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Sexual Goals, Plans, and Actions: Toward a Sexual Script Emerging Adults Use to Delay or Abstain from Sexual Intercourse

Abstract

This mixed-methods study of emerging adults investigates the messages asserted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. Goals-plans-action theory and sexual script theory inform the investigation of 192 survey participants and 27 interview participants. Results confirm that when emerging adults aspire to abstain or delay from intercourse, they enact a sexual script that includes communicative actions taken to reach their goal during conversations. This study identifies phrases used to initiate a conversation, recommends the inclusion of a rationale, provides the primary and secondary goals that inform message construction, and shows three primary ways conversations unfold.

Keywords

Goals-Plans-Action, Sexual Communication, Sexual Script Theory

Disciplines

Critical and Cultural Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Sociology of Culture

Comments

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Sexual communication is recognized as challenging, embarrassing, secretive, or a difficult task requiring special effort in close relationships (Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011; Theiss & Estlein, 2014). Discussing sexual topics differs from other topics such as dating, drinking, money or family concerns because sexual topics “lack open and free-flowing talk” (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011, p. 15). Relational uncertainty exacerbates these threatening qualities of sexual communication (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). However, sexual communication messages fulfill important functions, such as granting consent, negotiating preferences, managing sexual health risks, or preventing unplanned pregnancies, among others. These functions are particularly relevant during relationship development.

Emerging adults’ sexual behaviors have, for the most part, been labeled risky because of high rates of sexually transmitted diseases/sexually transmitted infections (STDs/STIs), fluctuating rates of unplanned pregnancy, and prevalence of date or acquaintance rape. Remedies to guard against these risks include abstaining from sexual intercourse or delaying the introduction of sexual activity, behaviors which are recognized as sex positive (Harden, 2014). Some emerging adults forgo sexual intercourse, even though the majority of their peers are sexually active and participate in serious, intimate dating relationships (Arnett, 2000). Approximately 15-25% of emerging adults have not engaged in consensual, sexual intercourse (CDC; Centers for Disease Control, 2012; Higgins, Trussel, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Messages used to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse are particularly important to investigate because communication is one means by which individuals protect their sexual boundaries and accomplish sexual goals. Research on the tactics used to say *no* or *maybe later* would elucidate these challenging conversations. The current study, therefore,

investigates the messages used to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse, relying on goals-plans-action theory (Dillard, 2015).

Goals-Plans-Action Theory

Goals-plans-action theory (GPA; Dillard, 2015) emphasizes “the message production process” used during strategic, influence interactions (Dillard & Schrader, 1998, p. 301). Message production begins with a goal, which is followed by the cognitive development of plans and the implementation of communicative actions. GPA theory acknowledges that not all actions are motivated by goals, but rather, that interactions intended to influence others rely on deliberate attempts to achieve goals (Dillard & Schrader, 1998). Delay or abstain conversations are conceptualized as strategic, goal-driven episodes that rely on cognitive plans, which are expressed to influence sexual behavior outcomes. However, GPA theory, with its emphasis on message production, does not stress the outcome of conversations. Dillard and Schrader (1998) are clear that the GPA process may not result in the attainment of the desired goal. However, it is important to know which communication strategies are most useful for abstaining from or delaying sexual activity. Thus, *outcome* was appended to the GPA process (see Figure 1). The literature review integrates relevant sexual communication research with each phase in the GPA sequence.

Goals: Motivators for Behavior

Goals are defined as “future states of affairs that an individual is committed to achieving or maintaining” (Dillard, 2015, p. 65). GPA suggests primary and secondary goals operate during influence interactions, where primary goals stipulate what the interaction pertains to while secondary goals reflect general motivations that recur in a person’s life (Dillard, Segrin, &

Harden, 1989). In the current investigation, the primary goal pertains to interactions where at least one individual seeks to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse.

Multiple meanings of *abstinence* impede shared understanding of research findings (Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006; Santelli et al., 2006; Wilson, Smith, & Menn, 2013). For example, 45% of high school freshmen reported *not having oral sex* as part of the definition for abstinence until marriage, whereas the remaining 55% did not report this behavior as an aspect of abstinence (Wilson et al., 2013). Further, abstinence does not always equate to virginity, as evidenced by researchers who used the term to describe refraining from sexual activity after an STI diagnosis (Gallo et al., 2016). Similarly, individuals who report regret following a sexual episode (e.g., Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012) may decide to abstain in the future, a practice labeled *secondary abstinence* (Loewenson, Ireland, & Resnick, 2004).

Another definitional issue complicates research on sexual communication and behavior—defining the term *have sex*. Research by Peck, Manning, Tri, Skrzypczynski, Summers, and Grubb (2016) showed that nearly all research participants agreed penile-vaginal intercourse constituted having sex. However, 85% of the participants considered penis penetration in the anus/rectum as having sex and over half viewed oral sex as having sex. A small minority, 14%, even considered French kissing to be having sex. Due to these varying interpretations of the term *have sex*, and in light of the near universal agreement that intercourse constitutes having sex, the phrase *sexual intercourse* will be used in this study. With these two definitional issues in mind, *abstinence* will be defined as the intention to wait to have sexual intercourse until marriage.

Delaying is distinguishable from abstaining and refers to waiting to introduce sexual intercourse into a relationship. Those who are delaying say they are open to engaging in intercourse before marriage, yet need some pivotal event to justify having sex whether for the

first time or in a new relationship (e.g., Cummings, Auerswald, & Ott, 2014; Hull, Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). The intent to abstain or delay may necessitate different communication plans and actions.

Goals-plans-action scholars have sorted primary influence goals into specific categories (Dillard, Anderson, & Knobloch, 2002) that can be adapted to sexual negotiation situations. The motivation to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse likely aligns with at least four of seven of GPA's primary influence goals. First, the decision to abstain from or delay intercourse could be influenced by the desire for sex to be a *shared activity* that would deepen the intimacy between the partners. Second, abstainers or delayers may want to *alter the nature of the relationship* and need a specific relational turning point, such as the mutual profession of love, cohabitation, or marriage, to signal the inauguration of sexual intercourse into the relationship. Third, partners could *seek permission* to abstain or delay, particularly if fear of rejection is a concern. In this way, one partner may want to invite the other into a joint decision-making conversation. Fourth, individuals who make a purity pledge or identify as an abstainer (Mullaney, 2006) could attempt to *enforce rights and commitments*. In this way, individuals assert their intentions to abstain or delay and accept the response from the partner, whether that response accepts or rejects the message. The first research questions ascertain if these primary influence goals operate in abstain or delay situations and if the goals differ between those who are abstaining and delaying.

RQ1a: What primary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?

RQ1b: Do the primary influence goals differ between abstainers and delayers?

Secondary goals within the GPA framework were found to relate to identity, conversation management, relational resources, or personal resources (Dillard, 2015). The secondary goals for abstaining or delaying may fall under these categories and/or may be unique because of the

nature of the sexual context. Specific motivations for abstinence among adolescents include commitment to self-concept (the feeling that having sex would undercut the individual's sense of identity), risk of disappointing authority figures, fear/apprehension of the sexual experience, fear of physical consequences, valuing virginity, reputation regret, perception that sexual activity is not important, and manipulation (Dunsmore, 2005). The second research question explores the motivations for abstinence to emerging adults, includes delay conversations, and tests for differences between abstainers and delayers.

RQ2a: What secondary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?

RQ2b: Do the secondary goals differ between abstainers and delayers?

Plans: Intrapsychic Scripts

The GPA framework describes plans as “representations of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and behavior sequences” (Dillard et al., 2002, p. 439) that influence the conversational partner. Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) clarifies GPA theory in relation to sexuality by defining plans as cognitive processes that “link individual desires to social meanings” (p. 100). The traditional sexual script depicts a plan by outlining a sequence of verbal and nonverbal movements advancing toward sexual intercourse (LaFrance, 2010; Simon & Gagnon, 1987). These scripts stipulate who participates, what each actor is expected to do, and where the episode occurs. Previous research has identified 64 unique behaviors in scripts related to heterosexual interactions (Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 1993). At each turn of the sexual script, men and women perform specific, culturally recognized, gendered behaviors (Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Wiederman, 2005). Scripts benefit relational partners when the meaning attached at each turn of an interaction is understood, thereby decreasing uncertainty (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Naturally, sexual activity performances include considerable improvisation

(Simon & Gagnon, 1986), but the traditional sexual script typifies a generally recognized sequence of interaction.

The traditional sexual script lays out interactional turns preceding a sexual episode. However, if one partner plans to delay or abstain, relying on the traditional sexual script could produce disharmony. Saying *I think this is moving too fast* was a moment in the fictional sex scripts that college students perceived as most likely to deter sex (LaFrance, 2010). This statement hints at a possible communication action to use when one's goal is to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse. The traditional sex script pertains to episodes where consensual intercourse is the result, but some partners prefer to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse. No known sexual script is available for these individuals or couples. In fact, rejection messages, which could be used to express the goal of abstaining or delaying, may be the most unscripted aspect of sexual interactions because some rejecters indicate they don't know what to say to a relational partner (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). It is helpful, then, to gather data about individuals who are abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse to understand the message tactics they use. The next research question therefore asks:

RQ3: How does a sexual script for abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse unfold for emerging adults?

Action: Sexual Influence Strategies

The GPA literature defines actions simply as behaviors (Dillard et al., 2002). The communicative actions necessary to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse connect with the sexual negotiation literature, which has analyzed compliance-gaining and resisting strategies (Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 1992). To that end, strategies have been identified based on the degree of directness and the application of

verbal or nonverbal messages (e.g., Bevan, 2003; Metts et al., 1992). Moderately direct rejection messages were found to achieve the sender's goal while also saving face (Metts et al., 1992), even though direct messages were found to be more effective (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). Additionally, four strategies—antisocial acts, emotional and physical closeness, logic and reason, and pressure and manipulation—operated when undergraduate students wanted to escalate or delay sexual activity, with logic and reason strategies used most frequently (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). A more recent study on the effects of alcohol consumption on refusal messages showed 11 different strategies females employ to refuse a sexual episode: avoidance, inappropriate to the relationship, excuse, apology, terminate the relationship, concession, offer alternative, compliment, insult, flat refusal, or other (Lannutti & Monahan, 2004). The goal of refusing differs from the goals of abstaining or delaying, although the messages used with either goal may overlap. Greater understanding of how messages are deployed would help individuals express sexual goals. The next research question asks:

RQ4: What influence tactics are used to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse among emerging adults?

Outcomes

Some individuals consistently behave in the ways they intend while others do not. For example, the intention to not have sex predicted not engaging in sex in a longitudinal study of adolescents (Hull et al., 2011), and the intent to have sex positively predicted sexual initiation in the same sample (Busse, Fishbein, Bleakley, & Hennessy, 2010). However, some individuals intend to behave in a particular way, yet behave in different ways. For example, HIV-positive men reported their intention to have sex despite their diagnosis, yet were found to engage in abstinence behaviors 12 months after initial data collection (McFarland et al., 2012). Individuals

could communicate intentions to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse, yet change their minds as situations unfold. Intimate situations place individuals at a turning point where they can advance to sexual intercourse or curb activity. Adding to the complexity of such situations, individuals may nonverbally attempt to communicate the intention to abstain or delay, which requires their relational partners to accurately decipher the intent. Individuals may also be undecided or ambivalent about their own goals (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998). Thus, relational partners may approach interactions with a specific goal in mind, may or may not clearly communicate that goal, or may or may not enforce that goal as the interaction evolves. This study assumes the intention of abstain/delay conversations is to refrain from sexual intercourse. The next research question ascertains the outcomes of abstain/delay conversations.

RQ5: What are the behavioral outcomes after abstain or delay conversations for emerging adults?

Mixed Methods Research

This investigation employed a mixed-method design to answer the research questions, which focus on the process of abstain or delay conversations. Survey and interview data were utilized to identify essential elements of abstain or delay conversations.

Quantitative

Participants. Students enrolled in introduction to psychology or communication courses from a large, Midwestern university participated in a survey, approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB). Useable surveys were collected from 192 participants, 139 females (72%) and 52 males (27%) with an average age of 20. Additional demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Procedures. Students received one course credit for participating in an online survey generated with Qualtrics. An initial 450 students (approximately 1/3 of students enrolled in the courses) selected this research project to obtain course credit. The survey opened with the informed consent information. Then, participants responded *true* or *false* to the statement, “I have had a conversation with a relational partner indicating that I wanted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. This conversation occurred within the previous 12 months.” From the initial 450 students, 192 (43%) responded *true* to this item and completed the survey.

Survey Instrument. Participants indicated their sexual behavior goal by checking *abstain*, *delay*, or *other*. Next, participants responded to an open-ended prompt to ascertain primary influence goals: *Type out the details of the conversation. What did you and your partner say during the conversation as best as you can recall? Please use fictitious names and be as specific as possible when writing what each person said.* Coding of the open-ended survey responses was conducted in two ways. First, attribute coding was used to summarize basic descriptive information (Saldaña, 2013), by noting the biological sex of the message initiator and common words or phrases used explicitly by participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Second, provisional coding, which relies on a predetermined set of codes based on theory or previous research (Saldaña, 2013), was used by relying on four of seven of GPA’s primary goals—share activity, change relationship, obtain permission, and enforce rights and obligations. Coders read each message and assigned their interpretation of the message to one of these four *a priori* categories. Three undergraduate, communication studies majors familiar with GPA theory participated in training and coding sessions to select and agree upon primary goals for each message. They were instructed to focus on the person who made the abstain/delay statement, unless the participant used *we* language, in which case the coders interpreted the goal as a shared

activity. The primary investigator recorded the students' analyses, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. Intercoder reliability estimates were strong with 97.9% agreement and Cohen's kappa, .964.

Secondary influence goals. The sexual abstinence motivation scale (SAMS; Dunsmore, 2005) was found in an unpublished dissertation and exhibited face validity to measure secondary goals. Instructions were expanded to include delaying. The measure included 41 stems for the sentence that began *I am/was sexually abstinent because* (see Table 2). The Likert-type scale ranged from 1 = *not motivating at all* to 5 = *extremely motivating*. A split-half reliability analysis was performed, and the Spearman-Brown corrected correlation coefficient was $r = .95$.

What happened? Participants reported behavioral outcomes by selecting either of these choices: (a) on the day of the conversation, we did not have sexual intercourse or (b) on the day of the conversation, we did have sexual intercourse. Participants reported relational outcomes by selecting one of these choices: (a) that relational partner broke up with me as a result of this conversation, (b) that relational partner complied but we have since broken up for other reasons, (c) that relational partner and I are still together, or (d) other.

Qualitative

Participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 emerging adults—seven from the survey participants and 20 from separate recruitment—from a large, Midwestern university. Participants included 20 females and 7 males; 23 heterosexuals and 4 homosexual, bisexual, or other; 22 White/Caucasian and five with other ethnicities. The average age was 20 with a range of 18-24. Students came from myriad academic majors. The average religious importance was 4.67 where seven indicated highly important. The mode was seven with eight participants indicating that religion was very important to them.

Procedures. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to complete a face-to-face interview for an additional course credit. Twenty-three indicated they could be contacted, and seven volunteered to participate. A second recruitment effort was approved by the IRB to increase the number of interviewees. Nearly 5,500 students were randomly selected from 36,000 to receive an email recruitment message. A compensation incentive of a \$10 Target gift card was included. These messages invited anyone who had conversed about abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse in the previous 12 months to be interviewed. Twenty students agreed to participate.

All 27 interviews were held in an on-campus conference room or the investigator's office. The consent form and a demographic form were reviewed before the interviews began. The semi-structured interview guide contained 12 questions that inquired about delaying and abstaining conversation details, identifying conversational goals and outcomes, disclosing concerns about partner response, and appraising personal effectiveness. Participants received a list of mental health resources after the interview in case they felt the need to discuss particular issues with a professional. Audio-recorded interviews ranged from 9 to 34 minutes with an average time of 20 minutes and yielded 215 pages of single-spaced data, transcribed by the author. Given many people's reticence to talk about sex as well as the complexity in talking about sex (Theiss & Estlein, 2014), the length of these interviews is not surprising.

Data analysis. The interview data were analyzed by the author with thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During transcription, brief notes known as asides were bracketed into the transcribed data to explain or clarify a particular detail from the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Commentaries, which are substantial paragraphs following a short interaction within the interview, captured immediate thoughts or theoretical connections. The commentaries were

useful to thread excerpts from one interview to another. In-process memos were composed in a document separate from the transcripts to record early interpretations of the data. The iterative processes of interviewing, transcribing, reflecting, interpreting, and writing continued throughout the data collection and early analysis period. Careful, repeated, and reflective reading of the transcripts, commentaries, and in-process memos aggregated similar ideas or concepts together in separate files with category labels (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Categories that had the potential to answer the research questions for this study were analyzed to understand the experiences of the participants.

Verification. Three techniques were used to verify the interpretations drawn from the data. First, persistent observation (Creswell, 1997) was used during the interviews by checking for inconsistencies in the participants' responses. Paraphrasing, clarifying, and probing questions resolved inconsistencies or unclear information. Second, rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 1997) are included in the results section by including sufficient quotations to support the findings. Third, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted after data analysis. Participants who wanted to participate in member checks were sent a one page summary of the results. They were asked to read the summary and comment on how well the results matched their lived experience. The three interview participants who responded indicated the interpretations were a good representation of their experiences.

Results

Goals

Primary goals. The first research question asked for a description of the primary goals expressed during abstain/delay conversations. A frequency analysis showed that enforcing rights was the primary goal for 43% ($n = 82$), 22% each ($n = 42$) for changing the relationship and

sharing an activity, and 2% ($n = 3$) for obtaining permission. The remaining 12% ($n = 23$) could not be coded because these participants did not include information regarding motivation in their open-ended narratives.

The first research question also asked whether the primary influence goals differ between abstainers and delayers. Preliminary analysis of frequency distributions indicated that participants were less likely to report the intention of abstaining (27%; $n = 52$), than delaying (69%; $n = 133$) (7 respondents reported “other”). Therefore, in order to compare the relative distribution of goals between those who enacted a conversation intended to abstain compared to those who intended to delay sex, a two-way contingency analysis was used. Results indicated a significant difference between abstain and delay conversations, Pearson χ^2 (4, $N = 185$) = 12.70, $p < .05$, Cramer’s V = .26. The proportion of delayers (.28) using the goal of changing the relationship was higher than abstainers (.06). Abstainers were higher than delayers on enforcing rights (.52, .41), and sharing an activity (.31, .19).

Secondary goals. The second research question asked, “What secondary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?” The SAMS measure was subjected to criterion and content validity analysis and principal components analysis during its development (Dunsmore, 2005). Therefore, analysis of SAMS in this study began with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation using SPSS. The EFA showed that an eight factor solution explained 68% of the variance. Each of the eight factors had eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser, 1960). Dunsmore’s (2005) analysis supported an eight factor solution, as well. However, the scree test (Cattell, 1966) showed a two factor solution, which theoretically does not retain content validity, but questions the parsimony of the scale. A subjective review of the original eight factors and their corresponding items showed at least three issues. First, 5 of the 16 items

on the first factor, *commitment to self-schema*, loaded on more than one factor. Second, content validity was scrutinized and misalignment of some items on a factor was noted to be problematic. Specifically, item analysis of the rotated factor matrix showed two items with factor loadings below .40 and these were deleted (i.e., *don't want to have a bad reputation* and *worry what my friends would think if I had sex*). Third, three factors had fewer than three items load, which indicates a weak or unstable factor (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

A second EFA was performed with a forced 5-factor solution, which explained 58% of the variance. Three items had factor loadings below .40 and were eliminated (i.e., *too busy to think about sex*, *if I have an STI I don't want to pass it on to my partner*, *sex is not important to me right now*). The fifth factor had only two items load, so the analysis was repeated with a forced 4-factor solution, which explained 56% of the variance. Four items had factor loadings below .40 and were removed from analysis. The next execution of EFA removed these four items and retained the forced, four factor solution, resulting in four factors that explained 60% of the variance with each item loading on one factor with at least a .40. Table 3 shows the revised scale, factor loadings, Eigenvalues, and variances. Reliability of the new 32-item revised scale was strong ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 86.61$, $SD = 25.66$). The four factors retained answer the research question by applying the following labels: Factor 1 *God and Parents*; Factor 2 *Respect for Self and Partner*; Factor 3 *Body and Performance*; and Factor 4 *Game Playing*.

The research question also asked if the motivations differed between abstainers and delayers. An ANOVA analysis showed that the *God and parents* factor was significantly different between abstainers and delayers, $F(2, 189) = 24.83$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .21$. The post hoc Tukey HSD showed that abstainers ($M = 41.14$, $SD = 13.45$) were more motivated by this factor than delayers ($M = 26.69$, $SD = 11.80$). *Respect for self and partner* was also significantly

different, $F(2, 189) = 27.53, p < .01, \eta^2 = .23$. Abstainers ($M = 44.9, SD = 8.35$) were more motivated by this factor than delayers ($M = 33.6; SD = 10.49$). There were no significant differences between abstainers and delayers on *body and performance* or *game playing*.

Plans: Sexual Script

The third research question asked how a sexual script advancing toward abstinence or delaying sexual intercourse would unfold. Responses from the interview data provided nuanced details about the moments leading up to and formulating abstain/delay conversations. The summation of a typical script was expressed by one participant:

I kind of started it by making it a non-conversation. And. Cause the first conversation is very short and just like ‘do you want to?’ And then it’s just ‘no.’ And then that’s the end of that conversation. But then later on it comes up, ‘Why?’ um, and so for me personally it’s just. I don’t want to be intimate with someone until there is some sort of commitment on both sides or some sort of emotional connection. And so just talking through that with the other person is important to me. (21F:41-47)

This quotation begins by describing a “non-conversation.” Several participants also described how brief, succinct messages were used to indicate *no*. These interactions were similar because they all coincided with sexual activity. As sexual activity escalated and intercourse was on the horizon, the abstaining/delaying partner would assert “no” and/or use distancing body movements to indicate disinterest in intercourse. Later, many of these relational partners would have a conversation about personal perspectives on sexual activity. These conversations surfaced during other relational talk or were designated as a specific conversation to discuss intercourse.

There were also participants who initiated a conversation before any sexual activity occurred. With or without a precipitating physical episode, the conversations included similar information.

Nearly all participants agreed that a conversation about delaying or abstaining should include a rationale for the intent to abstain or delay. These explanations tended to follow one of three lines of reasoning. First, participants wanted to maintain a personal boundary. These messages used the *I* pronoun accompanied by a proclamation that left little room for discussion. Participants who used this perspective recognized abstaining or delaying as a personal choice. These messages reflected individuals' sexual boundaries and insinuated an expectation that the message would be honored and respected in future interactions. One typical message was:

It just came up naturally in conversation, just because he has had one sexual partner, and so he asked me, like, if I was ever going to be comfortable with that, or what I was comfortable with. He never really pushed me farther than I wanted to go, and so I told him that I wasn't planning on having sexual intercourse until I was married. (5F:59-62)

Second, participants described conversational messages as a joint decision. These messages invited the relational partner to collaborate and reach agreement about the sexual activity they would or would not engage in. These "it's about us" messages treated sex as a joint activity that should be discussed as a dyadic endeavor. Interview participants mentioned turn-taking, where one person expressed a desire for the couple and invited the partner to reciprocate. In this way, the conversations reflected the need to engage in joint decision making about an activity requiring both participants. A typical example was:

Like, I had to explain to him why it was important for both of us, not just me, that way he would understand that it was, it would be a benefit to him as well. Cause if I just made it sound like it was just about me, and I want to be apart, I want to be closer to God, I want to be like, you know, not have sex until I'm married, is something that I want to do, that doesn't sound too good to him. (9F:187-191)

Third, participants stated that sexual intercourse would not happen. These messages used the “we” pronoun to make declarative statements leaving the partner without an invitation to participate in the decision. For example, one participant received a series of text messages from his partner, “‘I don’t feel that we have that emotional connection’ and things like that. And then she just texted me, ‘I think we should abstain from sex’” (27M:59-60). The elements described above represented several participants and provide foundational data upon which to build a more elaborate script for abstaining or delaying conversations.

Actions: Influence Tactics

The next research question asked, ‘What influence tactics are used to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse?’ The most frequent words or phrases used verbatim in survey participants’ open-ended narratives were *not ready* ($n = 46$), *want to wait/delay* ($n = 91$), or *wait until marriage* ($n = 43$). Coders also counted the biological sex of the message initiator (23 were initiated by males and 97 by females, with 65 scenarios written in such a way that the sex was undiscernible).

Behavioral Outcome

The final research question asked, “What are the behavioral outcomes of abstain or delay conversations?” The participants recalled that on the day of the conversation, 94% ($n = 180$) did not have sexual intercourse. As for relational outcomes, 50% ($n = 96$) of the participants remain with the partner reported on in the study, 40% ($n = 77$) had broken up for reasons other than abstaining or delaying, and 3% ($n = 6$) said they broke up as a result of this conversation.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate messages asserted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. Goals-plans-action theory provided a useful theoretical perspective to analyze

the production of these messages. The inclusion of sexual script theory augmented the analysis by outlining the flow of typical conversations. With these two theories, the study contributes theoretical perspectives to sexual communication research. The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data presents practical ideas about composing abstain or delay messages. The discussion section elaborates on three primary findings. First, the results confirm that abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse is a sexual goal for some emerging adults. Second, a patterned script is presented to achieve abstain or delay goals. Third, specific phrases are included that could influence a partner. The outcome of the conversations is discussed, as well.

Goals: Confirming Abstain/Delay

The study confirmed that some emerging adults aspire to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse (e.g., Rasberry & Goodson, 2009), which exemplifies mature sexual behavior and decision making advocated by adults (e.g., Kirby, 2008). Nearly three-fourths of the participants indicated their intent to delay sexual intercourse and the other one-fourth reported the intent to abstain. This finding provides evidence to parents who rely on social scientific research to promote abstinence-only sex education and/or purity pledges (see Manning, 2017). Given that half of the sample indicated they were virgins, we can deduce that some of those who selected a delaying goal were contemplating their sexual debut. Future research should examine the differences between virgins and non-virgins in their communicative tactics. Other sources (e.g., CDC, 2012; Higgins et al., 2010) have similarly shown that approximately 25% of emerging adults abstain from sexual intercourse. These goals may be difficult to accomplish in a culture inundated with sexual exploitation, marketing, and assumptions that sexual intercourse is a normal part of relationships among emerging adults, which reinforces the need to provide information on composing abstain or delay messages. Abstaining and delaying should be

recognized and supported as viable sexual choices for emerging adults, an admonition consistent with a sex positive framework (Harden, 2014).

Plans and Actions: A Sexual Script

Interview participants described typical sexual scripts for delaying or abstaining from sex. This study contributes to sexual script theorizing by describing interaction patterns leading partners to abstain from or delay intercourse, in contrast to other sexual script scholarship that focuses on the accomplishment of intercourse (e.g., LaFrance, 2010; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1987). Indeed, theorizing about sexual communication benefits from research about process (Coffelt & Olson, 2014) and “sequences of behaviors” (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016, p. 470).

Some of the conversations described by the participants in this study were preceded by escalating physical activity. Research on the traditional sex script showed that physical activity may be delayed or stopped with the statement ‘I think this is moving too fast’ (LaFrance, 2010). However, the interview participants in this study shared that, in their experiences, nonverbal distancing or succinct *no* messages were used to prevent intercourse when sexual activity was underway. The nonverbal distancing strategy is less face threatening than verbal statements and could be used when an individual is concerned about maintaining the relationship. This tactic could also be subject to misinterpretation and require subsequent messages to clarify one’s intent. Perhaps recent media attention on sexual assault has prompted emerging adults to be clear in their assertions of disinterest in intercourse. The use of an explicit strategy is surprising given that brief, direct messages are face threatening (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). However, they are also efficient. Considering the average sexual episode lasts seven minutes (Miller & Byers, 2004), a partner does not have much time to explain that he/she doesn’t want to have sex.

Additionally, longer statements may dampen the mood and end all sexual activity abruptly. Even though intercourse may not be desired, a sexual script may be used that allows both partners to move toward a gradual, satisfactory end to the episode.

Conversations involving the use of planned scripts were described by the participants whether they engaged in a prior physical episode or not. These conversations were initiated by the abstainer/delayer with an opening statement that invoked one of three phrases. Over half of the survey participants declared “I want to wait/delay” in their opening line. This phrase seems to convey the intent while also leaving open the possibility of intercourse in the future.

Approximately one fourth said “I’m not ready.” Female adolescents between 15 and 19 described “not ready” as not having the maturity to be sexually active (Long-Middleton et al., 2013), and college students described emotional investment as a predictor for sexual behaviors (Hill, 2002). Future research on the meaning of *readiness* and *have sex* could advance understanding of the role played by sexual conversations in the decision of whether to have intercourse. The remaining fourth said they wanted to “wait until marriage.” These individuals clearly intend to abstain from sex until they are married. This message may cause relationships to end if a partner does not want to wait until marriage to have sex. However, this statement provides the sender an opportunity to vet shared values in a partner and assess potential fit as a life mate. Religious individuals who abstain recognize the benefits of dating like-minded partners (Kosenko, Applewhite, Drury, & Ash, 2016).

After the opening statement, a rationale or explanation was provided. The survey data analyzing secondary goals illustrates the motivating factors that contribute to the expressed rationale. Specifically, the factors of *God and parents, respect for self and partner, body and performance*, and *game playing* contributed to motivation for abstaining or delaying. In fact, *God*

and parents explained more variance than the other three factors combined, suggesting these external forces influence the decision making of emerging adults who want to abstain/delay. This finding supports parents who believe that communication about purity and abstinence can be beneficial (Manning, 2017). Given that the mode age of the sample was 19, this study supports other research (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015) that shows the influence parents retain in the lives of emerging adults who are in college. Additionally, the importance of religion has been noted as a motivating factor for abstinence among high schoolers aged 16-18 (Abbott & Dalla, 2008). While the importance of religion decreases during adolescence (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007), this study aligns with others that show that religious beliefs influence some emerging adults in their decision to abstain from sexual activity (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016; Smith & Denton, 2005).

The secondary goals of *God and parents* and *respect for self* differed between abstainers and delayers, where abstainers had higher mean scores on each of these factors. The four factors collectively accounted for 60% of the variance, leaving 40% of the variance yet unexplained. It is possible that the SAMS instrument is not well designed to identify the motivations of those who want to delay sex given that the instrument was designed to measure motivation to remain abstinent. Future research should focus on determining whether delayers have different motivations and goals from abstainers. There were no significant differences between abstainers and delayers on *body and performance* and *game playing*, which each also explained a very small percent of the variance. These factors play a much less significant role in the motivations of emerging adults who abstain or delay.

After expressing the rationale for abstaining from or delaying sex, conversations took one of three different paths according to the quantitative and qualitative data. First, enforcing rights

and obligations was the primary goal most evident in the respondents' conversational depictions. These messages declared one's intention not to participate in sexual intercourse by establishing a personal boundary. Communicating this goal may require assertiveness skills because there appears to be no room for negotiation with this strategy.

Second, some participants seemed to be guided by two of GPA's primary goals—sharing an activity (in this case making a joint decision to not have sex) or changing the relationship. These individuals wanted the decision to delay or abstain to be a joint decision, one discussed and agreed upon as a couple for the sake of the relationship. These messages recognize the relational impact of sexual intercourse and convey the importance of the first episode as a pivotal moment in relationship development. These messages further emphasize the sender's focus on the relational quality of sexual intercourse, rather than a recreational perspective, and the intent to invite the partner into the same perspective. Previous research has suggested that marriage is often the pivotal moment when partners choose to initiate sex (Abbott & Dalla, 2008), although given that the majority of emerging adults have sex, less committed forms of relationships often include sexual intercourse. Messages focused on changing the relationship could derail a hook-up attempt if one of the partners seeks greater interdependence as a prerequisite for sexual intercourse. Indeed, this goal insists on continued relationship development before having intercourse. The goal of sharing an activity was expressed with the same frequency as changing the relationship. In brief, for individuals who expressed these two goals, abstaining/delaying might have required restraint, but the decision not to have sex was supported by each person in the relationship.

Third, some interview participants described messages demanding that the partner agree to abstain/delay sexual activity. These messages were declarative statements, similar to the

enforcing rights messages, but they used plural pronouns rather than singular pronouns. In this way, the messages were interpreted as demands of a partner that left no room for discussion or negotiation. The analysis of primary goals showed another possibility for conversations was to obtain permission. This possibility was reported by only three survey participants and no interview participants. This option is likely an outlier, and the experiences of individuals who believe they need to seek permission to abstain or delay sex should be examined in future qualitative studies.

Outcomes

Research on GPA theory is enhanced in this study by including the outcomes of interaction. Sexual communication research often focuses on communicative and behavioral outcomes of conversations to show support for talking about sex in several relational contexts (e.g., Coffelt & Olson, 2014). In this study, the plans followed and actions taken by participants resulted in 94% of the participants not having sex. This finding suggests that the meaning of the messages was understood and respected, a conclusion consistent with the results of an experimental study in which men indicated they would stop advancing if a woman said *no* (Byers & Wilson, 1985). The results of this study indicate that messages which lead a couple not to have sex rarely lead to a break-up as a relational outcome, which could be a fear of someone who wants to abstain or delay and maintain a relationship. In this study, 6% of the participants engaged in sexual intercourse, even though one of the partners had indicated a goal of abstaining or delaying. At the same time, it is possible that abstain or delay comments in the moments of sexual arousal escalate the risk for sexual assault. Certainly, there is a need for additional research to understand the sexual influence tactics invoked in these situations and reasons for non-compliance.

Limitations and Future Research

Future studies can overcome the limitations in this study in at least five ways. First, a probability sampling strategy would permit generalization of the results and could also produce a more balanced sample of men and women. Second, abstain/delay conversations need to be operationalized with quantifiable measures, rather than relying on independent coders. Third, it would be valuable to ask participants to report the nature of the relationship with the individual who was in the abstaining or delaying conversation. Tactics likely differ between a hook-up context and a dating relationship, for example, and these contextual factors warrant investigation. Fourth, a larger sample size would facilitate more rigorous factor analysis. While this analysis provides early evidence of the SAMS scale's validity, future research should continue to examine the factor structure of this instrument with larger sample sizes. Fifth, future research should build upon LaFrance's (2010) sexual script research and investigate very specific moments in a sexual script leading up to not having sex.

In sum, this study identifies message strategies used by emerging adults to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse and shows the outcomes of those strategies. The communicative actions employed during these interactions can be included in intervention programs, aimed at encouraging abstinence or safe sex practices (Realini, Buzi, Smith, & Martinez, 2010).

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents (N = 192)

Demographic Category	<i>n</i>	%
Female	139	72
Male	52	27
18 years	58	30
19 years	70	37
20 years	34	18
21 years	16	8
22 and older	13	7
Heterosexual	173	90
Other orientations	19	10
Freshmen	101	53
Sophomore	48	25
Junior	24	13
Senior/Graduate	18	9
White/Non-Hispanic	144	75
Asian/Pacific Islander	17	9
Hispanic/Latin/Spanish	12	6
Black/African American	9	5
Other	10	4
Agriculture	9	5
Business	29	15
Design	10	5
Education	18	9
Engineering	18	9
Human sciences	46	26
Journalism/Communication	13	7
Liberal arts & sciences	25	13
Psychology	28	15
Open option	13	7
Virgin	95	49.5
Non-virgin	97	50.5

Table 2

Original Items on the Dunsmore SAMS

Item No.	I am/was sexually abstinent because:
Factor 1: Commitment to Self-schema	
1	I am committed to my future partner.
7	I am committed to a higher being (for example: God or Allah).
8	I am waiting for the true intimacy that comes with marriage.
11	I don't want to feel guilty.
14	I don't want to lose respect for myself.
16	I feel better about myself (have a higher self-esteem) knowing I am abstaining.
19	I feel I am a role model for my siblings and/or other young people around me.
20	I have a commitment with myself to abstain.
21	I want to stay consistent with my religion's view of sex and marriage.
23	I have pledged/promised to remain abstinent.
24	I know what I want and I will do what it takes to get it (I am strong willed).
28	I want to share a similar sexual history with my future partner.
37	My religion teaches that sex outside of marriage is wrong.
38	I don't want to lose the respect of my partner.
40	Sex is not important to me right now.
41	True love is worth waiting for.
Factor 2: Risk of Disappointing Authority Figures	
4	I don't want to disappoint my parents.
10	I don't want to disappoint my religious community (for example: church family).
13	I don't want to have to confess/admit to a religious authority and/or community.
22	I have a responsibility to my parents to remain abstinent.
26	I want to please my parents by staying abstinent.
31	Of fear of not following family values (religious or cultural)
Factor 3: Fear/Apprehension of Sexual Experience	
5	I am afraid of being compared to somebody else regarding sexual performance.
15	I fear that I don't know how to perform.
17	I feel embarrassed to show my body.
29	I don't know what to expect.
Factor 4: Fear of Physical Consequences	
3	I am afraid of getting an STI.
34	I am afraid my partner may have an STI.
6	I am afraid of a pregnancy.
36	If I have an STI, I don't want to pass it on to my partner.
Factor 5: Value of Virginity	
2	Being a virgin makes me powerful.
9	I believe society values virgins more than non-virgins.
30	I want to stand out and/or be different.
Factor 6: Reputation Regret	
27	I don't want to have a bad reputation.
33	I worry what my friends would think if I had sex.

35 I'm afraid of regretting having sex.

Factor 7: No Opportunity/Not Important

12 I am too busy to think about sex.

18 I don't want to commit myself to a relationship.

39 Other things in my life are more important than sex.

Factor 8: Manipulation

25 I like being chased and keeping the other person wanting more.

32 I like to play hard to get.

Table 3

Dunsmore Revised SAMS

Item No.	Item	F1	F2	F3	F4
4	I don't want to disappoint my parents.	.633	.198	.281	.235
7	I am committed to a higher being (for example: God or Allah).	.756	.396	-.055	-.125
10	I don't want to disappoint my religious community (for example: church family).	.886	.242	.046	-.024
11	I don't want to feel guilty.	.516	.388	.194	.168
13	I don't want to have to confess/admit to a religious authority and/or community.	.754	.148	.077	.007
19	I feel I am a role model for my siblings and/or other young people around me.	.569	.448	.220	.045
21	I want to stay consistent with my religion's view of sex and marriage.	.806	.414	-.006	-.125
22	I have a responsibility to my parents to remain abstinent.	.766	.155	.089	.203
23	I have pledged/promised to remain abstinent.	.662	.371	.017	.066
26	I want to please my parents by staying abstinent.	.729	.240	.237	.169
31	Fear of not following family values (religious or cultural)	.719	.259	.086	.097
37	My religion teaches that sex outside of marriage is wrong.	.839	.301	-.028	-.063
1	I am committed to my future partner.	.358	.564	.130	-.185
2	Being a virgin makes me powerful	.268	.487	.179	.157
8	I am waiting for the true intimacy that comes with marriage.	.498	.559	.050	-.110
14	I don't want to lose respect for myself.	.200	.637	.188	.240
16	I feel better about myself (have a higher self-esteem) knowing I am abstaining.	.249	.702	.055	.137
20	I have a commitment with myself to abstain.	.533	.619	.017	-.062
24	I know what I want and I will do what it takes to get it (I am strong willed).	.181	.596	.018	.215
28	I want to share a similar sexual history with my future partner.	.298	.435	.288	.099
35	I'm afraid of regretting having sex.	.143	.452	.241	.310
38	I don't want to lose the respect of my partner.	.244	.510	.107	.220
39	Other things in my life are more important than sex.	.250	.540	.054	.196
41	True love is worth waiting for.	.339	.666	.149	.049
5	I am afraid of being compared to somebody else regarding sexual performance.	.124	.121	.648	.251

15	I fear that I don't know how to perform.	.051	.110	.779	.020
17	I feel embarrassed to show my body.	.030	.187	.598	.093
29	I don't know what to expect.	.080	.038	.684	.301
3	I am afraid of getting an STI.	.118	.112	.217	.427
25	I like being chased and keeping the other person wanting more	-.079	.243	.077	.725
32	I like to play hard to get	-.038	.128	.078	.723
34	I am afraid my partner may have an STI.	.061	.031	.196	.560
Eigenvalues		12.191	3.601	1.953	1.625
Percentage of total variance		38.10	11.25	6.10	5.08
Number of test measures		12	12	4	4

Note: Exploratory factor analysis using varimax rotation for 32 items. Factor loadings > .40 that load on each factor are in boldface.

Figure 1. Extended GPA Process Applied to Abstain/Delay Conversations

