

Research Article

The Learning of Interpersonal Sexuality Among Young French Adults Under the Prism of Consent

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Recent reports suggest that the French public school system is struggling to provide sufficient content to students both in terms of quantity and quality. Since the French formal education system does not seem to provide adequate sexual and emotional life education, the present study's objective is to identify and examine the processes underlying their learning of sexuality and intimate relations by focusing on three main topics: the sources of education, the first sexual experience, and the consent communication occurring during these moments. A qualitative method inspired by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to conduct and analyze 14 interviews with young adults (23-28 years old). The current study's main findings indicate that participants educated themselves mostly through interactions with peers and media consumption. As for their first sexual intercourses, the study showed two distinct patterns according to the participants' relationship status: those engaged in committed relationships generally followed a step-by-step process over several months, while the single ones' first sexual experience occurred over one specific intercourse, often with a partner met the same day. At the time of the first sexual experiences, consent communication was operated through non-verbal and implicit cues essentially at that time; however, following the Me Too social activism movement, most participants reported that now they feel the need to receive and communicate consent in a more explicit way. The participants' discourse suggests that formal sex education in France needs to be improved to fit the younger generation's needs.

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1. Introduction

Sexuality education was introduced into French secondary education 50 years ago. However, recently, the General Inspection of National Education in France (Romulus & Liouville, 2021) noted that the lack of appropriate tools and means still does not allow this teaching to accomplish its relevant mission, in the current context where adolescents have free access to pornographic images and often contradictory information about sexuality (Haney, 2006; Weber et al., 2012; Rothman et al., 2015; Vera Cruz, 2018; Vera Cruz & Sheridan, 2021). The importance of proper sex education among adolescents is not only related to the fact that this is the age when individuals experience their first sexual intercourses (Bajos & al. 2018), it is also the period of life when individuals are most likely to experience sexual violence, mainly committed by members of their close entourage (Baux et al., 2017; Hamel et al, 2016; Bernardi et al., 2019).

1.1. *Discovery of Sexuality and Intimate Relations*

General and specific knowledge about sexuality plays an important role in the development of people's first sexual experiences and what happens during these first experiences (positive or negative interplays). This learning process has a significant impact on the quality of the individuals' future sexual life (Golden et al., 2016; Vera Cruz 2015a, 2015b).

Meanwhile, studies conducted in several Western countries over the past 10 years suggest that adolescents are in demand of education on issues related to sexuality. For instance, in France, 79% of the 11,000 participants in recent surveys (Barre et al., 2022) indicated that the education in sexuality and affective life received during their schooling did not allow them to approach affective and sexual relationships with confidence; 73% said that the notions of consent and respect for "boundaries" set by one's partners were insufficiently addressed, if at all. As for questions relating to sexual orientation and gender identity, the French secondary school educational programs on sexuality and affective life rarely address them (Dawson, 2019; Richard, 2019; Barre et al., 2022). Studies conducted in the UK and Ireland on cohorts of more than 2000 adolescents or young adults indicate that the vast majority of them believe that they lacked relevant information at the start of their sexual life (Tanton et al., 2015; Dawson et al., 2019). In the USA, data analyzed by Rothman (2021) indicate that up to 45% of young people consider that they have not had access to relevant information about sexuality, whether at school or with their family.

Thus, it seems that the acquisition of knowledge about sexuality in its practicalities is essentially left to the (responsibility of the) students' families. In this regard, researchers explain that parents faced with

their children's sexual behavior (even in the case of behaviors suitable to their stage of development) tend to prohibit them without explaining why; in some cases, they just label them as dirty (Gagnon, 1965; Rothman et al., 2015; Vera Cruz, 2015a). Instead of inhibiting sexual curiosity in children, these educational methods seem to encourage them to seek information and experiment in secret; and therefore, via less reliable sources such as peers of the same age or pornographic media. Indeed, regarding sexual education, adolescents and young adults report that their peers are one of the main sources of information (Gagnon, 1965; Tanton et al., 2015; Rothman, 2021; Vera Cruz, 2021). On the other hand, nowadays, parents seem more inclined to broach the subject of sexuality with their children, especially mothers. For instance, a recent study (Rothman, 2021) revealed that approximately 30% of the adolescents and young adults surveyed considered their parents as the main source of information on sexuality, which is slightly high when compared to 25% in the 1960s (Gagnon, 1965). According to experts on this matter, this number remains insufficient to meet the youth's sex education needs. In addition, just like at school, the topics covered during the parents-children sex education discussions are generally limited to the biological dimensions of sexuality (e.g., contraception methods, sexually transmitted infections).

Pornography is also one of the main sources of "sex education" among adolescents and young adults. Indeed, in the past 20 years, access to explicit sexual content at an increasingly early age has been greatly facilitated by the development of the Internet and pornographic websites (IFOP, 2017; Vera Cruz, 2018, 2019). Globally, adolescents are exposed to pornography from the average age of 13 for boys and 16 for girls (Dawson et al., 2019). For instance, a significant proportion of older individuals, especially men, seem to refer to pornography to obtain information about sexuality, especially when it comes to practices and pleasure (Tanton et al. 2015; Dawson 2019; Rothman 2021; Vera Cruz, 2018; Vera Cruz & Sheridan, 2021). Particularly, pornography has been found to generate the young users' predominant sexual scripts, thus influencing to some extent their sexual attitudes and behaviors (Vera Cruz, 2018; Vera Cruz & Sheridan, 2021).

1.2. Sexual consent

Other than the general knowledge about sexuality, another important aspect of affective-sexual interaction is the consent negotiation.

Even though sexual consent is the core concept underlying the notion of sexual violence, we were unable to find a clear definition in the French penal code or from the World Health Organization. However, we

can extract from their definitions of sexual aggressions that a consented sexual intercourse has to be obtained without the use of coercion, threat, or surprise. Most of its definitions were produced by feminist activists, especially in the last few years following the Me-too movement. However, social psychology researchers have produced a few of them, such as Muehlenhard et al. (2016). According to them, sexual consent can be understood in 3 different ways: as an “internal state of willingness,” as an “act of explicitly agreeing on something,” or as a “behavior that someone else interprets as willingness.” In this perspective, consenting to a sexual act encompasses both the person who enacts the behavioral cues and the one to whom they are addressed.

The scientific literature on consent communication suggests that individuals, in their vast majority, use mostly nonverbal and indirect cues to communicate with their sexual partners, when these cues are in fact considered to be the least indicative of one’s sexual consent (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, pornographic material, which is widely used by male individuals even in their early teen years, seems to vehiculate content that is contradictory to the adequate discourse about consent (Vera Cruz, 2021). This means that the use of pornography as the main source of “sex education” might be problematic in this regard. For instance, an in-depth study of 50 pornographic films randomly extracted from the 150 top-selling films in 2015 (Willis et al., 2020) indicates that the communication around consent represented in it does not promote the learning of an assertive mode of sexual consent. The same seems to be true for the representations of sexuality in blockbuster movies (Jozkowski et al., 2019).

1.3. Rationale for the present study

While there is important developmental and clinical literature describing the normative individual psychosexual development process and stages, to our knowledge, very few studies using a qualitative approach have described adolescents’ and young adults’ interactions associated with the beginning of their interpersonal sexual life. Especially, there are few studies conducted that take into account the sexual knowledge they had at the time of their first sexual intercourse and the perspective of the “sexual consent” practices. In 2011, Le Gall and Le Van produced a qualitative study on the “first time” (first sexual intercourse). Their results describe it as an interpersonal process in which individuals tend to proceed step by step. This moment in young adults’ lives is associated with high emotional value, in which the interpersonal experience seems to be more valued than the sexual pleasure taken from it.

However, in this study, there is no mention of the consent negotiation process between partners in the context of this first sexual experience.

1.4. The present study objective

The present study aims at identifying and examining French adolescents' sexual knowledge and consent negotiation practices (with their sexual partners) at the moment of their first interpersonal sexual experience and evaluating the subjective impact that this knowledge and consent practices might have had on their subsequent sexual and affective life. This study is an exploratory work conducted from the perspective of a broader research aiming to respond more appropriately to French youth's needs in terms of sexual education, especially in the matter of sexual consent.

1.5. Research questions

As for sexual knowledge and skills, it seems that they are not innate within the human species (Gagnon, 1965). This observation raises the following questions: how, under these conditions, do French adolescents acquire knowledge about sexuality? How do they experience their initiation into interpersonal sexuality, particularly in terms of negotiating consent?

1.6. Presuppositions

We chose to work with an inductive research method (Restivo, Julian-Reynier & Apostolidis, 2018); therefore, no hypothesis was formulated prior to this research. However, as required by the reflective approach, at the beginning of the study and before data collection, we identified a few presuppositions:

- a. The participants were poorly informed about sexuality at the time of their first intercourse.
- b. Among the study participants, there would be individuals who experienced non-consensual sex within their relationships.
- c. Most participants would not have received school-based sex education outside the scope of prevention/harm reduction.
- d. People would have acquired sexual knowledge mainly through pornography, peers, and social networks.
- e. Parents would not be seen as relevant resources for sex education.

2. Method

Our research protocol was inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). According to Antoine and Smith (2016), the IPA method requires us to adopt a naïve stance with regard to the subjective experience of the individuals concerned by the research question. As a result, at first, we approached the current study subject by distancing ourselves from the various knowledge and opinions that we may have acquired. In accordance with this necessity, as recommended by the IPA methodology, the interviews were conducted prior to the in-depth review of the associated literature in order to avoid the knowledge of the researcher influencing the participants' questioning during the interviews as much as possible.

2.1. Participants

A total of 14 individuals (23–28 years old, 7 women, 6 men, 1 non-binary person) were interviewed. The average age of first sexual intercourse in France is 17 years (Bajos & al. 2018), so we interviewed individuals aged 23 to 28 ($M = 25.4$ years). The rationale was that individuals in this age group were more likely to have experienced their first intercourse before the #MeToo movement, and therefore to be able to take a reflective look at their first sexual intercourse in relation to the question of consent, while being of a generation fairly close in age to the population targeted by the sex education programs. The sample size was defined in accordance with the recommendations of Antoine & Smith (2016) for conducting an IPA study.

Among the 14 participants, 11 (79%) consider themselves to be heterosexual, although 4 (36%) of them declare some flexibility regarding their sexual orientation: “I am heterosexual. Uh... straight today, I don't know too much about later,” said Michel (for the purpose of anonymization, all participants were given a fictitious pseudonym), a 28-year-old cisgender man. “I am heterosexual. Potentially bicurious but it never happened,” explained Iana, a 24-year-old cisgender woman. In addition, two self-identified heterosexual participants had sexual experiences with same-sex partners during childhood. Finally, three participants declare themselves to be bisexual but have had their first sexual experience in the context of a woman/man relationship. Therefore, although all participants had their first penetrative sexual experience in a heterosexual setting, we considered that, within the study sample, sexual orientation was an uncertain factor to be taken into consideration in the data analysis and interpretation of its results.

2.2. Data collection instrument

It is important to note that IPA is based on in-depth non-directive or semi-directive interviews, during which the researcher's interventions must be rare or rooted in the participant's discourse. Also, the interviewer's interventions during the interview must be essential to encourage the interviewed participant to deepen their reflective discourse (Antoine & Smith, 2016; Restivo, Julian-Reynier & Apostolidis, 2018). Thus, in accordance with the data collection standards of this method, we constructed an interview guide in which the main question was formulated as follows: *"Now I would like to explore your memories and feelings about your first sexual experience(s) with another person. I'm going to invite you to tell me everything you remember as much as is comfortable for you. I will try to intervene as little as possible in order to limit the influence of my presence on your answers. I encourage you to keep your story as detailed as possible about your subjective experience, keeping in mind that what matters to me here is not the sexual sensations per se but the relational experience. To this main question were added follow-up questions and reformulations allowing, if necessary, to refocus the discourse of the participants on the object of research or to clarify their remarks, such as: "At that time, how did you learn what you knew about sexuality?"*

Thus, using the interview guide, the participants were interviewed about the beginnings of their interpersonal sexual life by accompanying them in a work of introspection with the aim of understanding, in a deeper way, the cognitive processes occurring at the beginning of sexual life.

2.3. Procedure

Recruitment was conducted via social networks and dating applications. Most interviews (with an average duration of 45 minutes) were carried out face to face in the researcher's office. Two interviews were conducted by videoconference due to geographical distance, and 1 last by telephone at the request of the participant. Each participant was interviewed individually.

2.4. Ethics

At the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym in order to respect their anonymity and facilitate the sharing of personal information. In addition, each of them was given the opportunity to consult the transcript of the exchange before publication and to propose modifications or withdraw their participation.

For each interview, the researcher/interviewer took an a posteriori time to debrief with the participants about the content discussed and their emotional state, especially when acts of sexual violence were mentioned. In her capacity as a clinical psychologist, the researcher/interviewer provided, when relevant, therapeutic orientation or informative resources to participants in need.

2.5. Data analysis

The interviews were fully transcribed manually word for word before being analyzed according to an iterative process. The data analysis was based on the content of the participant's discourse as well as on the elements that emerged from the exchanges with the researcher. In the data analysis process, there is a risk that, to some extent, the subjectivity of the researcher intervenes. To minimize this risk, the analysis of the participants' discourse must therefore be associated with a rigorous reflexive approach on the part of the researcher who must suspend their knowledge and their presuppositions about the object of research that may bias it. This also implies that, under no circumstances, should the analysis be carried out using automated data processing tools.

After analyzing each interview and pooling individual experiences, the data extracted were classified according to three themes: (a) learning about sexuality; (b) first sexual experience; (c) attention to consent.

3. Results

3.1. Learning about sex

Essentially, the participants in this study identify 4 main sources of learning about sexuality and intimate relationships: peers, media, family, and school:

Peers as a source of sexual education

The present study participants' discourse indicates that peers were one of their first sources of learning in chronological terms, but which also persists over time. During childhood, it started with peers of the same age or a little older, often of the same sex. These initiations often occurred as games in which the participants enacted sexual intercourse with friends by rubbing themselves in bed or caressing each other's genitals. Sometimes it consisted of simply showing each other's bodies or watching pornography and masturbating together.

It was during puberty that the peer's role in the participants' "sex education" became crucial. First, the learning process took the form of complex social influence. Several participants explained that they learned about sexuality -- on a theoretical level -- first and foremost by listening to the stories of their friends' experiences. This information sharing, if it was the only way to obtain information on sex in an "interactive" way (that is, outside of watching pornography), seems to have had, among some participants, the negative effect of giving rise to self-depreciation based on social comparison:

"You know when you're still a virgin and most of your friends aren't, you say to yourself: 'Oh shit, I'm the last one, I'm a loser.'" (Bastien, 27-year-old cisgender man).

- It must be noted that the participants were all interviewed and spoke in French. Thus, the direct citations of the participants' discourse presented in this manuscript are translations from French.

Conversely, these exchanges with peers are described by some participants as essential in their development, in particular by allowing them to become aware of problematic behaviors that they experience or impose on their sexual partners.

"I started to explain that I didn't know if we were good together, and there he managed to dig for more specific information, without me ever pronouncing the word rape. But he ended up saying: 'what you experienced is not normal'. It was from there that I started asking myself questions." (Iana, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

"My buddies saved me from this [coercing his girlfriend into having sex], literally. And especially two friends who introduced me to feminism and the subject of consent, sexuality, and everything. And one day, at 2 a.m., leaving their house, I really told myself: 'Dude, you were so stupid.'" (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

Some male participants also regretted not having had more opportunities to discuss sexuality with their female peers. It appears, in fact, in their discourse that conversations between friends about sexuality took place mainly in gendered spaces, and therefore were strongly impacted by the gender stereotypes internalized by adolescents.

"You see at 14, when you talk about sex, you talk about sex between guys; you will never talk about sex with a girl. Unless it's your girlfriend at the time with whom you plan to do your first time. I also think that the guys are dragging each other into 'bro attitude'..." (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

“What I really missed was talking to girls [about sex] actually.” (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

Media as a source of sexual education

This category brings together a wide spectrum of sources. The referred media included those which are explicitly informative, such as Instagram pages devoted to sexuality, podcasts, or books, pornographic websites; but also included, for instance, popular movies, stories coming from different backgrounds, etc. Michel (27-year-old cisgender man) evokes, for example, the love scene from *Top Gun* as the first reference of what a sexual relationship is. Jean (24-year-old cisgender man) says he has constructed his representations of a relationship between men and women around films such as *Virgin Suicides*, then he started actively searching, in classic cinema, for scenes that would feed his sexual imagination. However, the medium most frequently cited as a source of learning about sexuality is pornography. Within our sample, 78% of participants, including 100% of men, identified pornography as a source of learning. According to the participants, pornographic material was essentially used for the purpose of masturbation, and in some cases as a means of exploring practices in a virtual way that would feed their fantasies (sexual script construction or consolidation). While pornography was reported to be widely used by the study participants as a sexual learning tool, half of them declared to have been able to identify the fictional and exaggerated dimension of pornography from the start and minimize the influence that its consumption could have had on their interpersonal behavior in the context of their sexuality.

“Even at the time, I think that I had some perspective. I knew that pornography was not the ‘reality’. I knew that ‘real sex scenes’ didn’t necessarily happen that way. For example, I was aware that the fact that I was watching two women making love didn’t necessarily imply that I wanted to make love with a woman. You know what I mean? I differentiated fantasy and reality a bit.”
(Pauline, 23-year-old cisgender woman).

Family as a source of sexual education

Familial space was frequently cited as a source of knowledge about sexuality, whether through formal discussions with parents, informal ones with siblings, or by surprising a family member during intercourse. Overall, the participants’ discourses were contrasting/ambivalent when it comes to their perception of this source. For instance, several participants identified in their parents a strong

embarrassment associated with the subject of sexuality. Benoît (non-binary, 26 years old), for example, considered that the religious convictions of his parents were an obstacle to his sexual education. However, the participants who grew up in families that they perceived as open to discussion on this matter said that they did not wish to discuss sexuality in depth with their parents.

"We haven't talked about it much, though. I know I could have; they were downright, well, rather open on the subject, on that there was no problem. I think it's just me who didn't dare bring it up too much. And the few times they wanted to speak about sex, I managed to escape the conversation." (Aurélien, 28-year-old cisgender man).

"It was a very open family; they were... It's not really them who pushed for taboo or no discussion about it. It's just that we didn't specifically talk about it, and it kind of stayed like that." (Flicka, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

Overall, what emerges from the participants' discourse is that the subject of sexuality addressed in the family environment mainly concerned the issue of health (contraception, gynecological follow-up, sexually transmitted infections [STIs]) and prevention regarding pornography. Emotional life and pleasure were essentially absent from parental discourse.

School as a source of sexual education

The present study participants have received between 1 and 3 sex education sessions throughout their schooling. For the most part, it was a biology course on human reproduction where the themes of contraception and STIs were discussed. Overall, participants' memories are mostly about context and very little about content.

"As I remember, it was embarrassing that we had to learn more about the reproductive system and how to put on a condom than anything else. We never talked about anything else at that time." (Iana, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

"I do not remember. I know I had the feeling that the teacher was a bit off the mark with what she was saying. [...] I think there was a description of the genitals, female and male. Like all students of my age, I think of the episode of the teacher who puts a condom on a penis... a fake penis. And I don't think I can tell you anything else." (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

"I don't remember at all what she talked to us about, but I do remember that we put a condom on a banana. [Laughs] If I got anything out of it, it totally stayed unconscious because I don't

remember anything at all.” (Ingrid, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

Having had an active sexual life for more than 10 years, most of the 14 participants, at the time of the interview, easily identified the gaps in the education offered to them when they were adolescents. The lack of information about sexual consent, and more generally sexual communication/intimate interactions, was almost systematically brought up in their discourses. Also, they often mentioned the fact that at school, sexuality was “a sort of taboo,” and how that situation made their sexual education more complicated while they were growing up. Several participants reported that they would have wanted, above all, to have access to a space in which they could have openly discussed sexuality with well-informed and open-minded adults.

“I think it's important to dismantle everything about shame [regarding sexuality], which I find people have when they're young. All the pressure there is around sexuality. [...] Also, it would have made a difference if we had learned to communicate more from the start. Given keys to communicate with your partner and be comfortable with it. Deconstruct taboos, rather than saying that we have to do this or that. Finally, sexual education should ought to be to prepare an environment so that people can flourish on their own. (Bastien, 27 years-old cisgender man).

“I think that I clearly lacked... communication skills. [When we are teenagers] We're all super shy, and we don't dare to talk about all these things because we feel like what we are going through is different and that we're all different [...] but in fact, it would be so much easier if everyone would just talk about it honestly”. (Flicka, 26 years-old cisgender woman).

Finally, according to the participants' discourse, issues related to the relational and pleasurable dimension of sexuality were almost absent from the sex education they received at school. More importantly, pornography and its possible downsides, which most of them consumed at that time, were not discussed at all.

3.2. The “first time”, an isolated event?

For most of the participants (12 out of 14), first intercourse occurred between 14 and 17 years old. In France, the average age of the first sexual intercourse is 17 years old (Santé Publique France, 2016). In the discourse of most participants, there is a discrepancy between the perception of the “right” age to enter sexuality, according to their own adolescent point of view, and the one they have today, with hindsight.

"Well, in fact, now when I look at 14-year-old kids, I say to myself: 'damn, you're super young [...]'. Whereas at the time [when he was 14], with my ex, we had been together for like 9 months, discussed it, we had done what we called foreplay before, several times. And so, I think it was the right time." (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

For other participants, the moment of the first time seems partly conditioned by the perception of certain social norms, whether conveyed by peers or internalized from the general social discourse.

"I think at the time I was ashamed of being a virgin at 18. For me, I was behind on something." (Clotilde, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

The 4 individuals who were not in a committed relationship at the time of their first intercourse all chose a partner with whom they were not in a relationship for their first sexual intercourse. For instance, Bastien and Benoît describe the event of their first sexual intercourse as a seized opportunity. They met the partner they would have sex with for the first time in the context (a party) of alcoholic consumption, a partner met the same evening and never seen again afterwards. For Bastien and Benoît, the consumption of alcohol and cannabis in the moment they decided to engage in their first sexual intercourse ushered in the disinhibited state of mind and allowed them to be more enterprising with an unknown partner. Clotilde also is among the participants who had their first sexual intercourse following a psycho-active substance consumption with various casual partners. In this case, substances were used in a conscious and systematic way to reach a state of letting go. She identified that she was able to give up this particular use of substances when she started having sex with a regular and trusted partner.

"In fact, for a very long time, I really had to smoke marijuana. [...] I couldn't do it without smoking, there was no letting go of my body. [...] I don't see it as a negative thing. I think it just took a while. But I think that I didn't actually have confidence in my body without it... I didn't have the capacity to let go. And I think it was also the people I was with, maybe they didn't bring me that." (Clotilde, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

Ingrid and Michel also had their first sexual intercourse following a party attendance, but with partners they had dated for a while. For them, the festive context brought the opportunity to have a place outside the parental home to have their first sexual intercourse. However, this "first time" occurred as part of a process that began way before this specific day.

Two participants describe an entering into sexuality between 8 and 10 years old. These two men identify themselves as heterosexual but said that they had their first sexual contacts in the context of games with peers of the same sex. In both cases, the sexual acts were restrained to observing and caressing each other's genitals or watching pornography together. According to Gagnon (1965), these exploratory games seem to be a normal part of sexual learning that is quite frequent, but generally forgotten in the subsequent years or not identified at all as first sexual intercourse.

Among individuals who experienced their first sexual relations within a long-term relationship, we find similarities in the stories that draw a typical pattern. These participants describe a process rather than an isolated event. It begins with occasional experiments with various partners: kisses, caresses, during which they discover the body of the other person but also the first emotions and questionings about their sexual desire.

"And so, uh, we were kissing, and I was a little... I didn't really know what to do, I was a little lost. And she said to me: "well come on, let's get undressed". So, we started to undress, and it was nice, and I felt that she was very horny, or that she wanted to [...]. And in fact, at this moment, a guy entered the room and decided to stay with us. [Laugh]. And it sorts of stopped like that. And then I realized that, even if I had wanted to at some point, I wasn't really ready, I wasn't ready." (Michel, 27-year-old cisgender man)

For instance, among the 14 participants, 10 of them were in a stable intimate relationship with their partner when they had the first penetrative intercourse. For most of them, the first sexual intercourse came as a result of an intensification of intimate explorations within the couple. For a few months, the partners limited themselves to the practice of what they call "foreplay" to designate all sexual practices that do not involve penio-vaginal penetration. The duration of this phase often seems to be conditioned by the female partner of the couple. They are generally slower in "feeling ready," whether on a psychological or physical level.

"At the beginning, it was me who wanted, me who brought up the subject of sexuality. We talked quite a bit. It was her who stopped me, who told me: "I want to take my time." (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

"So, I would say it took us about 2 months to have our first sexual relations and 5 months to have a first penetration. At the time, I knew it was something important for me, but above all, I felt that for me it was not possible to pass that step. Finally, I did it when I really felt super ready. I didn't

feel any pressure, well, I don't feel like I felt any pressure. I really did it when I felt like it, and above all, I had a partner who was super attentive to that, super respectful, it's something we talked about, and I didn't even need to justify myself more than that. Simply telling him: "I'm not ready, that's too much for me." (Pauline, 23-year-old cisgender woman).

"There was no act of penetration. And at some point, I knew I wanted to make love, but then I didn't want to rush things or talk to her too much about it. I did not want to express it in a rather direct way. So, I said to myself: "well, I think that when she's ready, it's going to happen. At some point, we'll say ok, we both want it". And in fact, one day we were watching a movie with several friends. We were under a huge duvet on a big sofa, and we were touching each other under the blanket with this girl. It was very arousing, and texting about it later on, she said to me: "I would have been ready, to make love, I think". And suddenly I told myself: "well, it's the message that says: ok, it's going to happen." (Michel, 27-year-old cisgender man).

Through these stories, we can see the symbolic dimension of the act of penetration in the learning of sexuality. If the majority of participants insist on verbalizing that, to them, sexuality includes a spectrum of practices much wider than penetration, most of the stories, however, focus on the first experimentation of penio-vaginal penetration. Pauline, for example, describes a true specificity of the experience from a cognitive point of view following her first penetrative experience:

"For me, it was a very strong moment, a very important moment. [...] I was kind of proud to have done it: 'that's it, I've passed the milestone'. I remember the next day, walking in the street, in the metro, looking around me and saying to myself: 'hey, don't you know what I did this weekend?!'"

For two participants, however, the beginning of their sexuality inside their relationship did not follow that pattern. Iana and Flore both experienced their first sexual intercourse at the age of 15 with dating partners who were at least 5 years older than they were. In both cases, the interviewees do not describe a step-by-step exploration, but a first intercourse quickly followed by a coercive dynamic where their comfort, pleasure, and desire were generally not taken into account by their partners. Both of them expressed that they lacked resources to identify the problem and express their distress. These 2 participants are the only ones who negatively evaluated their first sexual intercourses. The rest of the participants (12) hold positive memories. Their discourse generally suggests that, even though they lacked technical and communicative skills at the time, having a positive interpersonal experience with their partners was actually what mattered the most regarding this particular moment of their lives.

"The only thing I would add [at the moment of the first experience] ... It was really to be able to communicate [in a more efficient way] with my partner. Truly communicate through words." (Leo, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

"Even though it was not crazy, I think it was still a good moment. [...] I have a good memory of it because we tried to do everything as best as we could. And... It didn't last very long, but it was the beginning of something that kept on getting better, so I think that you have to go through this in the end." (Aurelien, 28-years-old cisgender man).

"I wish we had a little bit more emotional maturity, or explicit communication. But otherwise, I don't regard it as a negative experience" (Flicka, 26-year-old cisgender woman)

3.3. The place of sexual consent

When participants were asked the following question: "Did you know if your partner was consenting or not when you first had sex?" They usually answered in the affirmative without hesitation. However, when asked how they knew this, we find that most have difficulty identifying precisely the source of this certainty.

"I don't know, well... One just can feel these sort of things..." (Ingrid, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

"We had, I think, very instinctive signals of when you want to have sex." (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

"Just, we liked each other, and then after there was this sexual tension that happened between the two of us, I think, and then that brought us to that." (Bastien, 27-year-old cisgender man).

By encouraging them to deepen their reflection, they nevertheless managed to identify elements that they consider to be signs of consent: initiatives taken by the partner, reciprocity of caresses/kissing, gazing into each other's eyes, implicit verbal invitations, physical intensity placed in touching/kissing, positions adopted spontaneously by partners, stripping oneself, or setting up pleasant environmental conditions for intercourse (e.g., music). Some participants also describe the implementation of strategies allowing them to feel assured of the consent of their partners when the first intercourse did not take place within the framework of a dating relationship. Benoît (male), for instance, indicated that choosing an older partner (female) with a strong personality was a way of making sure she would be able to express her refusal for intercourse. Also, both Bastien and Benoît mentioned letting the girl be on top

during the penetration to give her more control. However, the interviews of two participants who have experienced repeated sexual violence in the context of the couple raise questions about the possibility of relying on behavioral cues of consent as exhibits of genuine internal sexual desire. Indeed, Iana and Flore both recall that their first boyfriends, without having resorted to physical violence, regularly led them into having sexual intercourse that they did not desire; usually using various forms of sexual coercion, including emotional blackmail. In the context of these relationships, these two women describe having sometimes been very proactive and involved during unwanted relations, and even having initiated them so that they end faster.

“During [intercourse] it was more of a simulation, precisely so that it passes more quickly. And it's over sooner. [...] Make more noise, show that I have a lot of pleasure, even if it's maybe less the case than some other times. Yeah, for him to finish and come faster. [...]. There was a time when I knew he was going to pressure me until we had intercourse. So then, I would be super affectionate with him, super proactive, kiss him, touch him, make the sex happen fast. And there were times when I arrived, and I made sure that it happened quickly so that afterwards we could move on to doing something else. (Flore, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

4. Discussion

Sex knowledge at the beginning of sex life

In accordance with the study presuppositions, and in agreement with previous research work (Romulus & Liouville, 2021; Barre et al., 2022), the participants declared that they had, during their schooling, a number of sexual education sessions which is much lower (an average of 2) than what the French law recommends (21). In addition, the topics covered were generally limited to biology and STIs. Most participants reported, in accordance with our presuppositions and previous studies (Gagnon, 1965; Tanton et al., 2015; Rothman et al., 2021), that they actively sought information on sexuality and intimate relationships mainly from their peers and via various cultural contents such as movies, podcasts, books, or pornography. This is problematic because relying on sexual information coming from peers, mass media, or pornography has been found to induce biases in the perception and behavioral approach to sexuality among adolescents (Gagnon, 1965; Jozkowski et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2020; Vera Cruz, 2019; Vera Cruz & Sheridan, 2022). Finally, if parents are frequently cited as a source of sexual learning, they are often perceived to feel ill at ease with the subject, which is in accordance with what Gagnon had already

observed in 1965. In families where the subject is not taboo, on the other hand, it is the children who express that they did not wish to discuss this subject in depth with their parents, in particular concerning topics of pleasure, intimacy, and violence.

First sexual intercourse

The present study results yield a pattern associated with the participants' first sexual intercourse situation.

On one hand, there is a group of participants (the majority) who experienced their first sexual intercourses with a steady and trusted partner through a step-by-step exploration process leading to penetrative sexual intercourse. During this process, the female partner generally defines the timing of the progression towards higher levels of sexual intimacy. A qualitative study conducted by Le Gall and Le Van (2011) also highlights the recurrence of a "sexual script" in the first relationships of young heterosexual couples, with progressive exploration and first penetration conditioned by the fact that the female partner "feels ready". The fact that the current study results suggest that the participants who had their first sexual intercourse in the context of a stable and long intimate relationship reported having good memories and being more satisfied with the experience of their "first time" is corroborated by previous studies (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Marcantonio et al., 2018). These research works suggest that women in particular feel more comfortable when the first sexual intercourse happens in the context of a stable and relatively long intimate relationship. This fact might also be associated with an internalization of social gender roles that guide interactions between individuals even in their most intimate practices (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). In Western countries, as in the majority of the world, social norms encourage men to take the initiative in sexual matters, while women are required to act as gatekeepers of sexuality (Vera Cruz, 2015). In other words, women are required to delay the onset of sexual intercourses as much as possible regardless of their own desire; otherwise, they face the risk of social stigma (Darden et al., 2019; Vera Cruz, 2015).

As in the current study, Le Gall and Le Van (2011) also identify that individuals who surpassed the average age of the first sexual intercourse (17/18 years old) end up choosing to have their first sexual experience with a casual partner in order to "cross the line." These individuals represent a minority of our participants. This experience was associated with the consumption of psychoactive substances for disinhibition and "letting go" for 3 out of 4 of them. Having sex for the first time and with a casual partner are two situations generally associated with higher levels of anxiety (Marcantonio et al., 2018;

Vera Cruz, 2015b). The consumption of psychoactive substances as a stress management strategy in this kind of situation seems to be quite common for young people (Vera Cruz, 2019).

In accordance with what we presupposed, 4 participants reported an experience of sexual victimization at the beginning of their sexual life, including two in the context of their first sexual experiences. In these two specific situations, the participants expressed that they lacked reference and knowledge to clearly identify the problematic aspects of their partner's behavior. Here, we hypothesize that offering a proper in-depth sexual education to children and adolescents would provide them with better resources for understanding interpersonal dynamics in the context of intimate relationships and for acting in a more assertive way in the face of adversity (Darden et al., 2019). However, as victims should not be held responsible for being assaulted, these programs should essentially focus on providing youth with efficient tools to build healthy interpersonal relationships and raise awareness about coercive behaviors.

Sexual consent

Given these testimonies, how does one know if the person he/she/they are having sex with is indeed experiencing a state of internal desire? It would seem that the answer to this question lies in broader social skills than just the ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal cues. In fact, according to what our participants said, it appears that the most effective way of ensuring that the partners, whether they know each other well or not, engage in a consensual sexual relationship would be to establish a relationship in which each party feels free to express its refusal or discomfort at any time. This could explain why individuals who experienced their first intercourse in the typical context of progressive intimate interplay exploration as a couple would have more difficulty than others in specifically identifying the elements validating the consent of their partners.

Moreover, these interviews provide an in-depth understanding of the complexity of the link between internal consent and external consent (Muehlenhard, 2016; Darden et al. 2019). In other words, they illustrate how a person who does not wish to have a sexual relation can nevertheless express a large number of behavioral signs expressing consent. Communication around consent essentially seems to take place in an unconscious and intuitive way. This is particularly true for the participants who experienced their first relationship within a dating relationship and is in accordance with previous studies by Beres (2010) and Willis et al. (2019). However, among the current study participants, the content of the interviews suggests that, even though most of them expressed the desire to set up more explicit and verbal consent interactions with their partners because they considered them to be more

effective, they also described a majority of nonverbal and implicit cues when it came to describing how they enact or identify sexual consent in their sex life. This paradox is frequently presented in the literature regarding communication around sexual consent (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Willis et al. 2019). One possible explanation for this is that many individuals might experience difficulties in setting up this mode of communication in part because their sexual imagination is essentially built on cultural content depicting sexual relations where direct verbal expression is generally absent (Jozkowski et al., 2019, Willis et al., 2020). Another possible explanation may be associated with the fact that sexuality appears to be driven by automatic cognitive processes (Vera Cruz, 2019); therefore, using explicit verbal cues during intercourse would disrupt this process by requiring cortical treatment. Here again, facing these two hypotheses, we advocate that offering sexual education to children and adolescents would help them normalize explicit and verbal behaviors from the beginning of their sex lives and integrate them into their automatic behavioral processes.

5. Conclusion

The process of learning about human sexuality appears to be long and continuous; it sometimes begins even before puberty. Prior to their first relationships, individuals refer to various sources, ideally external to the family, but which can encourage the installation of biased or even problematic beliefs or attitudes. The role of formal sex education in this learning is generally minimal and limited to biological and medical notions. An important part of the “technical” learning of sexuality is then done gradually through practice with partners, thereby exposing individuals to potential risks by being poorly equipped in terms of knowledge. This suggests that there is currently an important need for better sexual education programs in French secondary schools. This need is expressed both in terms of the number of teaching hours and in the content covered. Responding to this need would help French adolescents navigate more appropriately through the different stages of the long and complex learning of sexuality. In prospect of setting up affective prevention against sexual violence, the results of the present study indicate that to teach adolescents how to live their sexuality in a secure way (for themselves and for others), the priority would be to encourage them to develop prosocial skills such as empathy, impulsivity control, and quality listening and communication in order to build healthy intimate relationships.

6. Limitations

As with any qualitative study on a small sample, the extent to which the elements extracted from the analysis are representative of the experience of an average young French or Western European is unknown. The strength of this study, however, as required by the IPA method, lies essentially in the fact that because it was conducted based on the IPA method, it allows us to dive into the participants' subjective experience.

Furthermore, the participants, having been recruited on a voluntary basis following a call for participation, it is therefore probable that the sample of the target population we included individuals who were keen to speak about their sexuality, and who therefore present their authentic experiences in this matter.

Abbreviations

- **IPA:** Interpretative phenomenological analysis.
- **STI:** Sexually transmitted infections.

Statements and Declarations

Conflicts of Interest

None to declare.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Picardie Jules Verne. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individuals for the publication of any potentially identifiable data included in this article, ensuring participant anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Contributorship

Initial conception of the study: EGN. Conception of the survey and writing of the questions: EGN.

Recruitment procedure: EGN. Data analysis: EGN. First draft: EGN, GVC, OM. Final draft: All authors.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because they contain sensitive qualitative interview data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author, Eléonor Gilles-Noguès (eleonor.gilles.nogues@u-picardie.fr), and will be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality.

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