Abstract: This article seeks to contribute to the study of fiction as a source of everyday life information by investigating Young Adult Literature (YAL) as a source of information on sexuality for young women readers. Through the examination of the reading experiences and practices of 11 young women, this article identifies major informational topics on sexuality that can be found in YAL as well as the unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality. Ultimately, this article argues that the type of information that can be found in YAL can help fill in the gaps of traditional sex education and contribute to the sexual well-being of young people.

Keywords: reading studies, everyday life, libraries, Young Adult Literature, sexuality

Mots-clés : études de lecture, vie courante, bibliothèques, littérature pour jeunes adultes, sexualité

A lot of [Young Adult books] are somebody's first gateway to understanding relationships. Sure there are relationships "on screen" or in person. But there's something about books. They give you the inner-workings of a character's mind in the way that TV shows and observing your parents don't really do.

— Kelly
Introduction
In recent years, research on adolescent sexuality in young adult literature (YAL) has included a discussion of its potential role as an information source for sex education (Bittner 2012, 2017; Gilbert 2004; Gillis and Simpson 2015; Kokkola 2013; Levine 2002). Based on the extensive, yet often problematic, presentation of sexuality within the genre, it has gained both support and opposition. However, very few empirical studies have been conducted on how readers themselves say YAL has informed their sexual lives. This article seeks to contribute to the study of fiction as a source of everyday life information by investigating YAL as a source of information on sexuality for young women readers. Through the examination of the reading experiences and practices of 11 young women who read sexually themed YAL, this article identifies major informational topics on sexuality that can be found in YAL as well as the unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality. Ultimately, the article argues that the type of information that can be found in YAL can help fill in the gaps of traditional sex education and contribute to the sexual well-being of young people.

Literature review
A link between fiction reading and everyday life information seeking (ELIS) has been well established in library and information science (Moyer 2007; Ooi and Liew 2011; Ross 1999, 2000; Usherwood and Toyne 2002). Most prominently, Catherine Ross’s (1999, 2000) seminal research on finding without seeking was the first to draw links between fiction reading and ELIS. Ross found that, although readers of fiction did not necessarily see themselves as actively seeking information, they were able to find valued information in fiction that informed their everyday lives. Readers in Ross’s study reported that reading fiction made a significant difference in their lives by awakening new perspectives, providing models for identity, eliciting reassurance or comfort, prompting feelings of a connection to others, fostering courage to make a change, encouraging acceptance of one’s life circumstances, and evoking a disinterested understanding of the world. According to Denise Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell (2006a, 2006b), in the ELIS behaviour of teens, teens are motivated to seek information to develop the following set of variables that directly relate to their maturation process: the social, emotional, reflective, physical, creative, cognitive, and sexual self. Although sexuality is one of the major variables in teen ELIS and although some scholars such as Robert Bittner (2012), Amy Pattee (2006), and Jen Gilbert (2004) have specifically suggested literature as a source of information on sexuality for young people, very few major empirical studies have been conducted on the reading practices and experiences of young readers in relation to sexuality.1

Prominent studies of sexuality in YAL itself tend to critique its presentation of sexuality, especially female sexuality. Linda Christian-Smith (1990) has argued that young adult (YA) romance novels regulate femininity by communicating what it means to be a young woman—as a sexual subject and as a member of society—according to conservative gender norms. Roberta S. Trites (2000)
has argued that discourses of sexuality in YAL frequently depict sexuality as displeasure, instead of pleasure, in an attempt to repress adolescent sexuality lest teens become too aware or involved in the power of sexuality. And, most recently, Lydia Kokkola (2013) has argued that many novels about teens, even texts that attempt to be liberal and depict controversial topics in affirming ways, portray teens as “sexy sinners or delinquent deviants” (214). All of these studies suggest that reading YAL may be detrimental to young readers’ sexual well-being, especially young women, due to a multitude of repressive strategies that can be observed across the YA canon.

However, it is necessary to consider both the text and the reader in order to fully understand the phenomenon of learning from literary works. This is because examining texts and readers separately may produce different findings. For example, Janice Radway’s (1984) highly influential work Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature demonstrates how readers may respond in unexpected ways to conservative, repressive ideology in romance novels. In her study of romance readers, Radway found that romance has the potential to be a site for naming dissatisfaction with patriarchal culture for women readers, despite the highly critiqued anti-feminist content within the texts. This discrepancy in expectations for reader experience based on the content of the text can be explained by Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading. This theory upholds that reading is an event where the interpretation of a text is wrought within a matrix of the author’s words and the reader’s own life experience. In effect, the examination of a text alone cannot determine the experience of the reader because it is only one part of the transaction.

In general, LIS scholars such as Paulette Rothbauer (2006) and Vivian Howard (2011) have found that reading fiction offers young people an opportunity to learn more about their social worlds, their places within it, and the possibilities for them in the future. This article builds upon all of these studies to answer how reading fiction can inform the social, emotional, and physical sexual lives of young women readers by examining the experiences of young readers themselves.

**Methodology**

The data for this study is derived from responses from phenomenological semi-structured interviews (Creswell 2013; Seidman 2006) that were conducted with 11 female participants for the author’s doctoral thesis research on young women’s experiences reading sexually themed YAL (Helkenberg 2019). This study was reviewed and approved by Western University’s Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. The findings presented in this article were guided by the following research question: “What are the experiences of young women who read sexually themed YAL and how might they be informed about relationships and sex when engaging with sexually-themed YAL?”

Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for this project. These sampling methods are recommended for difficult-to-locate populations and projects dealing with sensitive topics (Singleton and Straits 2010). Participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and attended Canadian
post-secondary institutions. Sixty per cent of participants self-identified as a person of colour and 30 per cent self-identified as bisexual, pansexual, or lesbian. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Each participant varied in the types of texts they read, which included novels, comics, and fan fiction. YAL is defined for this study as literature in any form that is written about teens and written in a teen voice (Helkenberg 2018). Novels included quintessential YA texts such as Judy Blume’s (1975) Forever and John Green’s (2005) Looking for Alaska. Comics included stories of adolescence such as The Diary of a Teenage Girl by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002) and Japanese comics such as Kiss Him, Not Me by Junko (2013–18). Fan fiction included a wide variety of fan works including Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, One Direction and Hunger Games fan fictions.

This research is specifically about young women readers. As such, it examines their unique experiences reading the literature that has often been written about and for young women in particular. During the interviews, which were between 45 and 90 minutes in length, participants were asked about their current and past reading experiences. Thematic analysis was then used to identify, analyse, and report themes found within the interview data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method of analysis is performed by systematically coding interesting features of the data and then collating codes into common or significant themes. Due to the small sample size, this article does not seek to generalize to the larger population. The study highlights the experiences of the young women interviewed for this project. However, these findings demonstrate the possibilities of YAL as an information source on sexuality and can act as a starting point for further discussion and future research.

Findings

The findings of this article outline the major informational topics on sexuality that can be found in YAL and the unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality. These findings reflect major themes that were drawn from the interview data and reveal what readers themselves have to say about what they learned from reading YAL. Each category is listed in descending order of most frequently referenced to least frequently referenced. Each of the categories were referred to by at least two of the 11 participants.

Information on sexuality found in YAL

Six major categories of information on sexuality were found within the interview data as identified by participants.

Sexual acts

I remember that the characters were trying to have oral sex and it was just bizarre to me.
Straight up bizarre ... it kind of broadened my horizons in that sense where I was like, ok ...
I guess sex doesn’t have to be penis in vagina.

— Arya
Participants learned three types of significant details about sexual acts from YAL. First, it introduced them to new sexual acts such as different sexual positions, non-penetrative sex (oral/digital), and sex in different contexts (not just in a bed). Second, it taught them the mechanics of sexual acts. For example, how oral sex is performed. Third, it presented sexual acts as pleasurable as opposed to strictly reproductive.

Different types of relationships

There was always this, not a stereotype but a connotation that you’re not really a lesbian, you’re only doing this because you can’t find a man or scared of a man. ... And after reading this literature I found that it’s possible to be in a relationship with another female. And even though they don’t have a penis, it doesn’t make it any less authentic.

— Sarah

Participants reported that YAL taught them about different types of relationships. Foremost, this was in reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) relationships. However, it also extended to the possibility of other non-normative relationships such as incestuous or age-gap relationships.

Relationship realities

[I learned about] . . . the intimacy of sexual intercourse. Because your parents can tell you, or forbid you ... and the textbooks can tell you the technicalities. But, it’s different when you see a character go through it and what they learn and what they regret ... That it’s not just technical terms. It’s not just feelings or what your parents tell you. There can be pros and cons to every romantic or intimate sexual relationship.

— Stacey

Participants reported that YAL presents a broader and more realistic picture of what relationships are like in practice: how people meet, start dating, engage in sex, and face obstacles together.

Strategies for dealing with relationship problems

I would read a story and I would be like: “Oh my god, why would he even get mad about that?” And then I’d think about it and like, wait, that’s happened to me and I completely overreacted. Seeing it from the other side in a situation that wasn’t mine. ... I was like, “Oh, I could see it now, I guess.” I have a bank of information that I can draw on and say, ok, I can either respond to this this way, like what I want to do right now, or I have five other stories that I had just read.

— Andie

Participants reported that reading about characters who were going through difficult situations in their sexual or romantic relationships provided examples of how to deal with their own relationship problems or reflect on their own personal issues that affect their relationships.
Abusive relationships

So, when I was in the beginning of high school ... [the book] was called Beach Blonds. There was this girl, she was taking the summer in the Florida Keys with her family. Everything was going nice. There were beautiful girls running on the beach, everything was fine, she met guys. Very sort of the ... not stereotypes, but the archetypes that come with Young Adult Literature. It was all there, but then it hit a point in the book where a friend of hers she was in an abusive relationship. ... And it made me take a step back and consider maybe sex isn’t that simple. Maybe things are different from the inside than they are from the outside.

— Bonnie

Participants reported that YAL taught them about different aspects of abuse. Predominantly, it provided nuanced examples of what abusive relationships can look like. In some cases, it also provided opportunities for participants to reflect on what it means to be treated well in a relationship.

Consent

I remember reading this book called Speak ... it was about this girl who got raped. And, again, rape was not something that was really talked about in my house. I didn’t even learn about it until health class and even then they kind of skirted around the topic and kind of moved on, right? So, I think, it was kind of like one of those moments for me where sex didn’t equal pleasure. Or sex didn’t equal baby. It was this whole other darker dimension that I had no idea about. And it got me thinking about the ownership of your body, consent, and all the other very vital things that come with the idea of sex.

— Arya

Consent was often discussed in relation to instances of rape, where consent was violated and, in turn, readers thought about what it means to give consent or to have ownership over one’s body.

Unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality

Participants in this study also identified unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality. One participant provided an excellent summary of what fictional narratives of sexuality uniquely offer to readers:

I think that books give you an incorporation of all aspects. From health you learn anatomy ... this is what happens, be safe. And then in terms of porn it’s very vulgar, it’s not very representative of real life sex. You know what I mean? I feel books incorporate all of that. Relationship aspects, dynamics between characters, it shows sex as the whole thing not just one specific scene or the biological aspect or something. So, I think it wholly encompasses everything.

— Christina

This section outlines the unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality, no matter the genre, as identified by participants. The participants reported on the unique qualities of YAL, including the following specific attributes.
Presents the emotional and social aspects of sexual relationships
Participants reported that fiction describes the emotional and social aspects of sexual relationships, including positive aspects such as dating, courtship, romance, flirting, passion, care, respect, intimacy, pleasure, and love. It also included negative aspects such as abuse, cruelty, confusion, confusion over sexual orientation, hurt feelings, and heartbreak. In this regard, it made participants view sex as more than just a biological act and see it as an emotional, social, and pleasurable part of a relationship.

Fills in the gaps of sex education
Participants reported that an emphasis on the emotional, social, and pleasurable aspects of sexual relationships helped to fill in the gaps of traditional sex education. Presented within the context of social life, they reported that they were able to read about relationships that were more organic and realistic. However, they also tended to emphasize that fiction works best as an information source on sexuality in conjunction with other sources such as sex education, non-fiction textbooks, health information, and peer groups.

Is detailed and descriptive
Participants reported that fiction often describes relationships and sex in great detail. They noted that, because readers are often following a character’s inner monologue, they can get a detailed view into the thoughts and feelings of a character experiencing a sexual relationship. They also referred to the amount of time that one spends with a written narrative as being longer than one would spend with other sources such as a health website or movie scenes. This makes it possible to live vicariously through the characters.

Is pleasurable to read
A focus on the emotional, social, and pleasurable aspects of sexual relationships that are described in detail made fictional content about relationships and sex interesting in a way that “banal” or “hospital-clean” health information is not. Although participants recognized that fiction reading can be educational and that they did learn from it, they primarily read it for pleasure. Some participants felt that, because fiction is pleasurable to read, you can “take more” from it and remember information better than you can with non-fictional sources of information. In some cases, it was also physically pleasurable to read sexually themed fiction.

Can lead to deep questioning
Participants who read complex narratives of sexuality reported that it often led them to ask more questions, demand more answers, and investigate sexuality more deeply. Some participants reported that they had complicated relationships with different texts that left them feeling confused, disturbed, angry, or annoyed. However, these experiences also led them to question their assumptions or question societal norms that they felt repressed by.
Unique qualities of YAL as an information source on sexuality
All of the qualities listed above can also apply to YAL, but the participants also identified qualities that were unique to YAL, and these qualities are outlined in the following sections. As Bonnie explained,

*I feel like with children’s books and Young-er Adult novels, maybe 9–12, they don’t talk about [sex] at all. And then when it comes to Adult Literature, you’re just completely confronted, sometimes overwhelmed by the sexual context or connotation that comes in the book. So, when you read Young Adult Literature it’s not necessarily a gateway, but it’s a way for you to be introduced to sex without being overwhelmed. And being a young person myself, I empathise with the people who are involved in the books and the characters. That’s why I feel like it’s so valuable. Because I’m not afraid to delve into the stories and because I can see myself in them."

Provides a script for a relationship
Participants reported that YAL provided them with a complete “standard” for what a relationship is or should be like. This included the progression of a relationship: meeting, dating, becoming committed, getting physical, and then maybe breaking up at the end. It also meant that readers got a sense of what was a “good” relationship and what was a “bad” one so that they could compare these with their own relationships. This script also dealt with a wide variety of topics that would be helpful in navigating a relationship: minimizing physical and emotional risks, gaining consent, dealing with relationship issues, having sex, and feeling heartbreak.

Acts as transitional literature
Participants noted that YAL is a gateway into the world of sex and sexually themed literature for young people. They noted that YAL is not usually as explicit or complicated as adult fiction, which is because it is targeted towards teens who are experiencing a relationship for the first time.

Is more relatable to teens
Participants reported that, because YAL is about teen characters and set within the unique context of adolescence, it is more relatable to teens. They often described a feeling of “seeing myself” in YA texts or being better able to empathize or live vicariously through teen characters when they were teens themselves.

Discussion
These findings provide empirical evidence that YAL can act as a valuable source of information on sexuality for young people, especially young women. Moreover, the inclusion of information on sexual pleasure, non-normative sexual relationships, and consent are especially significant as many sex education scholars have identified this information as missing from formal sex education (see, for example, Allen 2004; Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013; Fine 1988; Gilbert
2018). Specifically, leading scholars in this area, such as Louisa Allen (2004, 158), advocate for sex educators to acknowledge and promote:

- a need for knowledge about the body, as related to sexual response and pleasure;
- a need of recognition of the value of sexual pleasure enjoyed throughout life in safe and responsible manners within a values framework respectful of the rights of others;
- a need to foster the practice and enjoyment of consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable sexual relationships.

By including this range of information in sex education, these scholars argue that a sexual education of this kind may ultimately contribute to the sexual empowerment of young people, especially young women, by validating dynamic sexual feelings and acknowledging sexual agency. As shown by this study, YAL has the potential to address these topics in descriptive detail by focusing on sex beyond reproduction, dynamic relationships, and the social dimensions of sexual relationships. In conjunction with more traditional forms of sex education, YAL has the potential to fill the known gaps of sex education and contribute to young people’s sexual well-being.

It is also significant that some participants in this study reported that YAL was their primary source of information on the social, emotional, and pleasurable components of sexual relationships. For example, Jane said: “Yeah, it’s pretty much where I got all my information from. Or like a standard idea of what a relationship consists of, for sure.” Many of the participants also said that they were from conservative families and/or had limited sex education. For these participants, published YAL and other printed books, in particular, were a safe and protected space for them to interact with information about sexuality. As Madeline explains, “growing up my mom would take me to Chapters and I’d pick out a couple books. And she didn’t really look at them because she just assumed that ‘books are books,’ they’re always going to be kind of safe with what you read. ... I feel like because it was a book my mom wouldn’t question it.” Clearly, Madeline’s mom did not question the books she read, even if they had sex in them, because “books are books” and reading is a good thing. Indeed, LIS scholar Amy Pattee (2006) dubbed YAL the “Secret Source” on information about sexuality. Printed books, vetted and financially supported by publishing imprints, adds legitimacy to readers’ choices in narratives and also affords them freedom and privacy to read. As Christina said about reading sex within printed novels: “I feel like it’s special because it’s a little bit private. It’s within a book and even if someone walks in on you, you’re just reading a book.”

However, it is important to note that, while these participants talked about a wide range of information on sexuality found in YAL, some participants also felt that published YAL as a whole did not contain the information that they were seeking. This included positive narratives about LGBTQ relationships; bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism, and masochism play; and more descriptive sex scenes. In Paulette Rothbauer’s (2004a, 2004b) dissertation
research on queer young women readers, the readers revealed a dissatisfaction with uninflected “standard coming-out narratives” that depict queerness as an unfailing source of bleakness in one’s life. These young women desired to read narratives that showed queer characters in love and that demonstrated the positive possibilities of what life could be like for queer men and women. This could also be observed in many of the participants in this study. These participants tended to seek out fiction in online spaces when they had sexual reading interests that are not typically addressed in conventional, published YAL. Due to these factors, published YAL may not meet some readers’ sexual information needs. Online amateur fiction, especially fan fiction, is where these readers turned to when they are seeking alternative reading experiences.

The lack of descriptive, non-normative content in YAL is due to limitations on what is considered appropriate sexual knowledge for young readers. These limitations have been observed within YAL by Christian-Smith (1990), Trites (2000), and Kokkola (2013) in the form of overt and subtle codes and tropes that uphold conservative viewpoints and promote sexual repression. In effect, YAL often does school readers on sexuality according to adult viewpoints and does not necessarily portray teen sexuality honestly. This is because books that do challenge what is considered appropriate sexual knowledge for young readers are often met with pushback. For example, some of the most beloved texts about relationships and sex, such as Judy Blume’s (1975) *Forever*, are also some of the most repeatedly challenged and banned novels in school and public libraries due to their frank depictions of sexual acts. Challenges to *Forever* describe the text as “pornographic,” as not promoting “the sanctity of family life,” and as lacking any “aesthetic, literary or social value” (Sova 2006, 52–53). This study demonstrates the informative value of texts that may be deemed by some groups as inappropriate additions to libraries and classrooms. Making known the positive qualities of sexually themed YAL is a step towards reducing limitations on sexual content that may actually be beneficial to young readers’ sexual lives.

**Conclusion**

In her manifesto *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski (2008, 83) writes: “One motive for reading is the hope of gaining a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. Literature’s relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are.” Through the voices of the young women readers who participated in this project, this study reveals the informative value of sexually themed YAL in the context of everyday life. It ultimately argues that, although YAL as a whole is not perfect, it has the potential to provide rich and varied reading experiences that contribute to young people’s everyday sexual lives. In sum, YAL has the potential to give a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality that goes beyond the biological and includes the social, emotional, pleasurable, and painful aspects of sexual relationships that are traditionally excluded from sex education.

Fiction as a source of information on sexuality also does a kind of work that other sources, like sex education textbooks, may not be able to do. One thing
that surfaced within this study was that sexually themed literature often inspired a sense of hope in readers—hope that they could find happiness in their relationships with others. This affective dimension is not typically offered by “hospital-clean” sex education, which is what Sarah described as the highlight of her reading experience:

When I was a kid and even now a little bit, I am quite sceptical about love. But through reading these stories I realise that it’s possible between people, when people are finally opening up to each other. After letting go of their fears and opening up, letting their vulnerabilities show to each other and accepting each other’s vulnerabilities, true love can happen. So, that was wonderful. I did learn that from the stories.

Overall, these findings can provide a starting point for considering how YAL can be an informative resource on sexuality as well as how narratives of sexuality in fiction can be improved to better meet the informational needs of young readers.

Note
1 Major exceptions include Linda Christian-Smith (1990), Paulette Rothbauer (2004a, 2004b), and Robert Bittner (2017).

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