus on youth development and the development of the self. I selected identity theories are relevant to my topic.

Some of the most fundamental theories regarding youth development and the development of self are Erikson's Identity Theory, Berzonsky's Identity-Style Formation Theory, and Marcia's Identity Status Theory.

Marcia (1980) defines identity as an internal, constructed process, to achieve a sense of cohesiveness, uniqueness, and inner stability. Grotevant (1997) goes beyond the internal process

and adds the important aspects of cultural, historical and social contexts that shape the development of identity. Identity formation can be viewed as a systemic process in which multiple factors contribute and shape one's identity over time. We therefore can suggest that the sexual-self is impacted by internal processes, as well as the social contexts and undergoes a systemic process. These systemic processes are shaped by life experiences and environmental factors. When identity processes are marked by personal exploration, commitment, and reconsideration (Tsang et al., 2012), so should the sexual-self. Further, the adolescent years are marked by rapid physical and psychosocial changes, which may result in crises that tests coping ability.

Tsang et al. (2012) state that a youth who acquires a defined and positive identity after these crises, progresses more efficiently into adulthood. A defined and positive identity includes positive self-esteem, the opportunity to explore and commit to self- definition, a reduction of self-discrepancies, and an advancing role formation and realization (Tsang et al. 2012). This speaks to Fortenberry's (2014) notion of offering youth opportunities to manage some of their experiences with physical and psychosocial crises, to ensure a cohesive and defined positive concept of sexual-identity. Erikson provides a stage-based model of development that helps us conceptualize development as passing through separate but related stages.

Erikson described an eight-stage model of human development over one's life span: infancy, early childhood, childhood, puberty, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. He stated that each stage is determined by a psychosocial crisis, which includes an ultimate question. The adolescence stage is described as an identity crisis, it questions the essence of being, the meaning and purpose of life. Erikson states that the psychosocial crises can either end in identity confusion (for example, confusion or questioning

having set a sexual boundary) or in a coherent identity formation (for example, being certain or reassured that a specific sexual boundary needed to be set for oneself) (Tsang et al., 2012).

Schwartz et al., (2012) expanded Erikson's theory, including a diverse set of individual differences of innate capabilities, as well as the impact of socio-cultural aspects, which could impact identity formation throughout one's life span (Tsang et al., 2012). This confirms previous studies perspectives, and amplifies the importance of contextual and social factors in youths' social development, including sexual decision-making, and the development of their sexual-self. A theory that explored a more multi-directional movement between stages of identity development is Marcia's Identity Status Theory.

Marcia's Identity Status Theory introduces four identity statuses (identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement) that could affect identity formation, as well as two impacting dimensions, exploration and commitment (Tsang et al., 2012). The statuses are impacted by: Exploration (active questioning and searching for adult roles and values) or Commitment process (firm decision-making regarding work, politics, religion). The four statuses are: Identity diffusion (exploration has not occurred and no commitment made, which is least adaptive; for example, a youth who has no awareness of their sexual need or sexual boundaries); Foreclosure (commitment has been made but no adequate exploration; for example a youth committed to being heterosexual, as this is the expectation of society and their parent, but had not explored if that appears true to them); Moratorium (active exploration of identity with weak commitment; for example, a youth who does not wish to identify as heterosexual anymore but explores different sexual interests to see what fits for them); and Identity achievement (exploration of identity committed to a particular identity; for example, the youth identifies and has explored their sexual identity as being pansexual) (Tsang et al., 2012). Another theory, based

on Erikson and Marcia's work, hoped to establish a greater understanding of identity development by applying a socio-cognitive model.

Berzonsky explored a social-cognitive theory based on identity styles (1989; as cited in Ragelienė, 2016). He understood identity as a cognitive process in which selective information is assessed for the purpose of identity formation. Berzonsky (1989) categorized three identity processing styles: informational identity style, normative, and diffuse-avoidant identity style. Each style is connected to an explorative and commitment aspect to identity. Informational style is related to the highest amount of exploration and meaningful commitment to identity formation, while the normative style is based on others judgement, values and beliefs, including commitment. Diffuse-avoidant identity lacks exploration, and decision-making is based on situational needs to determine one's identity (Bosh & Card, 2011). The ultimate goal of identity formation processes is to achieve identity, which is suggested to reduce psychosomatic symptomology (Ragelienė, 2016). Ragelienė (2016) pointed out the correlation between healthy identity formation and healthy peer interactions and belonging to an accepting peer group. They suggest individual characteristics could contribute to healthy peer relationships, such as being empathic and having the ability to differentiate the self from others (Ragelienė, 2016). This indicates the importance of the development of a sense of self, self-concept or self-system for youth to ensure a healthy identity formation, and healthy sexual peer interactions.

The Self-System

The integral self-system is “a comprehensive model of the self that embraces the relevant research and theoretical understandings of how our self-sense evolves and accounts for much of our experience of the world” (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007, p. 193). Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter (2007), view the self as an entity that is consistent, yet impacted by contextual factors

and multifaceted. They describe the self-system through Wilber's (2000) metaphor of *ladder*, *climber* and *view* (as cited in; Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). *Ladder* refers to developmental impulses and the *rungs* of the ladder are levels of consciousness (degree of development). The *climber* is what we identify as, describe as sense of self (self-system), or distinguishes us from others. The *climber* then goes up the *ladder*, where each *rung* provides a new perspective (*view*) on the achieved degree of development, that will then replace and expand the previous perspective. Assuming healthy development, each *view* should inform the *climber* of a new step towards identity formation, and then be integrated into a new perspective (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). For example; a 4 year old child who has no sense of sexual identity at this point, besides assigned gender, will have a different perspective on self as an adolescent, who starts exploring their sexuality and climbs the ladder which each significant new sexual experience, informing their perspective toward sexual identity formation.

This adaptation and integration of new perspectives through experiences and personal development was observed throughout this study and considered as steps to setting sexual boundaries. This study examined youths' sense of self before and after constructing, communicating, and setting sexual boundaries, and the impact of sexual events which set their sexual boundaries.

Chapter Summary

All of the reviewed qualitative studies, highlighted the importance of social contexts for adolescents' decision-making processes to explore and engage in sexual activity and to practice safer sex. Quantitative studies on the other hand, mainly limited their foci on determining researcher-driven risk and protective factors. Overall, limited research focused on the specific experiences of setting sexual boundaries, however, it lacked insight into youths' responses to

their unique experiences. Studies on identity formation and development provide a framework on aspects that contribute to a person's development and sense of self. They also explore how healthy identity formation can be achieved through positive peer interactions, which plays an important part in response to setting sexual boundaries.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter takes a qualitative research position. It explains to what extent this methodology fits the research question of how sexual learning takes place through setting sexual boundaries. The research seeks to understand the experience of the participants when setting sexual boundaries. This chapter describes the narrative style interviewing approach to research, and the use of Thematic Analysis (TA) and its rationale. It outlines the chosen participants, recruitment process, and explains the process of qualitative methodological credibility. Further, it discusses the ethical implications of the study and how this study ensured an ethical research practice, ending with a Chapter summary.

Qualitative Research Positioning

The objective of this research study is the exploration of setting sexual boundaries of adolescents based on their personal experiences. Since this study taps into adolescents' experiences in the context of their socio-cultural development and identity formation, I chose a qualitative research approach, that allowed me to apply a holistic lens to adolescent experiences of setting sexual boundaries. Qualitative research is a form of inquiry and information gathering that looks to understand human experiences by searching for constructed meaning, underlying motivations, rationale, and values in relation to a specific problem (Creswell, 2009). Other elements that distinguish qualitative research design from quantitative research design are: flexibility (questions can change throughout the interview process); applying a holistic lens when exploring a person's experience; using an investigative approach to data analysis; viewing the researcher as an integral part of the research process (co-creating meaning); and placing the interview process in a familiar setting for the participant (Creswell, 2018).

Denzin & Lincoln (2018, p.16) clarify aspects in which a researcher becomes an integral

part of the study design by stating that “gendered multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, as framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways.” These indicate the importance to be transparent about my contextual make up and personal background, including beliefs and biases relating to the study context, in order to ensure credibility of the study findings.

To clarify the framework for my study I employed a social constructionist paradigm and psycho social development theory, which underlines the belief in multiple realities; expresses my specific epistemology (social constructionist), which is subjective as it co-creates meaning between myself as researcher (knower) and the participants (respondent); and states the naturalistic set of methodological processes, narrative style interviews combined with a Thematic Analysis approach to this study (Denzin & Lincoln , 2018).

Qualitative research can suffer from an providing an inadequate format or conceptualization. Guba’s (1981) systemic attempt at building a framework for qualitative inquiry may help in creating a more concrete format. Guba (1981) introduces four aspects to judge and implement the truthfulness of qualitative study design through inquiry (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability). Credibility is viewed as the most significant aspect to achieve truthfulness to qualitative studies. The next chapter focuses and explore how this study will adhere to this criteria.

Methodological Credibility

Guba’s model to evaluate trustworthiness of the inquiry processes has been used by many researchers over the years. Krefting (1991) developed additional strategies to implement these criteria into qualitative research designs. She points out that credibility appears to be the most

significant aspect to ensure truthfulness in one's research design. I focused on truthfulness and outline strategies that were applied within this research study to ensure credibility. For a more comprehensive overview I added Table 2, which summaries strategies from Guba's model (Krefting, 1991, p. 217).

I outline Guba's (1981) established criteria to ensure methodological trustworthiness in qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria for adequacy are based within a naturalistic inquiry process in qualitative research (Guba, 1981).

Table 2

Guba's Model of Trustworthiness

Table 2
Summary of Strategies With Which to Establish Trustworthiness

Strategy	Criteria
Credibility	Prolonged and varied field experience Time sampling Reflexivity (field journal) Triangulation Member checking Peer examination Interview technique Establishing authority of researcher Structural coherence
Transferability	Referential adequacy Nominated sample Comparison of sample to demographic data Time sample
Dependability	Dense description Dependability audit Dense description of research methods Stepwise replication Triangulation Peer examination
Confirmability	Code-recode procedure Confirmability audit Triangulation Reflexivity

Credibility

Guba (1981, p.85) described credibility as “the heart of the credibility criterion.” The significance of this criteria is that participants feel understood and are able to recognize their voice in the research findings (Krefting, 1991). To ensure that my findings are credible, I applied the following strategies to my inquiry process: sending findings back to the participants for review and feedback (member checking); ensured that my presence at school was not viewed as an interruption or threat (prolonged engagement over 1 year as researcher); and debriefed each step of the research process with my supervisory committee by reflecting on experiences and thought processes (peer debriefing) (Guba, 1981).

Transferability

Transferability questions how applicable the findings are for other contexts and groups (Krefting, 1991). Based on my qualitative research design, the findings present a uniqueness within its small sample size and therefore lacks generalizability. However, I provide sufficient descriptive information about myself, the research context and design, the recruitment and analysis processes, and the participants to provide the reader with the opportunity to situate the research within its context, and to define how the findings may be transferable in similar settings. Further, I collected enough descriptive data to allow comparisons, which combined, addressed the challenges around applicability (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).

Dependability

Dependability, addressed the consistency and reliability of findings (Guba, 1981). Most importantly, in relation to qualitative research, is to account for variability and not to assume that there is none (Guba, 1981). To ensure transparency and account for the possibly high variability of my inquiry, I kept a document that clearly outlines the steps I took to analyze my data (audio

trail) (Guba, 1981). Further, to counteract the variability I ensured methodological stability in my research design, to provide as much consistency as possible within my research design.

Confirmability

Confirmability, in qualitative research design, addresses the criteria of neutrality (Krefting, 1991). Krefting (1991) emphasized the importance to apply rigorous approaches to methodology to ensure validity. That said, findings should connect strongly to the research question, based on the responses of the participants, rather than reflecting the researcher's assumptions and biases. To ensure confirmability, I ensured that at least 60% of my participants (4 youths) endorsed each theme and used participant's verbatim quotes in support of my developed themes. Additionally, I ensured a high degree of methodological credibility and dependability by consistently discussing, reviewing, and evaluating each step in my thematized process with my supervisory committee (Krefting, 1991). Further, I kept a field journal to ensure reflexivity of my assumptions, thoughts, impressions, and influences throughout the interviewing process (Guba, 1981). I continuously acknowledged and reflected upon myself as an integral part of the study and adhered to rigorous qualitative research practice (Guba, 1981).

Narrative Style Interviewing

This study used a narrative style interviewing approach to research, employing the use of Thematic Analysis, which is an approach that is a "distinctly *qualitative* research philosophy that emphasizes, for example, researcher subjectivity as a resource ...the importance of reflexivity and the situated and contextual nature of meaning." (Braun & Clarke, p. 107, 2018). Narratives create meaning by noticing how actions and events intertwine to produce an outcome. This process is then constructed into a coherent unit helping understanding of past actions and events and determines future actions (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative style interviewing then, is

the attempt to extract subjective associations to understand a person's implicit experience. Specific to my research, there was an important link between narrative inquiry and identity formation. Grotevant (1997) stated that narratives do not only reveal the interconnectedness of diverse identities, but also help to differentiate and outline the connection between assigned and chosen identities. The concept of constructed identities fits within a narrative style interviewing, which is a method within qualitative research, based within social constructionist epistemology. Denzin & Lincoln (2005, p. 157) expressed that "epistemology asks, how do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?" Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the chosen epistemology implies a specific ethical and moral standpoint towards society, the world and human interaction, making the researcher an integral part of participant's experience. Social constructionists specifically, believe that we understand and are able to see our world through cultural, contextual normative rules and understanding. Normative rules and understandings are co-created through relational interactions, which are based within the context of language (Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). It is a lens we apply to assign meaning to personal stories and experiences. People come to understand themselves and their experiences through the stories they tell and a social constructionist approach emphasizes the importance of listening for non-dominant stories told by a person, which, at first glance, do not seem to fit social constructs and cultural assigned frameworks (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). Roy-Chowdhury (2010) believe that there is not one reality but many valid narratives. As Roy-Chowdhury (2010, p. 343) puts it, a "...relational self is a discursive construction, conversationally created." However, personal experiences become troublesome and challenging when they do not appear coherent within the dominant interpretive framework of society (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). The significant aspects in applying a social constructionist approach to my

study were to: listen for the non-normative stories, and normative rules through which a participant understands their experience; bringing awareness to myself as integral part of the study with my cultural background; recognize the co-creation of meaning within the interview process; and acknowledging the historical, cultural and social complexity within each participant's experience.

Additionally, Polkinghorne (1988) indicated specific challenges in narrative research. He points out that grasping a person's narrative is difficult, based on the fact that a narrative is flexible in nature as it is an activity rather than a static object; the fact that there is a lack of awareness of one's narrative at times and a need for it to be transformed into language first before made coherent; and, (in line with social constructionist approach) its complexity within an integral and complex system that affects different layers of consciousness within a person.

Polkinghorne (1996) supported the idea of identity stories introduced by McAdams (2011). Identity stories help to understand a person's constructed meaning about their lives. Polkinghorne (1996) emphasized that processes contributing to life stories are lying outside of a person's awareness and that therefore identity formation processes, as well lay mostly outside a person's control. However, once a story is told it becomes articulated and underlies different restrictions (language, grammar, social constructions) and is influenced by the context in which it is told and by whom it is told (Polkinghorne, 1996). Therefore, the narratives are not based on the participant alone, but co-created by the participant and researcher. Narrative interviewing has to take this awareness into account and I, as researcher, have to be sensitive to the process of co-creating a person's life story. Polkinghorne (1996, p.365) puts it "there are significant differences between the identity story as it is lived and the story as it is told". Guba (1981) added that the interviewer and the storyteller are by the nature of the inquiry process, interrelated and influence

each other. It was pertinent to acknowledge and bring awareness to the study and the process, that this holds true and, as each narrative is unique and context dependent, generalizations cannot be made. However, as Guba (1981) pointed out, the focus of the study is not to make “true” assumptions but point out differences and similarities related to the study question.

It is important to keep in mind the uniqueness of people’s experiences, that experiences are embedded in a complex internal and external system, that narratives are co-constructed within the interview process, and that narrative inquiry does not look for a general “truth” but multiple “truths” relevant to the study topic (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). By choosing a narrative style interview based within a social constructionist epistemology, participant’s experiences with setting sexual boundaries can provide a unique and complex insight regarding how youth make sense of and understand the world through their experiences. It can further provide a complex comprehension of cultural, historical and social factors that impact each participant’s ability to form a cohesive narrative based on their experiences. Further, it provides the opportunity to look beyond historical and traditional normative rules and values. A social constructionist approach can offer opportunities of co-creating different ‘truths’, ‘realities’, and enter into a new continuum of meaning making, when listening to new voices (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). One of the new voices, I explored, were some of the unheard youth voices gathered from interviews. I used open ended questions in my narrative style interview process, initiating each interview with the following question: “Tell me about a time when you had to set a sexual boundary?”. This open ended question hoped to address youth specific experiences around this topic, by offering space for the youth to be able to explore their narrative in any direction they wish. I added a few follow up questions to further explore youth experiences around setting sexual boundaries:

- How are setting sexual boundaries perceived and responded to?

- How do youth learn about setting sexual boundaries?
- How do youth distinguish between crossing boundaries and violations?
- How do youth communicate personal sexual boundaries?
- How does social media contribute to this topic?

In order to stay close to my research topic, regarding sexual learning: adolescents' experiences setting sexual boundaries, and to reflect aspects explored within my literature review, I was curious about their unique experiences, learning aspects, ways of communication, the integration of learning and how this reflects within online settings. The gap in the current literature, and therefore lack of framework made me add follow up questions, in order to gather more data and gain an extended insight into aspects around youth specific experiences when setting sexual boundaries. For the complete interview script please review Appendix B.

After I heard these voices, life experiences and stories of setting sexual boundaries were gathered, audio taped and transcribed. I explored and identified some of the themes, new perspectives and perceptions. To gather insights on youths' experiences, I used a thematic analysis fitting them methodically into my narrative style interview data.

Thematic Analysis Positioning

“Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). I chose this approach because Thematic Analysis can be used in combination with different epistemological approaches and provides a flexibility that other analysis methods do not (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clarke (2018) clearly stated that TA needs to be used with another methodology. They caution readers in their latest publications, that TA is a method only but not an approach that cannot be used without a theoretical framework.

TA needs to be connected to a theoretical framework. More importantly, I applied a “contextualist” method to my analysis. This method acknowledges a person’s own strategy of making sense and meaning of their specific experience, and acknowledges social and cultural complexity that shapes and impacts those meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clarke (2006) provide a 6-step guide that offers researchers a structured framework to thematic analysis, which I used in this research study.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The following outlines the 6-step guide starting with *Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with your data* to *Phase 6: producing the report* (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with your data describes the importance of actively engaging with the data set as a whole. Braun & Clarke (2006) encouraged the researcher to engage with the content at once before starting to look for themes, meanings and occurring patterns. This phase additionally focuses on the transcribing process, which is considered a helpful way to familiarize yourself with the data set, while paying attention to verbal, as well as non-verbal cues.

Phase 2: generating initial codes, focuses on coding pertinent themes and occurrences within the data. At this point codes distinguish between data driven themes and question driven themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasized the importance to code, colour code, as much data as possible to provide multiple opportunities for developing themes. They also advocate not using a codebook while using TA. They feel this is not aligned with the sensitive nature of qualitative research (Braun & Clark, 2018).

Phase 3: searching for themes, extracts the coded material and separates them into different themes. The authors encourage playing around with themes and utilizing different

means to visualize possible themes and sub-themes. Additionally, they suggest holding on to coded material that appears not to be relevant at this point (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clark (2018) emphasized that developing themes is an active construction by the researcher and that each theme has a core or essence. A fully developed theme, therefore, is not a descriptive summary, but rather “...has the potential to highlight shared meaning, as well as contrasts or disjuncture in meaning...” (Braun & Clarke, 2018, p. 108).

Phase 4: reviewing themes, is described by a two-step process. The first step creates a cohesive meaningful theme pattern for each interview conducted, while the second step includes finding cohesive themes within the whole data set. This process can entail a re-coding of themes or discarding of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 5: defining and naming themes, includes a defining and refining process within the data set. This process is defined by identifying why the themes are of interest and are relevant to the research study. This phase results in clarifying each theme and sub-theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The last phase, *Phase 6: producing the report*, focuses on creating a cohesive and compelling narrative around your data set. This narrative should be comprised of explicit examples that underline a compelling argument and are relevant to my initial research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Transcription

Braun & Clarke (2006) described transcribing as a tool to familiarize yourself with your data set. It is the first significant step to be an active part of your data set, while paying attention to verbal, as well as non-verbal cues. This positioning aligns with Lapadat & Lindsay (1999), who view transcribing as an “...interactive event...” (p.81). Lapadat & Lindsay (1999)

expressed the importance to acknowledge the challenges that come with transcribing. They state that transcription is not necessarily a transparent process and they encourage an open dialogue to enable researchers to "...make choices about transcription that enact the theories that they hold" (p. 66). To discuss the transcription process, researchers are encouraged to outline the implications of their underpinning theories to connect with the process of transcribing data. This would allow for an explicit approach to this part of the research process aiding reflection on findings more clearly within the chosen methodology (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Lapadat & Lindsay (1999) pointed out that the tape-transcribe-code-interpret cycle (TTCI) is inherently analytical. TTCI is not the end product. It is important for the research process but the process of transcribing itself that is noteworthy. The process reveals significant details of the participant's interview.

Lapadat & Lindsay's (1999) perspective on the transcribing process, is aligned with my chosen approach of social constructionist epistemology. It assumes that my personal biases and beliefs play an integral part in the interviewing process, transcription and analyzing practice, and the overall method of this research. This validates my understanding and assumption that this research study is co-constructed with my participation in all areas of this study. It is an essential part of the researcher's responsibility to acknowledge biases, beliefs and assumptions, personal views, and the fact that I, as researcher made active choices in which parts of the interview I deemed important, what to filter out and what to highlight. Within this context, I tried to make sure that I included as much detail as possible within the chosen verbatim quotes to represent the participants' voice as much as possible. I included filler utterances (e.g., *mmh*, *ah*), occurrences of laughter or chuckles, as well as non-verbal cues such as shoulder shrugs. Unfortunately, it is impossible to present all occurrences within the interviews and provide a complete and objective

picture of the energy and presentation of the participating youth. I deemed it as crucially important to increase awareness and reflect as much possible on all aspects that impact the transcription process.

Participants

The procedures for this study were approved by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board prior to recruiting participants and conducting interviews. The voices of the youths providing direct feedback on how sexual education should be taught, and understood. Current youths' concerns can directly aid implementation of adequate supports for navigating sexual health concerns. In order to be as current as possible, I chose to recruit youths who are in the midst of sexual exploration and development while still attending an education system that attempts to educate and support their sexual growth. Included in the criteria for participants to be part of the study was an active connection and engagement with their school counsellor at their participating High School; having experiences with setting sexual boundaries, and being between the ages of 16-18. Ethical considerations were provided by a tight support network in case of incidental findings throughout the interview process, or feelings of emotional distress while exploring setting sexual boundaries experiences. Inclusion criteria:

- Age: 16-18
- Adolescents who experienced sexual interactions and are accessing school counsellor services
- Gender, Sexual orientation, Sexual interest: All included

Exclusion:

- Youths: not accessing school counsellor services and are not seen regularly for support and therapeutic work
- Youths who are considered in crisis

Participants were recruited through the school counsellors at the two participating high schools. The school counsellors were provided posters to distribute within the school and hand out to the Leadership, and Peer Counselling extracurricular groups. To ensure credibility I connected with two high schools, to whom I was known to through my work as Youth and Family Counsellor at Cowichan Valley Youth Services. To some of the participants I became known through my work as sexuality workshop facilitator. The applied component of this work was made possible through a grant from The Centre of Outreach Education (CORE) at the University of Victoria.

My participants were 6 adolescents who were all accessing school counselling services or connected to the school counselor in some capacity. Four of the adolescents identified as female, while two identified as male. One of the males identified as bi-sexual, while the remaining 5 identified as heterosexual. 5 of the youths described themselves as Caucasian, while one participant identified as First Nation. All were between 16 and 18 years old.

Interview

Potential participants were informed about this study by the school counsellors or through posters placed on school boards. School counsellors assisted in the recruitment by handing out the posters and consent packages. They were signed and returned to the school counsellor and then handed to me. The package indicated how the information would be used and for what purpose. Students were informed that they would be contacted by me to determine eligibility and discuss possible questions for this study. The recruitment posters provided information on how to

contact the primary researcher if they were interested in participating in the study.

Once the potential participants showed interest, we connected them by phone to screen for eligibility and to schedule interview times and locations at participants' high schools. Participants then took part in 1-2 hours qualitative, in-person interview. Participants were invited for a feedback session to verify their information and to go over the themes determined by me, months after the first interview. However, in March 2020, when COVID-19 affected the world, public health measures were put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which included social distancing and school closures. I was not able to meet the youths in person, but conducted five feedbacks on the phone and one via E-mail correspondence.

When I met the participants they were handed back the consent and confidentiality form. They had already handed the forms to the school counsellor. The forms were discussed and read out loud with the participant before the interview process began. The youth had the opportunity to ask questions before the interview started. The forms were signed and each youth was provided a copy of the consent form. On the feedback session, I once again asked for a verbal additional consent and let the student state yes or no and to ensure they were comfortable with giving consent.

Individuals were given a number during the data collection and analysis. A pseudonym was chosen if quotes were used in the paper. Identifying characteristics were removed from the data set. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time up to the time the thesis had been uploaded for the final review to graduate studies. Each digitally recorded interview referred to a participant's number. Each participant could refer to their number if they decide to withdraw their data until the thesis had been uploaded for the final review. Hence, all information is anonymous.

The option to withdraw was articulated and transparent to the participant at each step of the interview process.

Participants were informed that once the interviews were completed, transcribed and divided in themes, I would not be able to determine their identity and data could not be removed anymore. Digital audio recordings were double-deleted after the thesis had been uploaded to D-space. Word file transcriptions with no identifiers are kept for 5 years after final thesis defense date. All data, digital recordings and consent forms are kept in a locked cabinet throughout the study process and beyond.

Ethical Implications

Risks

The research presented a possible risk for:

1. Emotional or psychological discomfort, such as feeling demeaned or embarrassed due to the research questions.

2. Fatigue or stress, due to the time commitment of sitting through up to a 2 hours long interview process.

3. Social risks, such as being seen by other students or known to participate in the study and/or being teased.

4. Risk of incidental findings, such as sexual misconduct or sexual victimization.

To minimize, mitigate, or prevent the risk, the following steps were taken.

1. In case of emotional or psychological discomfort, such as feeling demeaned or embarrassed due to the research questions, I provided a full disclosure of all the information necessary for individuals to make an informed decision about voluntary participation in the research regarding setting sexual boundaries. Further, Participants were interviewed on school

grounds to ensure familiarity and comfort with the environment. During the interview, I was alert to any signs of discomfort. I provided ongoing validation of their feelings and offered clients a break whenever it appeared needed. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Further, it was suggested to the participant to seek out their school counsellor following the session.

2. In case of fatigue or stress, due to the time commitment of sitting through up to a 2 hour interview, a convenient time for the participants was arranged to attend the interview and feedback session. Sessions were never booked during exam times, and they were provided a break or offered to continue the interview at another time, if participants showed signs of fatigue or stress.

3. In case of social risks, such as being seen by other students or were known to participate in the study and/or being teased, interviews took place in a classroom that provided some privacy within the school (not in a high traffic area of the school). Further, students from the Leadership Group, were not aware of who participated in the study.

4. In case of risk of incidental findings, such as sexual misconduct or sexual victimization, I ensured that the recruitment poster outlined some of the possible risks and provided participants with the opportunity to have an informed consent. Before the Interview process began, limits to confidentiality, following procedures for mandatory reporting '*duty to report*', were read out loud together with the participant, discussed and explained clearly to all participants. These limits to confidentiality included any indications of harm to self, harm to others, and harm by others. The participants then were offered the opportunity to ask questions before beginning the interview, and if all their questions were answered they were asked to sign the form.

I applied following protocol for incidental findings:

1. If reports indicated an incidental finding, that suggest sexual, emotional or physical abuse or neglect and indicated that a duty to report was present, we reviewed the previously signed form and any action needed was addressed prior to the interview. One youth identified a sexual assault in the past and shared that this was followed up with, by going to the hospital and having an ongoing exploration regarding this incident with her counsellor. Another participant described sexual coercions in the past, but was not at the stage to name it as such or add meaning to it for her. I provided the counselling resources to her and let her know that whenever she feels ready to explore more, to contact any of the provided resources. The following steps outline my protocol only, and were not necessary to address during my study process.

2. Together with the participant a course of action would be explored and discussed. Dependent on the findings, MCFD, or Police would be informed. Further, the school counsellor would have been be a part of the next steps as outlined within the informed consent and confidentiality form. Hence, one of the criteria was for participant accessing their school counsellor services.

3. The participant would have been guided through the reporting process and connected to further supports if necessary. A sheet with contact information for support networks was provided to all participants regardless of findings.

4. Last, a follow up would have taken place, whether with the participant or school counsellor, to ensure the participant was supported and guided through the process.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 described the qualitative research positioning, characteristics and underpinning theory of my study design, as well as the narrative style interviews and thematic analysis. This

chapter clarified the fit and connection between these methodologies, and outlined the specific steps that were followed for narrative style semi-structured interviews and thematic analyses. It further outlined the recruitment process and described who participated in this study. I further defined criteria that ensure trustworthiness specific to qualitative research design. This was followed by the ethical considerations associated with my research study and how I followed up with the one incidental finding and would have further minimized the possible risks for my participants.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The following data was gathered through narrative style interviews with six participants at two local High Schools in Duncan. This Chapter provides an overview of the participants, as well as an overview of the themes in table format, before exploring the developed themes. As stated in previous chapters, the main question asked was “Tell me about a time you had to set a sexual boundary?”. Once all interviews were completed and data was gathered, I transcribed the interviews and analysed them by using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) TA approach.

Overall, I developed seven themes during the coding and thematization process. For the development of themes I used a ‘Big Q’ approach to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach is inherently flexible. As the researcher, and an active participant in constructing the themes, by engaging and reflecting on the data, while applying my skills as a researcher, my personal experiences, and my personal and professional context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I utilized an inductive approach to develop the themes, starting with the data and the youths’ experiences to create meaning and patterns, rather than testing a specific theory with my data set (Terry et al., 2017). The development of themes, started with a familiarization process, where I actively began to identify patterns within the data set. I coded, played around with themes, abandoned some, and developed others. For further clarity, I outlined the steps of TA more explicitly in Chapter 3. I ensured my themes were well connected and coherent to the research question. I provided evidence for each theme by connecting verbatim quotes to each developed theme (Terry et al., 2017). I used my research question as a guiding tool in developing themes that provided rich meaning and told a story about the youths’ specific experience regarding setting sexual boundaries. Terry et al. (2017), point out that this rich meaning should encompass an essence, or concept that captured the depth of the research, offering an opportunity to explore the

theme more when describing it. Braun & Clarke (2018) cautioned not to offer themes that present a descriptive summary, but rather construct themes that reveal implicit meaning.

To warrant and ensure the quality and trustworthiness of my findings, I adhered to Krefting's (1991) and Guba's (1981) criteria for dependability, auditability, credibility, and confirmability for qualitative research studies. To ensure credibility, I developed themes representing an accurate interpretation of the interviewed youths' experiences. I cross referenced and validated the developed themes with the youths.

I ensured reflexivity by maintaining a field journal throughout the interview process in order to catch and identify biases of mine. This field journal additionally helped to achieve confirmability; a way to check that I did not seek out specific findings but rather stayed open minded and focused on what the data actual presented to me. In this context, Krefting described reflexivity as "an assessment of the influence of the investigator's own background, perceptions and interests on the qualitative research process" (1991, p. 218). Lastly, to follow the guidelines for dependability and auditability, ensuring accuracy in my research process, I regularly checked in with my supervisory committee and presented my process step by step. In return my supervisory committee reviewed and audited my process and themes.

Table 3
Participant Overview

Name	Age	Identified Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity
Lisa	18	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Edna	17	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Marge	16	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Bart	16	Male	Bi-sexual	Caucasian
Patty	17	Female	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Ned	16	Male	Heterosexual	First Nation

Table 4
Themes Overview

Themes	Validated by Quotes	Endorsed after Final Check
1) Sometimes it is okay to say no	6	6
2) They got mad at me for saying no	4	5
3) They did not take no for an answer	5	6
4) Even after saying yes, it might not feel good	5	6
5) Sometimes it just happens	6	6
6) Check ins help	4	6
7) You can feel it in your gut	5	6

During the interviews, open discussions unfolded about the youths' experiences and learnings around setting sexual boundaries. All of the participants shared some of their sexual experiences with this writer, and most strongly expressed their wish to provide insights, that can contribute to more adequate sex education for youth in the future. Themes included three main concepts: ways they had to manage and make sense of different responses when setting sexual boundaries; managing their feelings of confusion during and after setting boundaries, or not

setting sexual boundaries; and lastly, creating solutions that facilitate satisfactory outcomes for healthy boundaries.

At first, the youths started to express negative experiences with setting sexual boundaries; situations, in which they decided not to set sexual boundaries in order to avoid negative responses from sexual partners, or to fulfill their own or other's sexual expectations. They also shared situations in which they set sexual boundaries, which were ignored or attacked. They also expressed experiences that were less intense, or even perceived as positive, where they felt respected and understood. Themes developed were: 1) Sometimes it is okay to say no; 2) They got mad at me for saying no; 3) They did not take no for an answer.

Secondly, the youths expressed emotional distress, feeling overwhelmed, or confused when setting sexual boundaries. The youths expressed having set boundaries, or consciously not setting boundaries, or said that their sexual partners had set boundaries, ending in uncomfortable emotional and/or physical feelings for both of the sexual partners. The youths expressed feelings of regret, guilt or shame, and often carried those feelings with them, without ever being able to integrate, or make sense of them. Overwhelming situations were described when sexual interactions happened, with no prior discussions. Sexual boundaries had to be communicated and understood spontaneously. Interestingly, the youths expressed a sense of normality around 'it' just happening and boundaries not being addressed, or not being clear in the moment. Themes developed from this concept were: 4) Even after saying yes, it might not feel good; 5) Sometimes it just happens.

The youths often expressed ways regarding how they could ensure that boundaries are respected, known to self, reassured, or reflected upon. They insightfully described ways they check in with each other, asked clarification questions afterwards or during exploring sexuality,

and described ways to self-check in when determining their own sexual boundaries. Themes developed from this concept were: 6) Check ins help; and 7) You can feel it in your gut. Lastly, youths were asked what they would have liked to know before they started to become sexually active, or what they would have told to their younger self. The youths endorsed co-ed sex education and the importance within the school system to educate on sexual topics, while most endorsed outside services coming into the school, rather than school counsellors or teachers educating students about sexual health. Further, most supported sex positive messages, rather than abstinence, opportunities to talk openly about consent, peer pressures, and ways to understand how to connect to self and say “No”.

Primary Themes and Supporting Quotes

The following explores the seven themes, including the titles and descriptions, as well as the supporting verbatim quotes taken directly from the transcripts. All themes were endorsed and validated by the participating youths during the data analysis process.

1) Sometimes it is okay to say no

Youths described circumstances in which they, or the other person involved, agreed that setting a sexual boundary was okay. All youths who endorsed this theme experienced that the sexual pursuit was stopped by them or by the other person. Remarkable to note is, that the participants did not experience an overwhelmingly positive response to setting a sexual boundary, but were rather nonchalant about it. However, the implications for stating no and it being respected can be far reaching and meaningful, as seen by one participant who expressed feeling a sense of empowerment when realizing that their sexual boundary was respected: “it was me saying no”. Overall, responses were described as okay, fair, good, or apologetic. Six

participants validated the theme “Sometimes it is okay to say no.” (*This theme was endorsed by all six participants after final check*).

Lisa: “Yes, it’s the feeling when I’m about to do it, that what helps me to realize kind of, like I was, to three days ago or something, I had this guy over and we were laying in my bed and he wanted to cuddle me, and so he did, and then we started making out, and he tried to stick his hand on my pants, and I stopped him and I said I didn’t want to do that, and he tried again and I said no I don’t want to, and then he didn’t do it anymore...It was me saying no and then he stopped. He just said okay.”

Marge: “I made that clear, when we first started dating I told him.... I’m sorry, but personally I myself cannot do that, and he said that’s okay and he never asked me again...It felt good for me, finally someone who doesn’t want to push boundaries, does not want to persuade me, someone who just said okay, that was really nice for me.”

Bart: “I straight up talk to her, said this is something I need to bring attention to... And I brought it up, and said maybe we are taking things a little too fast, and for the benefit of you and I so no one is hurt we should state that by a slower pace....She responded pretty fair to it.”

Bart: “We were making out, and just getting on watching a movie friend was upstairs, and then I said hey, could I give you oral, it would be fun, and she said no, it would take some time to get to know each other better, and I said okay and we just continued making out.”

Patty: "...a couple of times he was like having asked of having sex before, and I was like no I'm not ready for that, I think we need to hit a couple more spaces before we get there...because I just wanted to like explore...he was good with that, because that was the exact same thing for him too..."

Edna: "I remember few people I was like no, don't touch me, and they respected it, and said like oh sorry."

Ned: "I think if a person will just say don't do that anymore please or something and then I was like okay... I just moved into a more comfortable position. I just think it was like, oh okay."

2) They got mad at me for saying no

Participants described situations where they had to deal with another person's anger after setting a clear sexual boundary. This theme describes that others got upset, agitated or mad at them when sexual boundaries were expressed. They would describe both, the reaction from their sexual partner, and own response of feelings of upset, when their sexual partner got mad. The experience often caused chain reactions, such as getting "pissed", feeling "awkward", or deciding not to interact with this person anymore. It seldom leaves the youths with an ability for closure. Youths reported to have experienced anger either between a person to person setting or through social media. This theme was endorsed by four of the participants.

Lisa: "He was obviously mad, but whatever I did not talk to him after that ever..."

Marge: "And if I like absolutely said no, don't touch me. Then he get really mad at me."

Edna: “Well, he kinda, he started, he was swearing at me. He was like, fuck you, why are you a bitch about it? He said, you said you like me?....I just said things change, and I just don’t want to do right now. It doesn’t mean I don’t like you.... I just got really pissed off, I was like leave me alone, it’s not a big deal, I just don’t want to have sex with you... he was clearly very agitated with me. I think he just kinda lost it. He was pretty upset.”

Ned: “I have been sent some [nudes] randomly and then I was like oh nice or something, just a compliment to make them feel good...It was my girlfriend she just randomly did it. I kind of felt awkward because I’m not the kind of type of person to jerk off to pictures, and so I was just like oh okay. I didn’t really give it too much of big compliment, and then she kind of sort of got mad...”

3)They did not take no for an answer

When it comes to setting sexual boundaries that were not respected, participants described having experienced a prolonged holding and asserting of their boundaries. Part of their experience is that the other person did not take no for an answer and kept trying to convince them to say yes. In some instances, youths decided to ignore their own boundaries, in order to stop the argument, or to “get it over with” and move on from the situation. Others needed to assert themselves through physical action, or by yelling at the person who would not take no as an answer. For some youths this occurred in different settings, on social media platforms, in person with people known to them, and with strangers. Five participants validated this theme, and five endorsed after final check.

Lisa: “There was also that other time ... that I tried to say no to that guy, he pretty much kept asking and asking and asking and asking for like an hour. Like, and then eventually I just said yeah. “

Lisa: “He just wanting me to do it and I just “no bud”. No like end of story no more asking. He said fine whatever [after 20min]... I think this is easier when they are texting me, I can always block them, I don’t have keep dealing with it.”

Edna: “At a music Festival, some guy kept trying to grind on me, and I kept trying pushing him off me, and he just wouldn’t and I said no, so my friend pushed him away from me, because he was a guy, and obviously I couldn’t push him away... Like really creepy, I just kept telling them to fuck off...”

Edna: “And I was like, I was drunk, but I was no, I don’t want to do it right now, and he just trying to get me to say yes. And I just kept saying no. And he gave up after a while....[after] like half an hour. He just kept grabbing me and stuff, and asking me..... he would not take no for an answer, that pissed me off. “

Edna: “And then ... some guys... send me some nudes, and I say no. Just no! And then they’re just trying to keep convincing me to, come on just one picture, and then I’m saying I’m like with people, and then...they just tell me oh, just go to the bathroom, or you both could send a picture, like, very strange...”

Edna: “We usually just ignore them [males on snapchat] and then they kept going [asking for nudes], until we removed them.”

Marge: “I just kind of realized that I need to stand up for myself, because even he knew that it was not okay, and you can’t be having sex with someone trying to do stuff with someone if they’re sitting there crying or not saying anything... and like I finally after just telling no, I don’t know, sometimes I tell him no, and he said no, you’re fine...”

Patty: “...there was one guy who randomly added me on snap chat ... I never met him in my life, and he just kept sending me dick pics, and I was like what is this?”

Ned: “I told her that I didn’t really care that much for them [nudes], but I am still getting them randomly.”

4) Even after saying yes, it might not feel good

Part of participants’ experience when setting sexual boundaries is that giving consent does not guarantee a positive sexual experience, physically, as well as emotionally. Youths reported situations when they or their sexual partner said yes and consented to sexual interactions, but that they did not feel good during, or after the sexual act. Their reactions were feelings of physical or emotional discomfort, regrets, feeling bad, awful or weird, despite having said yes, or received a yes from their sexual partner. This theme additionally shows the confusion, that even after saying yes, it might not feel good afterwards as many youths expressed such by stating : “ I don’t know”; “ I do not really understand”. This theme was experienced within multiple settings (social media and in person) and validated by five participants, and endorsed by six after final check.

Lisa: “And then, I do not really understand... why guys always want to fuck girls titts. Because it does not make any sense, because it looks really odd...I had many people wanting to do it to me and I don't understand ...Cause they, they have to stand there and they pretty much looking at you, while your boobs are like this, and they are having sex with your boobs. So it is just uncomfortable. I said yes a couple of times. Because whatever. ...and actually two people done it to me and yeah it's no fun. It is just weird.”

Marge: “No, I think, we were really fast at it compared to others. like my sister waited a year before she had sex with her boyfriend, and I don't know. I feel it because I was so young. I felt like, and he was older, you know, you kinda feel like you are less, than you feel like if this is what he wants, it's going to happen. I don't know, it is not like I didn't want to have it at that time, it is just what happened. I never really asked to take things slow. I do regret it though. Now that I am older now, I think that I should've waited until I was at least, I don't know, 16.”

Bart: “I was like, okay why don't you go on the doggy style on the bed and I hold your hair and then we will fuck. And she's like, okay that sounds good. And then the whole time she just wasn't saying much, and seemed upset, so I said you're okay? want to stop? she is like, no just keep going. And then we talked about it after, and she wasn't comfortable with that, and she felt violated, she said, and that just made me feel awful...”

Ned: “When I was with this girl once she said she didn't, she said if she doesn't like something she didn't tell me to stop because she didn't want to upset me.....I don't know but I told her not to do that

anymore. You shouldn't feel scared to tell somebody that you don't like something...Felt a little bad a little awkward I don't know I just felt bad and awkward."

Lisa: "And then, I said yes, and since then...all go back into that moment when I say yes into things and afterwards I am just feeling disappointed in myself, cause I know that I did not want to do it..."

5) Sometimes it just happens

Participants described that boundaries are not necessarily communicated beforehand, and that at times one thing just leads to another. Part of their experience was that boundaries were communicated verbally or non-verbally in the moment, verbally evaluated and assessed afterwards, or not communicated at all. It is significant that setting sexual boundaries in the moment is that communication, verbal or non-verbal were at a minimum. No extensive conversations were described by any of the participants. If communicated in the moment, it is a short OK, shoulder shrug, or a look or nod indicating yes or no to a boundary. Six participants validated the theme that at times it "just happens", and all six endorsed this theme after final check.

Ned: "There were not really any stages, because it just happened and then..mmh, she was like, are you ready? Have you ever done that before? Or I was like I haven't done that before, have you, yes I have, and then it was just like okay. Are you comfortable with doing it? And then I was like yeah and then I just let her do it the most ..."

Lisa: “Because a lot of people think like, you gotta sit down and have a big conversation with somebody before you have sex..., because it’s never happens, it happens in the moment.”

Patty: “We had sex ...more a kind of, it would be kind of like happened a little, and we either one of would ease off, and say no I’m not ready for that... when we had sex for the first time, that just happened ...but we already known each other and were kind of already comfortable with each other, so it wasn’t that weird, but yeah, that was the only time [we got carried away]...”

Marge: “...usually just start making out. And then, you know when it gets carried away, you just like , I don’t know, they usually give you a look. I don’t know, you like, if they do stuff they give you a little, they’re like do you want to? And you say [shrug shoulders] sure!....Yeah, or nodding. Like most of the guys I slept with after him, I didn't really think like no I don't want to do it. I was always just kind well, okay.”

Bart: “Sometimes my, my instincts get the best of me, and it is just something happens, before I know it, my Dick is in someone’s mouth, and I like oh wow halfway through, this is too fast, oh it’s very happening, there is no backing down now...”

Edna: “Guys would be touching and then you kiss you, then it just kinda happens. Just one thing led to another, to be honest I can’t remember we talking about it.”

6)Check ins help

If it comes to providing check ins around sexual boundaries, four participants validated the importance to check in around someone's boundaries whether beforehand, in the moment or afterwards. These conversations were described as more in depth than non-verbal communications in the moment. Participants expressed being asked questions, double checking with their sexual partner, or even exploring what can be done better, or what did not feel good. Check ins were described as an engaged way of expressing and elaborating on one's sexual boundaries with each other. Participants experienced check-ins as feeling nice, reassuring, liking it, or using it as regular way to evaluate sexual interactions, to explore preferences, or to enhance practices. Six participants endorsed the theme "Check in helps" after final check.

Edna: "I didn't really realize, like, I was even setting sexual boundaries, until I met my boyfriend, and he like asked me stuff. I was like, how nice is that, maybe other guys should ask me too."

Bart: "First I check in with myself, and I need to know what I am going to want 20 minutes down the line. How I'm going to feel about what I'm doing now, and then I check in with the person and I just double check, you want to do that baby? You are absolutely sure?...Usually, they respond okay, they really like that..."

Marge: "Like with my boyfriend now, he knows everything, and I told him what everything, so he is very careful how he talks, and it's more comfortable for me. He asked are you comfortable with this? Are you okay with this and I think that helps. The reassurance thing."

Patty: “Afterwards we were like, oh that was new, let’s explore that, what’s going on there, and it was all good things, I was like yeah like that, and it was always going and get better every time, that’s now that we try it, it’s gonna get better. Of course, he’s like did I do it well, is it okay, and I was like yeah, I don’t know, but he always like, for every new thing he always checked in with me, and I check in with him, for a hand job or blow job I’ll be like what can I do different, what’s good for you?”

7) You can feel it in your gut

Participants described a bodily sensation, of something going on in their body or gut, when setting or exploring their sexual boundaries. Part of their experience was, that if they payed attention to this gut feeling, it provided them with a sense of right or wrong, a clear understanding of their sexual boundary, knowing when to stop if something did not feel right, and provided a reassurance that it was okay to set this boundary. Participants described the gut feeling as a way of knowing their sexual boundary. Importantly, participants expressed differences about their gut feeling. For some, their gut clenches, others feel a sense of intimidation when knowing their boundary is crossed, and another participant described the body sensation as feeling safe. Five participants validated the theme of feeling and experiencing a body sensation when needing to set a sexual boundary, and six participants endorsed this theme after final check.

Bart: “...and with setting your own personal boundaries it’s really like, just watching where that line is and recognizing and definitely communication is a big part life. If you feel in your gut something is right and it’s not too fast don’t be afraid to say something...”

Lisa: "...and somebody goes to do that and my stomach clenches, with being nervous or something, that's when I know I don't want to."

Marge: "I feel like I soon as I feel like, intimidated I guess, you know, if you feel smaller, then somebody else, I feel this is when initially your boundaries being crossed, you don't feel like on an equal page, if you feel smaller than them. I think that's when you know, that it is going too far, when you're not comfortable with it..."

Patty: "And that there's nothing wrong about waiting, and that you do things when you feel safe, like I felt safe in my body... Yeah that's big thing about myself, like immersing yourself in your mind and your body and your comfort level."

Edna: "[My body] just kinda feels uncomfortable, didn't really want to be around him, and it was just like weird."

Notable Category of Response

The following described category was identified frequently across the interview transcripts by youths through first hand or second hand experiences. As this concern was considered not to directly answer my research question and has not been endorsed by at least four participants; it does not meet the criteria for a fully developed theme. Therefore, I did not review this concern, or endorsed it by the participants. However, I felt this concern is significant in the overall understanding of sexual learning and adolescent setting sexual boundaries and possibly can be considered for future research inquiry.

During the interview process, three youths shared the impact of peer and societal pressures, when deciding to engage sexually and/or considering when to lose their virginity. It appeared important for them not to appear boring or be perceived as a nerd. They also described that they did not wish to be assigned to the role as caretaker or “*mother*” when with their friends. All, to some extent, viewed the achievement of a higher social status within their peer group by appearing experienced, was worth the sacrifice. They expressed that in order to seek out sexual experiences or to lose their virginity, alcohol was used as “liquid courage” to overcome hesitations, eliminate insecurities, or ignore needs to set sexual boundaries.

Lisa: “It is pretty much I just, like if I wanted to I just could have sex, but I probably have to be drunk or high or something..”

Lisa: “...I don’t know it was almost like I thought that everybody I know lost their virginity and I didn’t yet I was like maybe I just should do it.”

Edna: “At first, for the first, end of grade 9 until halfway through grade 10, I don’t think I was sober for any single time..”

Edna: “I know a lot of my friendships lost it because they just did not want to be a virgin anymore.”

Edna: “...like all my friends are partying, so it really weird if you weren’t partying. You just being the mom friend.”

Patty: “...and I was like [to my friend] you are very drunk, you don’t need to make those decisions [having sex at a party] right now, I was also like, I was like a mom to this group.”

Patty: “There’s a couple of friends in our group, who just got way too drunk, and then they would disappear, and then yeah...”

Patty: “...it’s a lot from the people around you I think. ...sex was like in high school that was when everybody lost her virginity, at the same time, everybody was sexually active because of the parties, and who did that person sleep with that night, I was very big then... because our whole friend group basically lost her virginity, and there like they felt like left out, like not a part of this world...”

Patty: “...”when you lose your virginity in high school it kind of makes you and upper-class men, like you more than anyone else, because you lost your virginity, so you had those experiences, you more knowledgeable.”

Chapter Summary

Chapter four presented the developed seven themes, based on findings of six narrative style interview transcripts. The analysis was based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis process. The next chapter outlines the importance of these findings in connection with the existing literature, as well as presenting a detailed discussion of possible implications for this study and further research. It explore strengths and limitations of this study and take the researchers context into account. Additionally, the chapter outlines applications useful to a

counselling practice, as well as, future education enhancements to aide youths' ability to set, and explore healthy sexual boundaries.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter includes my findings in relation to the current literature, outline unique and auxiliary findings, discuss strengths and limitations of my study, and offers recommendations for possible future research. This is followed by a reflection by the researcher context, outlining possible implications for the field of counselling psychology, and ends in a summary and conclusion section.

Findings in Relation to Previous Literature

This research study investigates the topic of Sexual Learning: Adolescent's experiences of setting sexual boundaries, and explores significant implications from these experiences. As outlined in the previous section, all seven developed themes described participants' experiences and the impacts of setting sexual boundaries. As stated in Chapter 2, quantitative studies provided limited insights into youths' unique experiences when setting sexual boundaries, focusing on determining researcher-driven risk and protective factors. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, focused on the diversity of sexual boundaries, frequency of sexual exposures or boundary violations, and lacking insights into experiences and the impacts on the youths. This study therefore filled a gap in the existing literature, and presents an important impetus toward further empirical research on youths' experiences and insights into setting sexual boundaries.

Findings Supported by Previous Literature

The prevalence of sexual boundary violation and unsolicited exposure to sexual content through social media, is consistent and reflected throughout the current literature. The findings of this study were specifically looking at the individual experience of maintaining sexual boundaries over an extended period of time, rather than the frequency of exposure to violations

of their boundaries. The theme "*They did not take no for an answer*" is not surprising, nor unique to the field. Based on the existing literature, I would have expected at least one of my participants to experience a sexual boundary violation, and about 50-60% experience a sexual harassment incident (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Hickman et al. 2004, Jouriles et al., 2009). Additionally, based on current research we would expect an increase in boundary violation through involuntary exposure to sexual content of social media (Koops et al., 2018; Koops, 2009). Four participants endorsed this theme. Findings indicated a representational sample of exposure to boundary violations concurrent with the literature.

Michels et al. (2005) described in their research the model of sexual decision-making. The step of *boundary communication* in their model, is strongly aligned with the theme, "*Sometimes it just happens*", which was endorsed by all of my participants. This step of, "*it just happens*", discusses the time frame of communication, outlining that youth often negotiate their boundaries in the moment, and that they are explored spontaneously. Also, the research does not address the specific experiences of youths when boundaries are set in the moment. Research clearly supports the theme that sexual interactions and boundary communications often *just happen* and is not always planned and communicated beforehand. Hence, the notion of navigating setting sexual boundaries spontaneously, is not unique within this field of research, but concurrent with current literature.

Further, the last step in the model of sexual decision-making by Michels et al. (2005) described a similar process as the theme "*Check ins help*", defined by them as *evaluation*. They describe the process as reviewing and contemplating the effects of previous set boundaries. Also, Michels et al. (2005) did not specifically explore the positive emotional impacts of this step, they mark it as a significant aspect, necessary to complete the concept of healthy sexual decision-

making. Hence, the theme “*Check ins help*” is endorsed and previously recognized by current literature.

Unique Findings of the Present Study

Even after saying yes, it might not feel good

Four participants validated, and six endorsed this theme after final check, which describes the experience that it doesn't always turn out to be emotionally or physically okay for one, or both of the participants when one person says yes and provides consent. Contrary to school curriculum and sexuality workshops that emphasize consent for healthy sexual decision-making, this theme presents a unique perspective and possible extension to the concept of consent. Based on these findings, it questions if current practices or teachings on consent possibly underestimates the need to explore the actual experience, surrounding impacts on providing consent, and the management of possible emotional distress afterwards if it did not feel good. Based on the findings, current literature under-explored the complexity and overwhelming nature of emotions and circumstances that make it difficult for some youth to set firm boundaries. These difficulties limit participants' ability to distinguish, between emotions of insecurity and fear of exploring new intimate or sexual territory, from the actual need of having to set a boundary.

The significance of this theme is, that youths are often aware of their boundaries but choose to ignore or not express them during sexual interaction. Some experienced the need to please, instead of feeling pleased themselves, others appear to be wanting to get it over with and are tired of holding their boundaries.

This theme further described the immense emotional impact of ignoring one's own boundaries, as well as the impact on the partner when discovering that boundaries were ignored, but consent provided. No current research (outside research on sexual assault) addresses the

complexity of providing consent, or addressing the possibility that providing consent by saying yes, can lead into an overwhelmingly emotional state, that could impact the sexual-self and sexual-scripts (Fortenberry, 2014) negatively. This could possibly also affect identity formation, especially if the experience cannot be properly integrated (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). More research is needed to explore this aspect of consenting to sexual interaction and not feeling good about it afterwards.

Sometimes it is okay to say no

No current literature exists that reflects findings of adolescent experiences of, “*it is ok*” to set sexual boundaries. Chapter 2 outlined literature that mainly focused on the importance of adolescent’s social and environmental contexts for decision-making processes to explore and engage in sexual activity, as well as, identity-formatting processes (Tsang et al., 2012, Ragelienė, 2016, Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). However, the impacts and experiences around affirming responses and their impacts to setting sexual boundaries are not specifically explored. This theme was endorsed by five of the participants, who describe their experiences as feeling a sense of respect when responded by, fair, with an OK, or a rather impartial accepting response after expressing their sexual boundary. The theme describes how the experience of respecting someone’s boundary could possibly be healing for some, and affirming for others. Youth described feeling respected and validated, despite not receiving an overly positive, but neutral response to their set boundary.

Thus, looking at recent research regarding identity formation, we can assume that even an OK can contribute to a healthy integration of a new step in identify formation (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007), as well as the empathetic differentiation from self (setting your sexual boundaries) to others (sexual boundaries) (Ragelienė, 2016). However, no adolescent’s sexuality

specific research explored the impacts of affirming or accepting responses to setting sexual boundaries, despite identity-formation research indicating the importance of positive sexual experiences in order to develop a healthy sexual-self (Fortenberry, 2014). Further research and insight could provide a strength-based approach to the field of adolescent's sexual education in relation to healthy setting of boundaries.

They got mad at me for saying no

Despite the growing body of research regarding adolescent's sexual behaviours, research exploring negative responses to setting sexual boundaries has generally been disregarded, especially if it is not considered a boundary violation or sexual assault. But despite the lack of research on youth specific experiences regarding negative responses to setting boundaries, research on identity-formation makes us aware of the importance of understanding the nature of an experience (cohesiveness), suggesting that negative experiences may lead to maladapted and negative sexual scripts (Fortenberry, 2014). This theme was endorsed by five of the participants after final check. It is noteworthy to note that all youths appeared to be clear about regarding their sexual boundaries, and displayed a sense of trust in themselves. They also seemed to have an understanding of the other person's insecurity for behaving poorly towards their set boundary. At least three out of the four participants showed an ability to distance emotionally themselves from this response, and not take it personally.

The present findings show, that despite holding and expressing your boundaries, part of the participants' experience is managing intense negative responses towards their set sexual boundary, making this experience a grey area between accepting someone's boundaries (it being OK), and violating someone's boundaries. Thus, this theme expresses the importance to strengthening youths' sense of sexual-self and identifying their sexual need, to support their

ability to differentiate self (setting your sexual boundaries) from others (sexual boundaries) (Ragelienė, 2016), and to feel good and strong about their own choices. The next theme could provide more unique insights into how this strengthening process could unfold.

You can feel it in your gut

I found no current literature which explored youth sexuality regarding the need to connect with their body, and explored gut feelings when setting sexual boundaries. After final check six participants endorsed the theme of feeling and experiencing a gut feeling that guides their setting sexual boundaries and sense of sexual-self. This possibly indicates a connection to the concept of identity-formation and their exploration of self through sexuality. None of the youths specifically explored identity in the interviews with me, however, I recognized it nuanced in their ability to connect with self through a somatic experience (their gut feeling), separating themselves and their experience from that of others. The ability to notice self through their gut feeling, can be viewed as a significant strength in youths' ability to develop a strong sense of sexual-self. To what extent this is connected or correlated to a strong sense of identity remains unclear. However, there is a need for a check-in tool that helps to develop a strong sense of when and where boundaries are violated and when boundaries need to be set. Participants endorsed the notion that the gut feeling needs to be consistently explored, and that only experiences over time can help checking in and learning to trust this gut feeling. This theme, that experiences need to be explored and practiced, is in line with Fortenberry's (2014) understanding of sexual learning and the need to experience and practice them, to form a comprehensive learning process, that leads to positive sexual scripts in the future.

However, more research exploring the connection between somatic experiences and setting sexual boundaries would be helpful in gaining more insight into youths' learning when

setting sexual boundaries. This finding could provide a significant contribution on how sexuality workshops with youth can be facilitated to support youths' sense of sexual-self and boosting a healthy setting sexual boundaries.

Notable Category of Response

Chapter 4 found a significant and consistent pattern that was expressed across of the interview transcripts. This pattern embodied an important finding regarding a broader aspect of adolescents' setting sexual boundaries. This auxiliary finding needs further empirical research to explore diverse aspects of the learning of adolescents' setting sexual boundaries. During the interview, three youths discussed the impact of peer pressure when engaging sexually and/or losing their virginity. Some youths mentioned that they did not want to appear "*boring*", did not want to be the "*mother*" of the group, but wished to gain higher social status, by appearing experienced, having lost their virginity. Youths described one way to seek and achieve this higher status, despite not feeling ready to engage sexually, was to get drunk. Youths described that this made things easier (feel less pressure), and, reportedly, cared less. Sex appeared more a means to get somewhere socially, and feeling obliged to rise to social expectations, than to explore their own sexual-self on their own timeline. The exploration of the concept of ignoring sexual boundaries once set, in exchange for achieving status and fulfill societal expectations, might provide an informative insight into the current sexual experiences of youths.

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

Strengths

Adhering to the chosen methodology by conducting narrative style interviews and applying a Thematic Analysis, the strength of this study in its' capacity to provide rich data on

the participants' experiences. The narrative style interview offered the gathering of individual in-depth data of their experiences, and the analysis provided a flexible approach to unravel complex themes within the participants' social context, while the researcher was an integral part of the research process.

This study ensured credibility of its methodology by applying the following characteristics, reflexivity (field journal), member checking, and establishing authority of researcher (Guba, 1981). I kept a field journal to ensure reflexivity in my process, and followed a more rigorous research process to ensure trustworthy findings (Krefting, 1991). I made sure, that I was aware of my biases and assumptions before and after the interviews, to ensure I was able to reflect openly and evaluate my preconceptions if any, towards my research. I checked in with all participants after developing the themes to reach mutual agreement. To ensure trustworthiness, I needed to make sure that the themes represented participants' voices and that I understood the youths' shared experiences. Lastly, I adhered to criteria of credibility, and confirmability by working closely with my supervisory committee, who conducted multiple qualitative studies and could be viewed as authorities in the field of the methodology I chose. I was closely monitored and mindfully explored each step of the research process, including the analysis process, giving significant strength to this study.

The use of Thematic Analysis offered the opportunity to be flexible in my epistemological approach, and supported my constructionist approach to the study; I saw myself (researcher) as an integral part of the research process. The process of narrative style interviews supports seeking truth by understanding how youths frame and construct their reality around sexual boundary experiences. This approach paired with TA provided the opportunity to give voice to youths' experiences, and for me as the researcher, "active choices" in the development

of the themes.

The methodology approach obligated absolute credibility and trustworthiness, while exploring and gathering in-depth data of youths' experiences related to setting sexual boundaries, and supported the researcher's social constructionist epistemology. The approach can be viewed as a significant strength of the study. The chosen methodology provided a good fit for the research question.

Open discussions on my part about sexuality and boundaries was a strong tool in allowing the youths to open up and speak freely. Sexual conversation are limited between youths and adults are often reactionary in its nature (Roberts, 2019). The significance, as described in the opening Chapter is, that we are now living in a hypersexualized world. Sexual morals and understanding have changed. Parents often had a very different experience and find it hard to adapt to what their children are experiencing. Sexting, sharing nude photos on a regular basis, and accessing pornography are some of the changes within the last few years. Their children have grown up with this fast changing hypersexualized world but this can be difficult for parents to handle.

I like to refer to Bronfenbrenner's "bioecological" theory, which introduced the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Tudge et al., 2018). This model points out that systemic interactions and their frequency (time), between a person and the environment are the key to human development (Tudge et al., 2018). Hence, youths' increased exposure to sexual content online and offline, accounts for a significantly altered impact on sexual understanding and development, and is, by default, substantially different from the parents' experiences.

This results in a huge generational gap, enabled by the enhancement of digital technology since the 1990's. Youth have been exposed to the internet, and experienced an

increase in digital accessibility of sexual content. This exposure can lead to a desensitizing, which can be difficult for parents to understand, but it is crucial to monitor, to help youths navigate through this exposure (Roberts, 2019). A disconnect between generations, can be filled by active engagement with each other. This active engagement can foster understanding, provide insights and enhance meaning for both parent and child. Roberts (2019) encourages parents to be proactive and openly engage in dialogue with their children and teens about sexual health and protection.

The strength of this study lies within the open approach to this topic with youth, for them to be heard and provide insights that, in return, can be utilized to provide a more adequate and supportive way to engage with youth formally (workshops, school curriculums), or informally (teachers, parents, counsellors).

Limitations

The methodology provided some limitations to my study. The recruitment process through the school counsellors, was only offered to leadership groups. This opened recruitment to a specific and limited set of participants, and not to the whole student population. The participants might have participated out of obligation to their school counsellor who lead the leadership class, or provided other motivation for volunteering that are not obvious to this researcher.

The small sample size of six participants would not allow for generalized research findings. Additionally, my small sample size shows a lack of diversity. Five participants identified as Caucasian and one participant identified as First Nation. Five participants identified themselves as heterosexual, and one participant identified as bi-sexual. Additionally, all participants attended grade 11 or 12 and are therefore at the end of their High School career.

The sample was quite homogeneous in its make-up, and cannot make generalizing statements about the findings impossible. Although, qualitative research of such a small sample cannot be generalized to the youth population at large, it did provide important insights and implications that can be considered for youth in similar location and under similar circumstances.

Another limitation is this researcher lacks experiences in the field of qualitative study design. I conducted semi-structured interviews before, and had been a senior research assistant for two years in a quantitative research study, but I am new to thematic analysis, and have never conducted or designed a qualitative research study on my own. I prepared myself by taking methodology research courses at the Ryerson University and University of Victoria (UVIC), and participated as research assistant in a qualitative study at UVIC. However, my lack of practical experiences provides limitations within this study. Reviewing this research study, I am now more aware of possible challenges, and would likely re-frame many of my follow up questions to stay closer within my research topic. Some follow up questions, I noticed, were leading away from my research question.

Lastly, I was not able to meet the youths, as planned, at their schools for the follow up and final check. Due to the community-based measures to mitigate the spread and exposure to COVID-19, public health measures included social distancing and school closures. Also, I was able to conduct the final check with all participants; five by telephone and one through E-mail exchange, I view the lack of face to face interaction, the change of setting for the feedback session as a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

As already outlined in the previous chapter, this study addresses a gap in the current literature. More focus on experiences and impacts of experiences regarding setting healthy

sexual boundaries are needed to assess and address possible challenges in this field and support the integration of these experiences to foster healthy identity-formation and learning experiences. This raises the question to what extent identity-formation is connected to youths' ability to set clear and healthy sexual boundaries? It is interesting that this aspect did not come up more clearly in the conducted interviews (despite in the exploration of youth's gut feeling) but could be an important aspect to guide future investigations. Further research regarding the connection of identity-formation and setting sexual boundaries could provide important insights from a psycho social developmental standpoint, and appears to matter greatly in better understanding and supporting youth in setting healthy sexual boundaries.

Because this research presented a small sample size, a larger scale research approach could provide the opportunity for possible generalizations of the results. This said, it would be beneficial to incorporate a larger and more diverse sample into this study, as this sample size was very homogenous (High school students from public High Schools, mainly heterosexual with similar ethnic backgrounds and close in age 16-18). As themes are developed through thematic analysis the larger scale study could develop generic questions based on this study's unique themes and target a larger population in a mixed method approach, to present an overall well-rounded research design and findings that could provide more generalized results.

This research purposely did not focus on gender roles nor did it apply a feminist lens to the study. A study designed with this lens might provide some additional insights on how gender roles impact setting sexual boundaries in adolescents here in North America. As most research focused on the difference in why females or males set sexual boundaries the research may provide further insight if we explore a person's sense of identity and understand more clearly, their assigned gender role in relation to setting sexual boundaries.

Extending the research and opening it up to the LGBTQ2SIA+ community to study how gender and identity exploration might affect their ability and experience with setting sexual boundaries, would offer important insight into the experiences of our LGBTQ2SIA+ youths. In return, such a study could further support the underserved LGBTQ2SIA+ community regarding healthy sexual development and understanding.

Lastly, I challenge the assumption that sexual interactions among youths is only to connect intimately, to learn, or to exchange sexual pleasures. This notion goes beyond the concept of consensual versus non-consensual sexual interactions and possible violations of boundaries. Through this interview process the auxiliary findings, that were not developed into a theme, suggests that sex appeared in some cases to be a form of commodity, or a way to reach a status within a peer group, rather than a way to connect and explore one's sexual-self. To continue the support for youth through their years of sexual exploration, we might have to step out of our comfort level and societal norms and expectations, and open the field towards a complex exploration of youths' experiences with setting sexual boundaries beyond the cultural norm.

More specifically, research that could build on my findings could explore the connection between somatic experiences and setting sexual boundaries. Furthermore, future research could explore the impacts of negative responses to setting sexual boundaries and the sexual-self, when sexual partners become mad when sexual boundaries are set.

Researcher Context

In Chapter 1, I outlined my own biases and assumptions regarding sexuality that were impacted by my upbringing, and exposure to youth in my years as a Child and Youth Worker, Youth and Family Counsellor, as well as Sexuality Workshop facilitator.

I had hoped that I would not find a significant gender divide in the experience of setting sexual boundaries. However, there was a significant gender divide. The exposure at a young age to sexual content through social media, as well as the need to hold boundaries over an extended period of time, was overwhelming, and affected exclusively females during direct personal interactions. Furthermore, the two as males in my study, struggled when they had to set a sexual boundary. One of the males mentioned that he had never set any boundaries.

The youths provided me with insights into sexual learning is segregated between males and females at schools. I found this surprising, especially when overall awareness around gender fluidity, and the implementation of SOGI. That said, while completing the study, I found myself reflecting on the experience of my stepson in school. Surprisingly I could not find a significant difference in how sexuality was taught in the school system now and then.

I was also surprised to learn there was a lack of sexual education in the students' home. There is a strong reliance on the school system for supports and education on sexual health. As seen in the literature review, sex-talk within the households in Germany contributes significantly to sex education for youth. Still, I realized that the parent and counsellor in me was very excited to notice how youth learn, explore and listen to their gut feelings when setting sexual boundaries, and how they emphasized the importance of check ins. These were results, which I had not fully expected, based on the feedback I received from school counsellors and other community members. Though, these results are in line with the positive youth development approach (Damon, 2004). Youth seem to have a natural ability to find somatic connection to self and show care for others, which just needed to be validated and encouraged.

Further, one of the meaningful aspects of this inquiry that stood out after concluding the research process, is the resiliency youth show after all their adverse experiences. Their ability to

re-frame experiences, and to provide themselves with the possibility to integrate an experience with positivity. Also, their astonishing and seemingly innate ability to connect somatically with themselves to guide themselves through a challenging sexual exploration with limited access to support impressed me. Some of my other expectations and beliefs were rather accurate, such as the uniqueness on how sexuality is perceived and explored by each participant; and the impacts of the ecological system on the self (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), including community, school, and peer impacts on sexual learning. Lastly, I realized that my interviews did not explore the importance of identity-formation, sex scripts or their sense of sexual-self, or how youth actually integrated their experiences. I realized during my exploration in Chapter 5, when relating my results to the current literature, that these insights allowed me to draw an important connection between their experiences and sexual learning aspects, especially regarding their identity and sense of sexual-self. This knowledge further informed the following section on implications for practice. Overall, these findings will influence my future practice and strength-based approach to counselling, and my practice as sexuality workshop facilitator.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

This research study is toward the completion of my Master's degree in counselling psychology. Despite the fact that this study mainly focuses on adolescents' specific experiences of setting sexual boundaries, in order to develop comfortable sexual experiences, rather than focusing on clinical or pathological challenges, the findings are significant and informative for counsellors who work with youths. The findings may help youths in their journey into adulthood. These findings can provide significant insights when working as sex-educators and/ or facilitating sexuality workshops in schools. The developed themes indicated some crucial challenges for our youths.

Four of the themes outlined significant challenges regarding the acceptance of sexual boundaries by others. Helping youths navigate those challenges and helping them integrate these experiences is crucial for healthy sexual development and the positive development of their sexual self (Fortenberry, 2014). Overall, the most important implication for the field of counselling psychology lies in the significance but infrequency of asking youth about setting sexual boundaries. It appears that opening up this topic, as counsellor, researcher, parent and school counsellor could offer great benefits for youths. As Fortenberry (2014) stresses, sexuality is a learning process that requires practice. But as we can't take youths by the hand, while witnessing their failures and first struggles, youths could benefit from opening the dialogue so it is not an isolating experience.

Managing different responses

One of the challenges presented are the different responses from youths when faced with exploring their sexual boundaries. Most of the youths described experiencing noncommittal, as well as negative responses to their set boundaries. They have to manage confusing, incoherent responses (aka setting their sexual boundary) throughout their adolescent years. They have to deal with feelings of upset from others when saying no, based on the theme "*they got mad when I said no*", having to assert their boundaries when others, "*... did not take no for an answer*", and having to balance those responses that show that, "*sometimes it is okay to say no*".

As a counsellor we want help and support youth in making meaning out of these different experiences, helping them integrate them, to create a healthy sense of self and sexual-self (Fortenberry, 2014). One of the goals would be to help navigate youths to distinguish their own needs (to set a sexual boundary) and to the needs of others (to continue the sexual interaction). The importance is to help youths increase their ability to separate their emotion from their sexual

partner's (who gets mad) and not feel responsible for their upset. Once this emotional separation is understood and felt, it provides the youths with the ability to act autonomously.

Preparing youths to manage different responses from partners is very important. They need to understand that most likely, they will need to assert their boundaries more than once. The themes indicate that boundaries often needed to be held for an extended period of time. It would be beneficial to prepare youths with further coping skills, such as safely asserting their boundary, seeking support, or walking away.

Managing confusing feelings within themselves

Another confusing aspect youths are exposed to is understanding and possible implications of consent, or what consent is not. The theme, "*even after saying yes it might not feel good*", explores that consent is not a guarantee for a positive sexual experience, either physically or emotionally. As a counsellor and sex-educator this subject is important to explore; what does saying yes mean, what doesn't it mean, and what are we saying yes to, or what might it not mean if someone else says yes. Youth shared feeling weird, regretful and ending up not feeling good after a sexual experience despite saying yes. Helping youths explore their assumptions on consent, expectations of self or others (concepts around pleasing versus pleasure), might be helpful for youths to make sense of their experiences.

Solutions

Two of the developed themes indicated possible solutions for youths to apply when trying to expand the practice of providing consent. The theme, "*Check ins help*", and, "*You can feel it in your gut*", are both communication tools (one with their partner and the other with self), to explore sexual boundaries in the moment. As a counsellor and sex-educator using a strength-

based approach, we can utilize these findings to integrate into practice in encouraging youth to explore and practice these communication tools. Check ins could be practiced by reading and understanding others body language, and somatic approaches could be used in our practice to help youth connecting body and mind to make informed decisions. It would be helpful to identify how to sense and acknowledge one's boundaries through body sensations, and then learn how to make meaning of those sensations, and how to effectively and safely prioritize and communicate them. This gut reaction needs to be integrated, practiced and learned over time.

Overall, this study helped us to understand that helping and promoting the ability to reassess boundaries in the moment, taking time to check in with others and using your body to sense where your boundaries are, is instrumental in supporting youths to gain a healthy sexual learning experience. Further, in order to understand and sense your own sexual boundaries, or how to safely set a boundary with yourself and others, there needs to be some exploration and counselling support on how to deal with uncomfortable feelings, vulnerabilities, anxieties and frustrations, as well as being OK with upsetting others who struggle to accept your set boundaries.

Summary and Conclusion

Limited empirical research has been conducted on adolescent sexual boundaries setting. I found no research focused specifically on adolescents' experiences when setting sexual boundaries. This highlights the uniqueness of this study, provides new perspectives on adolescents' sexual experiences, and brings some insights into this field of research from the youth's perspective. The current study supports previous research results, regarding the frequency and intensity of sexual boundary violations, as well as unsolicited exposure to sexual content through social media. Further, some findings are concurrent with current research that

sexual boundaries are often set in the moment, and that sexual boundaries are often evaluated (through check ins) during or after the sexual interactions.

Overall, this study developed seven themes which were endorsed by at least 4 of the 6 participants. Further, this research developed a noteworthy area of response, which did not reach the threshold of at least four participants endorsing the area of response to a theme. Importantly, the research findings suggest that setting sexual boundaries is an experience that needs to be explored, learned, practiced, and foremost, talked about in order to positively integrate, learn, and grow from these experiences and develop healthy concepts of self- and sexual-self. This suggests, along, with a more therapeutic support, more psycho-education in schools is needed to guide youth in finding healthy ways to explore, set and respect theirs and other's sexual boundaries. And finally, to open the dialogue and be part of our youths' need to share and express their sexual experiences, and to help them navigate the challenges that come with a hypersexualized digital world.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster



Invitation to Participate in MA thesis project

Dear Students of (*Secondary School Name*),

I, Bianca Humbert am very excited to announce my research study that hopes to explore **how sexual learning takes place and explore adolescent experiences with setting sexual boundaries**. Sexual experiences include anything such as kissing and/or touching someone or being kissed and touched by someone in a way that felt sexual to you.

This is the first of its kind and will be ground breaking for future development of sexual health workshops and support for you.

The goals of the study are to:

- Providing adolescent's voices to be heard and shared that lead to improvements in teachings and workshops for sexual health education
- Contribution to a better understanding of youth's perspectives, concerns and needs regarding sexual health.
- Better understanding specific adolescent experiences regarding setting sexual boundaries.

This study isn't possible without your participation; therefore, I hope you will consider participating if you fall within the following criteria:

- Accessing school counsellor services for any reason.

- Ages 16-18.
- You like to share your experiences with setting sexual boundaries.

Study Requirements Include:

- To complete an anonymous & confidential 1-2 hours interview
- Additionally, there will a 1-2hrs feedback session to review your answers and transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Interested individuals can contact their school counsellor (*name of school counsellor*) to be put on a contact list for Bianca to contact you via text messaging. Please be advised that students who are receiving counselling services from Bianca Humbert are not eligible to participate in the study, and that students will be screened and that only those who are eligible will be contacted.

I like to inform you that participation in this study may lead to a **risk of incidental findings**, such as sexual misconduct or sexual victimization. Before the interview process begins, consent and confidentiality form including the duty to report and potential risk factors, as well as potential actions when a need to report to authorities is present will be discussed.

Or, if interested in participating you may also contact Bianca Humbert under xxx@uvic.ca or text 416-xxx-xxxx directly.

This study has received approval from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board along with approval from SD79 Associate Superintendent Sheryl Koers.

If you have any further concerns or questions please contact either my supervisor by email at xxx@uvic.ca or the university's ethics board at ethics@uvic.ca.

Thank you so much,

Bianca Humbert

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Narrative Style Interview Script

Preamble

During this interview, I'm going to be asking you about a time when you set a sexual boundary. Please feel free to start telling me your story at whatever point in your life you feel this experience begins. During the interview, I will be asking you clarification and prompting questions to make sure that I am understanding you correctly, and to ensure you have had the opportunity to tell me everything you want me to know about this experience. Before we end our interview today I will check in with you to make sure you have told me everything you want to share and if your story feels complete to you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions

- 1) Tell me about a time when you set a sexual boundary.

Closing the Interview

- 1) Do you feel that you have told me your story of setting a sexual boundary?
- 2) Do you feel that I know and have understood your story correctly?

Potential prompts and clarifiers

- Do you mind telling me a bit more about...
- How was it for you when...
- Is this what you meant by ...
- Do you mind repeating...

Possible Questions:

- Adolescents' experiences when setting sexual boundaries?
- How are setting sexual boundaries perceived and responded to?
- How do youth learn about setting sexual boundaries?
- How do youth distinguish between crossing boundaries and violations?
- How do youth communicate personal sexual boundaries?
- How does social media contribute to this topic?

Appendix C: Consent Form

Sexual Learning: How Adolescents Experiencing Setting sexual boundaries?

A Masters study through the Faculty of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

Thank you for indicating an interest in participating in an exploration of **Sexual Learning: How do Adolescents Experience Setting sexual boundaries?** This study is being conducted by Bianca Humbert, Master candidate in the Counselling Psychology Program at the University of Victoria.

Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

PO Box 3010 STN CSC Victoria British Columbia

V8W 3N4 Canada

Tel 250-721-7799, Fax 250-721-6190

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Principal Applicant:

Bianca Humbert MA Student (Counselling Psychology)

Email: xxx@uvic.ca Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Thesis Supervisor:

Dr. Timothy Black, PhD, RPsych. Email: xxx@uvic.ca Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Purpose and Objectives of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore student's experiences, concerns and hopes regarding sexual interactions and healthy setting sexual boundaries, and explores the distinction between boundary crossing and boundary violation. Sexual experiences include anything such as kissing

and/or touching someone or being kissed and touched by someone in a way that felt sexual to you.

This includes individuals who:

Inclusion:

- Age: 16-18
- Position: Adolescents attending SD79 and accessing school counsellor services for any reason, and also experienced setting sexual boundaries.
- Gender, Sexual orientation, Sexual interest: All

Exclusion:

- Youth: not accessing school counsellor services
- Youth: in crisis (for example currently suicidal, major depressive episode, recent sexual assault)

This Research is Important Because

We are living in a sexualized world.

Especially recent developments within the #metoo movement and multiple news reports on sexualized violence within our adult and youth population frames sexuality as an ongoing problem within our society, and leaves us with a negative connotation of such.

Organizations, schools and community groups struggle to be proactive, inviting experts to brainstorm and conduct interventions such as lectures and workshops. Within this fear based and sexualized framework, student voices are often unheard. But the questions arises on how does sexual learning take place best? To what extend does youth learn their sexual boundaries through boundary crossings?

Youth voices are important to be made part of the current health curriculum to provide direct

feedback on how sexual education could be taught, and how it is understood. Current youth's concerns can directly help implement adequate supports for them to navigate sexual health concerns, while dealing with them.

Inclusion for Participation

You are being invited to participate in this study because:

- You responded to the information concerning this study and freely volunteered to share your story for this study.
- You are between 16 and 18
- You have had some experiences with setting sexual boundaries.
- You are accessing school counselling services for any reason

What is Involved in Participation

- Your participation will consist of one digital audio recorded interview of approximately 60-120 minutes in duration. You will be asked to respond to two basic questions: “*Tell me about a time when you set a sexual boundary?*” and “*How was this responded to?*”
- The location of the interview and feedback session will be in a classroom at your school during your spares or directly after school.
- You will also be contacted by text a few weeks after your interview to schedule a feedback session to ensure that the data analysis accurately represents your experience.

The time commitment for this feedback session will take between 60-120min.

Please initial the appropriate box below to indicate permission for follow-up contact to review the findings:

Yes - I consent to receive follow up emails or text messages to review the findings associated with my data.

No - I do not consent to receive follow up emails or text messages to review the findings associated with my data.

Inconvenience

Involvement in this research will not involve any substantial inconvenience for you other than the time to participate in the interview, and the time to validate findings during a feedback session. The interview will take approximately 60-120 minutes and the review of findings is expected to take, as well 60-120 minutes.

Benefits

- This study will provide participants with the opportunity to share their experiences, concerns and need for support regarding setting sexual boundaries. This opportunity provided adolescent to make their voices heard and may lead to improvements in teachings and workshops for sexual health education, while sharing concerns and needs regarding sexual health at the current state of the world. This encounter may prove to be an affirming and validating experience.
- Student's voices heard can contribute a better understanding of youth's experiences, unique perspective, concerns and needs. This could provide and generate new and comprehensive information to better understand the causes and key characteristics of issues that pertain to concerns regarding setting sexual boundaries in our society.
- Your participation in this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on adolescent experiences regarding setting sexual boundaries. No available published research has

addressed the specific issue of adolescent experiences when setting sexual boundaries.

This study will generate new knowledge and hopes to fill a gap in the literature.

Risks

- Possibly, there is a chance that participation in this study may lead to emotional or psychological discomfort. If your experience setting sexual boundaries took place in the context of difficult circumstances, sharing your experience may result in bringing up difficult memories or emotions, and possibly including a sense of embarrassment or feeling demeaned. In the interview, I will ask you to respond to the two questions specified above. It is important to consider what your emotional responses might be to determine your level of comfort while discussing these experiences.
- Further, there is a possibility that participation in this study may lead to the experience of social risks, such as been seen by other students or known to participate in the study. Interviews will take place in a classroom that provides some privacy within the school (not in a high traffic area of the school). Also, School Counsellors and students will not be made aware of the final decision of who will be participating in the study.
- Lastly, there is a possibility that participation in this study may lead to the experience of risk of incidental findings, such as if you mention that you experienced or may have experienced sexual misconduct or sexual victimization, or you or another minor (person under 19 years of age) may currently be at risk of harm or neglect, please know that I am legally required to report this information to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Duty to report: Your provided information is confidential (will not be shared with others) unless I have the reason to believe that you have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused, or have experienced neglect. Further, if I have reason to

believe that you might seriously harm yourself or someone else, I have the duty to report to the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

- Before the interview process begins, consent and confidentiality form including the duty to report and potential risk factors, as well as potential actions when a need to report to authorities is present will be discussed. The participant will have the opportunity to ask questions before beginning the interview process regarding risk factors and the duty to report.
- Should you experience distress at any time during the interviews, you can take a break, end the interview and resume the interview another time, or withdraw from the study at any point. Any of these choices may be done without any risk of consequence or need for explanation.
- I also might suggest to you to seek out your school counsellor following the session(s)/interview if you experience distress.
- I will provide you with a list of available resources in your community that offer support services in the event that speaking with a professional would be of benefit for you. This is part of the plan to support you in case you experience distress as a result of the interview or would like to speak to someone at any point, including the school counsellor.

Voluntary Participation

- Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without consequence or explanation. If you feel coerced, manipulated, or influenced to participate in this study I ask that you not volunteer to participate, or withdraw from the study.

- You have the right to refuse to discuss any aspect of your experience. If you decide to withdraw from the study during the interview, the audio recording of the interview will be erased and all notes will be shredded, unless you give consent to use the material already obtained, and as long as you notify me of your decision prior to the completion of the final draft.
- Students will be screened and that only those who are eligible will be contacted.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants

In most cases, the researcher (Bianca Humbert) will not have any known relationship with individuals participating in this study. Your participation is fully independent of, and will have no consequence or bearing on any pre-existing relationship. I like to help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate in any way. Therefore, students who are receiving counselling services from Bianca Humbert are not eligible to participate in the study.

Withdrawal of Participation

- All aspects of your participation in this study are strictly voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without any obligation, explanation or consequence. You may also choose not to answer certain questions in the interview
- In the event that you choose to withdraw from the study, you will be asked if you want the data you have contributed to be included the final analysis. If you agree, your data will remain in the study. If not, the audio recording of your interview will be erased and all data associated will be destroyed.
- Withdrawal from the study can occur at any time prior to the final write-up of the study.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

- The principal researcher will be conducting the interviews and therefore your identity and your individual responses will be known to her; a pseudonym of your choice will be used throughout the interview and on all other records
- Because of the initial distribution of the recruitment poster through the school counsellors, your intent, and interest in potentially participating will be known by others; however, any further contact after showing interest will be facilitated through me. Therefore, knowledge of your participation in this study should be protected.
- All records (e.g., audio-tapes, transcripts) will be labelled with participants' pseudonyms and kept in secure locations, either in locked filing cabinets for hard-copies or password-protected personal computers for digital records, to which only the principal researcher and research supervisor will have access to. Any personally identifying information will also be removed from the transcripts and formal documents.
- When describing events and/or other people in the interview please refrain from using names; additionally, the researcher will make sure that names are not included in the transcriptions; and may alter details of people and events if there is a chance that others reading the research could recognize the participants and possibly the events and people being described.
- All information collected will be securely stored when not in use.
- Word file transcripts without identifiers will be kept for 5 years and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Exceptions to Confidentiality

- The researcher may share segments of your interview recording or transcription with Dr. Tim Black for the purposes of supervision and guidance with the data analysis process. Both the researcher and his supervisor will adhere to ethical standards for confidentiality established by their governing professional bodies, the counselling psychology program, and University of Victoria.
- Confidentiality is limited in situations when there is sufficient reason to believe that a child or vulnerable adult is being abused or neglected. Should anyone reveal information to suggest this is the case, it is a legal obligation to file a report. In any such instance, I will follow the legislated *duty to report* guidelines for the province in which the respective participant is located.

Dissemination of Findings

- The findings and final report will be presented in the researcher's thesis document and oral defense.
- The findings and final report will be presented in publications and academic conferences.
- The findings may be presented in a published book chapter.
- The findings may be presented to the participating schools.
- The final report will be made available to participants, upon request.
- The thesis will be posted on the UVic Library website "UVicSpace."

Questions or Concerns

- Contact the researcher or his supervisor, as listed above.
- Contact the UVIC Human Research Ethics Office - 250 472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Withdraw from Participation

In the event that you choose to withdraw from the research, please indicate whether you consent to have your data remain in the study. (Indicate with your initials in the appropriate box below.)

If you decide to withdraw, please contact Bianca Humbert immediately. It may not be possible to remove your data if the analysis has progressed to a later phase and if the final draft of the thesis is almost completed. Interview sessions are planned for May/June 2019, while the analysis will begin in July 2019.

Yes - I consent to keep my data in the study in the event that I withdraw from the research.

No - I do not consent to keep my data in the study in the event that I withdraw from the research.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you freely agree to participate in this research project. In order to follow the school districts research policy that stipulates that parents/guardians must provide consent for their child in their care to join a research study, I require your parents/guardians signature for you to participate.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Parent/ Guardian *Signature* *Date*

Consent for Feedback session:

Name of Participant ----- -----

Signature *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Thank you so much!

Appendix D: Counselling Resources

COUNSELLING RESOURCES:

School Counsellor (name and contact information for specific school counsellor)

CYMH Child and Youth Mental Health Intake 1-250-715-2725

Crisis line at 1-888-494-3888

<http://www.vicrisis.ca/crisis-lines/>

Sexual Assault Advocacy Centre 1-250-710-8177

<http://www.warmlandwomen.org/services>

CVYS Cowichan Valley Youth Services 1-250-748-0232

Cowichan Tribes Youth Services 1- 250-746-0607