



The Virtue of Chastity: Understanding the Experiences of Abstinence from Pre-Marital Sex Among Public High School Students

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RESEARCH ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Received: July 29, 2024 Reviewed: November 15, 2024 Accepted: December 02, 2024 Published: December 30, 2024  Copyright © 2025 by the Author(s). This open-access article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.	The moral dilemma surrounding premarital sex among adolescents is a pressing issue that transcends cultural boundaries, affecting young people worldwide. This study explored the reasons and challenges faced by high school student couples in refraining from pre-marital sex (PMS), alongside their coping mechanisms and realizations to understand their experiences of abstinence from pre-marital sex. Using a qualitative case study design, seven couples aged 15 and above in a local high school in Eastern Visayas, Philippines, were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that the primary reasons for abstaining include setting personal boundaries, strong family influences, and positive peer pressure. Challenges included societal pressures, navigating intimacy, and balancing the emotional and physical aspects of their relationships. The coping mechanisms identified were maintaining open communication, practicing mutual respect, and adhering to religious values. Furthermore, participants realized that avoiding PMS allowed them to prioritize education and personal aspirations while preserving family trust and cultural values. The study concludes that personal values, familial guidance, and social support play a critical role in enabling teenagers to resist PMS despite external challenges. Schools and communities are encouraged to promote comprehensive sexuality education, incorporating

information about the risks of early sexual engagement and the benefits of abstinence. Programs should emphasize informed decision-making, fostering a supportive environment for teenagers to navigate relationships responsibly.

Keywords: *chastity, coping mechanism, pre-marital sex, sexual behavior, abstinence*

Introduction

Pre-marital sex (PMS) among adolescents is a growing concern worldwide due to its implications for public health, education, and societal values. As noted by Shrestha (as cited in Ekasari et al., 2020), over two-thirds of teenagers in developed nations engage in sexual intercourse, raising concerns about the associated health risks, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, and emotional distress. The consequences of adolescent sexual behavior extend beyond individual health risks; they impact family dynamics, educational outcomes, and community well-being (Ekasari et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, this issue is particularly acute, with alarming statistics indicating a rise in teenage pregnancies and STIs, reflecting a significant decline in sexual morality among youth (Cordero, 2018). The 2019 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study revealed that nearly 1 in 10 Filipino youth aged 15-24 had experienced pregnancy or fathered a child, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive sexual education and support systems (National Demographic and Health Survey, 2020). This deterioration has prompted families, educational institutions, and religious organizations to collaborate in addressing these challenges and highlights the need for research focusing on the factors influencing adolescents' sexual behaviors, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Despite these alarming trends, there is limited research exploring the perspectives of adolescents who choose not to engage in PMS. Studies such as those conducted by De Jose (2013) highlight how peer dynamics significantly influence adolescents' sexual decisions but often neglect to consider the narratives of those who maintain their commitment to chastity. Moreover, research by Sutherland and Kelsey (2019) indicates that adolescents who perceive strong parental guidance are less likely to engage in premarital sex. This gap is particularly evident in educational contexts, where schools play a pivotal role in shaping students' values and behaviors. Most existing studies emphasize the prevalence and risks of PMS, with little attention given to the reasons and challenges faced by adolescents who choose to abstain from such behavior. This study aimed to fill this gap by examining the personal experiences of selected student-couples who embody the virtue of chastity despite societal pressures.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework guiding this research is grounded in social learning theory, which posits that behaviors are learned through observation and interaction within social contexts (Bandura, 1977). This framework is particularly relevant in understanding how familial expectations, peer influences, and cultural norms shape adolescents' decisions regarding premarital sex. Moreover, findings by Arega et al. (2017) emphasized that comprehensive sex education can lead to improved decision-making among youth regarding their sexual health. Thus, understanding why some students choose not to engage in premarital sex can inform policies and programs aimed at reducing unwanted pregnancies and STIs among youth.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on adolescent sexual health by shedding light on an underexplored dimension of youth behavior and investigating the lived experiences of abstinent high school couples. It can also contribute to understanding an underexplored dimension of adolescent behavior, offering theoretical, practical, and societal implications fostering informed and responsible choices among youth.

Methods

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically using a multiple case data, to explore the reasons and challenges faced by high school couples who abstain from pre-marital sex (PMS), their coping mechanisms, and their realizations after non-engagement. A multiple case study design was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of each couple's unique experiences while identifying common themes across cases (Creswell, 2008). The focus on multiple cases strengthens the validity of the findings by capturing diverse perspectives on the phenomenon of adolescent abstinence.

Research Participants

The participants were seven high school couples in a local junior high school in Eastern Visayas, Philippines aged 15 and above, who were in romantic relationships for at least one month and exhibited a commitment to chastity. These couples were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they met specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. The researchers identified potential participants through consultations with school counselors and class advisers, who provided insights into students who matched the study's focus. Each participant provided informed consent, and parental consent was obtained for minors. Anonymity was maintained by assigning codes (P1, P2) to each participant, and all identifying information was omitted.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face in a private setting within the school premises. The interview guide comprised six open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' reasons for abstaining from PMS, the challenges they faced, their coping mechanisms, and their realizations. Coping mechanisms refer to strategies or practices that the participants use to manage the pressures and challenges associated with maintaining chastity, while realizations pertain to their reflections and insights gained from abstaining from PMS. The interviews were conducted in the vernacular language to ensure participants' ease and authenticity in sharing their experiences. Interview sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and supplemented by written notes. The researchers ensured cultural and ethical sensitivity during the interview process.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This included familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy.

The coding process involved a meticulous, iterative approach. First, transcripts were read thoroughly to identify significant statements and assign initial codes. These

codes were then categorized into broader themes, with patterns and connections identified across the cases. For instance, the themes of "peer influence" and "family expectations" emerged from the reasons for abstaining, while "emotional resilience" and "faith-based practices" were prominent among coping mechanisms.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure participants' welfare and privacy. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents (for minors), and approval was secured from the school administration. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, with all data securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Using thematic analysis, key themes were identified and are summarized in Table 1. The analysis revealed four major themes, discussed below in detail with sample supporting narratives, and aligned with relevant literature.

Themes	Key Findings	Sample Supporting Quotes
Reasons for Non-Engagement	Setting personal boundaries	"I know my limitation... we're too young for that." (P12)
	Influence of peers and family	"My friends advised me never to agree to PMS, and I respect that." (P9)
	Awareness of the consequences	"We know that early PMS can lead to unwanted pregnancy." (P13)
Challenges in Abstaining from PMS	Societal pressures	"Many of my peers are already sexually active; it's hard to resist." (P6)
	Balancing intimacy and emotional connection	"Sometimes, it's difficult not to take things further when you care about someone." (P4)
	Managing misconceptions from others	"People think we're strange for waiting, but it's our choice." (P8)
Coping Mechanisms	Open communication and mutual respect	"We constantly talk about our boundaries and respect each other." (P3)
	Religious commitment and shared values	"We serve in church together... it keeps us focused on what matters." (P7)
Realizations	Sociocultural influences shape behaviors	"I've seen friends drop out of school due to pregnancy. I don't want that for us." (P9)
	Acknowledging the long-term benefits of abstinence	"Waiting means we can focus on our goals and build trust in our relationship." (P5)

Reasons for Non-Engagement in PMS

Participants identified several reasons for their decision to abstain from PMS, including setting boundaries, the influence of family and peers, and awareness of the consequences. Setting boundaries emerged as a central theme, highlighting the importance of mutual respect and self-discipline in relationships. For instance, one participant shared: *"I know my limitation, and my boyfriend understands it. We talked about not crossing certain boundaries because we're too young for that. For me, it's something that should happen after marriage"* (P12). This aligns with De Jose's (2013) findings, which emphasized that respect and boundaries are integral to fostering healthy adolescent relationships.

Positive peer and family influences also played a significant role. One participant explained how their friends encouraged them to maintain their commitment to chastity: *"My friends said that if my boyfriend ever insists on PMS, I shouldn't agree because it might ruin my life. They've been a big help in reminding me to focus on my future"* (P9). Similarly, another participant highlighted their parents' expectations: *"My parents always remind me to focus on my studies first. They worked so hard to send me to school, and I don't want to break their trust"* (P5).

Participants also cited awareness of consequences such as teenage pregnancy and disrupted life goals as a deterrent to PMS. As one participant put it: *"We know the risks. If I get pregnant, it would be the end of my studies. I don't want to face that kind of future"* (P13). Moreover, awareness of the risks associated with PMS, such as teenage pregnancy and disrupted future aspirations, played a pivotal role in their decision-making. This aligns with findings by Ekasari et al. (2020), which emphasized that self-awareness and knowledge of consequences significantly impact adolescents' sexual behaviors.

Challenges in Abstaining from PMS

Despite their commitment to chastity, participants faced notable challenges, including societal pressures, balancing intimacy, and addressing misconceptions. Societal pressures were frequently mentioned. One participant described the difficulty of resisting peer influences: *"Many of my classmates are already sexually active. Sometimes it feels like everyone expects us to follow the same path, but I know I have to stay strong"* (P6). The complexity of balancing intimacy and emotional connection was another challenge: *"There are times when it's hard not to take things further because of the strong feelings we have for each other, but we remind ourselves about our goals and boundaries"* (P4). Participants also reported facing misconceptions and judgment from others: *"Some people think we're weird for waiting, but it's our choice. I know it's the right one for us"* (P8).

The emotional maturity of maintaining boundaries while fostering intimacy illustrates the nature of adolescent relationships. Participants described navigating the tension between physical attraction and emotional connection, emphasizing the need for mutual understanding and shared values.

Furthermore, misconceptions and judgment from peers and community members posed additional challenges. The decision to abstain was sometimes perceived as unconventional or even unnatural, adding a layer of social pressure to participants' resolve. This underscores the importance of creating supportive environments where diverse choices are respected. These pressures underscore the conflicting values adolescents navigate, a challenge also observed by Sutherland and Kelsey (2019); balancing intimacy and emotional connection within a relationship was another notable challenge.

Participants expressed struggles in maintaining boundaries while deepening their emotional bonds, reflecting the complexity of adolescent romantic relationships. Additionally, participants reported facing misconceptions and judgment from others, who viewed their abstinence as unconventional. This highlights the societal stigma attached to decisions that deviate from prevailing norms (Wang, 2020).

Coping Mechanisms for Managing the Challenges of PMS Abstinence

Participants adopted various strategies to manage the challenges of abstinence, including open communication, mutual respect, and religious commitment. Open communication and mutual respect were frequently cited as key to maintaining their commitment. As one participant shared: *"We always talk about our boundaries and why they're important to us. It helps us stay on the same page and avoid misunderstandings"* (P3). Regular discussions about boundaries and shared goals helped strengthen their commitment to abstinence. This finding aligns with Crisostomo and Jimenez (2009), who emphasized the importance of effective communication in fostering healthy relationships.

Meanwhile, religious commitment also played a pivotal role. Participants' commitment to their religious beliefs and values provided them with a moral framework and a supportive community, reinforcing their values and offering an alternative source of identity and belonging. This is corroborated by this interview extract: *"We serve in the church choir together, and it keeps us focused on what's important. It also helps us bond in a meaningful way"* (P7). Participants noted that shared involvement in church activities strengthened their bond and kept them focused on their shared goals. This aligns with Hardy and Willoughby's (2017) assertion that religiosity plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' sexual behaviors.

Realizations After Non-Engagement in PMS

Participants shared profound insights gained from their decision to abstain, reflecting on sociocultural influences and the long-term benefits of abstinence. Sociocultural influences shaped their perspectives, as they observed the negative consequences of PMS among peers. One participant noted: *"I've seen friends drop out of school because of teenage pregnancies. That's not the life I want for myself"* (P9). Another participant highlighted the importance of making informed choices: *"Seeing how others have struggled made me realize how important it is to stay true to my values and focus on my future"* (P13).

Participants also reflected on the long-term benefits of abstinence, such as personal growth and strengthened trust in relationships: *"Waiting has made our relationship stronger. It's not about physical intimacy but about understanding and supporting each other"* (P5).

Participants' observations of peers who experienced the negative consequences of PMS, such as teenage pregnancies and school dropouts, shaped their decisions. These reflections underscore the role of vicarious learning, as posited by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The long-term benefits of abstinence, including personal growth, strengthened trust, and the ability to focus on education, were consistently highlighted. Participants viewed their choices as investments in their future, framing abstinence as an empowering, forward-thinking decision. This aligns with Win's (2015) findings, which emphasized the positive outcomes of informed decision-making among adolescents.

Conclusion and Future Works

This study explored the reasons, challenges, coping mechanisms, and realizations of high school couples who chose to abstain from pre-marital sex (PMS). The findings provide valuable insights into the personal and social factors influencing adolescent decision-making, with significant implications for education, adolescent development, and sexual health initiatives. Adolescents' choices to abstain from PMS were shaped by factors such as strong family and peer influences, self-awareness of consequences, and adherence to personal and cultural values. These findings highlight the potential for schools to integrate values education, peer mentorship programs, and parental engagement activities into the teaching and learning process. Such initiatives could equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their relationships and future goals, fostering a supportive and values-driven educational environment.

Challenges such as societal pressures, misconceptions, and the complexity of balancing intimacy and personal boundaries within relationships revealed the intricate interplay between external influences and individual choices. These findings emphasize the importance of comprehensive sexuality education that goes beyond addressing risks associated with PMS to include strategies for building healthy relationships, managing societal expectations, and leveraging positive peer influences. Schools, in collaboration with community and religious organizations, can play a pivotal role in reinforcing these values through workshops, info drives, and targeted initiatives that promote informed decision-making among adolescents.

While this study provides meaningful insights, it is limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific geographic and cultural context. Future research could broaden the scope by examining diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and regional settings to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents' sexual behaviors and decision-making processes. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of parents, educators, and healthcare providers could enrich the discourse on adolescent sexual health. Longitudinal studies may also provide valuable information on how adolescents' decisions evolve over time and their long-term impacts on relationships, education, and overall life outcomes. Addressing the multifaceted nature of adolescent sexual health, this study underscores the need for collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities. These efforts are essential to creating an environment that empowers adolescents to make choices aligned with their goals and values. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on fostering responsible and values-driven decision-making, ultimately promoting a healthier and more informed adolescent population.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.