Using an Intersectional Life Course Perspective to Understand Familial Environment and its Impact on Sexuality Development among Asian American Sexual Minority College Students

Talia Kim-Thanh Kiều[a,b,*], **Emily F. Galper**[c], **Cierra Raine Sorin**[d], **Brittnie E. Bloom**[e,f]

[a]Department of Health Behavior, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

[b]Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

[c]Hussman School of Journalism and Media, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

[d]Department of Sociology, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

[e]University of California Global Health Institute Women's Health, Gender, and Empowerment Center of Expertise, Los Angeles, CA, USA

[f]Graduate School of Public Health, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA

Abstract

There is a dearth of research understanding the sexual health of Asian American adolescents, and even more so for those who identify as sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, and other sexual orientations). This study is a secondary qualitative analysis focused on young adults' recollections of their formal and informal sex education experiences in childhood and adolescence using a sub-sample of in-depth interviews from students who self-identified as both Asian and sexual minorities living in the USA (n=9). Results were organised into three sections: 1) latent cultural factors (e.g. stigma surrounding sex, self-sufficiency, filial piety); 2) the downstream effects of latent cultural factors (e.g. sex-related discussions, rules disallowing dating, role of lateral family members); and 3) the impact of deficient familial sex-related discussions (e.g. Internet, resentment). Study findings underscore the links between identity concealment and relationship concealment that are unique to Asian sexual minority individuals. We suggest that interventions involving Asian American US youth and their families should be culturally informed and promote cross-generational sex-related discussion. Future research should further explore the role of chosen family and non-parental family members as a point of intervention as they can be helpful sources of informal sex education.

Keywords

life course theory; parent-child communication; intersectionality; Asian American; sexual minority

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[*]**Corresponding Author:** Talia Kieu tkieu@email.unc.edu.

Introduction

Human sexuality exists on a spectrum and changes throughout a person's life course (DeLamater and Friedrich 2002). Adolescence and young adulthood represent critical moments of sexuality development (Russell, Van Campen, and Muraco 2012) that are often supported and informed by sex education. Formal, school-based sex education in the USA is not required in every state and content requirements vary widely (Lindberg and Kantor 2022). Although there has been an increase in LGBTQ+ (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other identities)-inclusive sex education, LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education is not available to most young people (SIECUS 2022) and sexual minority youth are more likely to report having received no sex education compared to their heterosexual counterparts (McKay et al. 2021). Moreover, LGBTQ+ youth report that the sex education they do receive is heteronormative and focuses mainly on pregnancy and disease prevention (Naser et al. 2020). To address the gaps left by either inadequate or a complete absence of formal sex education, young people may seek information through informal sources of sex education. Informal sources of sex education include exposure to media, information found on the internet, and conversations with family members or peers (Brasileiro et al. 2023; Charest and Kleinplatz 2021; Litsou et al. 2021).

When compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ youth face a higher risk of experiencing physical dating violence, sexual violence, and sexually transmitted infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019; Szucs et al. 2023). This disproportionate risk could be buffered by the provision of good quality comprehensive sex education (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021). However, multiple studies report that LGBTQ+ youth turn to the Internet (e.g. pornography, online health information) to supplement the deficient sex education they receive in schools (DeHaan et al. 2013; Mitchell et al. 2014; Mustanski et al. 2013; Mustanski 2011; Bloom et al. 2022). Given there is a need for youth to receive sex-related information outside of schools, the familial environment has the potential to be a powerful informal source of sex education. Although interventions promoting effective sex communication in the home have shown success in the broader population, these interventions have yet to be researched in families with LGBTQ+ children (Sutton et al. 2014). Due to the stigma rooted in cisheteronormativity—the societal expectation that everyone is cisgender and heterosexual—conversations about sexuality between LGBTQ+ youth and their parents may not take place (Kelleher 2009; Pachankis and Jackson 2023). When such discussions do occur, they may be harmful to the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth (Flores et al. 2019; Rubinsky and Cooke-Jackson 2021).

The Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth population, including both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ individuals, remains underexplored in the field of sex-related research. This gap is potentially influenced by the prevailing model minority myth, which is a stereotype that suggests certain ethnic or racial minority groups, particularly Asian Americans, are perceived as more successful, academically accomplished, and socioeconomically well-off than other groups (Poon et al. 2016). This stereotype tends to oversimplify and homogenise the experiences of diverse communities within the labelled group, ignoring the significant challenges, inequities, and disparities that individuals may

face. The model minority myth can contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, overlooking the diversity of experiences within a particular community and downplaying the systemic barriers that some individuals may encounter (Walton and Truong 2023).

Despite the model minority label attributed to AAPI youth, one study found that sexually active AAPI youth engage in more risky sexual behaviour (e.g. condomless sex) compared to their non-AAPI peers Lee and Rotheram-Borus 2009). Sexuality studies highlight that the parent-child relationship is a significant factor that influences sexual risk (Diiorio, Pluhar, and Belcher 2003), this factor is understudied in Asian youth. Although the literature is limited, there are studies that explore parental contributions to sexual socialisation in AAPI young adults. In a sample of Asian American female college students, parents were the least reported source of sex education (Lee et al. 2013). In a cross-sectional survey, Trinh et al. (2014) examined the influence of parental sexual communication on Asian American college students' sexual behaviours. Participants reported more sex-related conversations with peers than with parental figures, specifically in topics related to gendered sexual roles, acceptance of casual sex, and importance of relationships; however, parental communication exceeded peer communication on the topic of abstinence.

Filial piety may be one explanation for the lack of diversity in topics of sex-related conversations, as well as sex-related conversations with parents among AAPI youth. Filial piety refers to a "set of normative notions about how children should treat and interact with their parents" and is characterised by respecting, honouring, caring for, and meeting the expectations of parents (Hu and Wang 2013; Huang, Chan, and Cui 2020; Kyu-Taik Sung and Song 2001). Although filial piety has links to the Confucian teachings characteristic of East Asia in particular, it is considered as a broader value that has been ingrained across Asian cultures irrespective of an individuals' religious or other beliefs (Zhang, Ailshire, and Crimmins 2016; Bedford and Yeh 2021; Li, Singh, and Keerthigha 2021). In sum, the literature documents a lack of sex-related conversations between AAPI youth and their parents through quantitative studies; however, there is a need to qualitatively explain the cultural components that contribute to this communication breakdown.

Theory and Research Question

The analysis presented here was guided by an intersectionality framework, fundamental cause theory, and a life course approach. Intersectionality frameworks, rooted in feminist law, posit that the interactions of various social identities have a multiplicative, rather than additive, impact on individuals' experiences (Crenshaw 1991; Bowleg 2008; Lowe 1991). In the context of this study, such a intersectionality framework guided the analysis with three assumptions: 1) systems of oppression (racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.) intersect to create unique forms of advantage and disadvantage; 2) individuals are influenced by the intersections between multiple identities (social location); and 3) individuals' social locations create unique experiences that cannot be understood or addressed adequately by examining each identity in isolation (Crenshaw 1991; Bowleg 2008; Carastathis 2014).

Fundamental cause theory posits that systems of oppression create stigma against certain populations, which in turn, create health inequities (Link and Phelan 1995). This theory

also identifies that stigma can come in many forms. For example, externalised stigma can include verbal derogation, microaggressions, and disclosing another person's concealable identities without consent (Phelan, Link, and Dovidio 2008). Stigma can also manifest in passive forms, excluding individuals through practices such as silence or the act of feigning ignorance towards an issue, thus perpetuating a barrier that discourages open discussion (Phelan, Link, and Dovidio 2008). Understanding the multifaceted nature of stigma is pivotal to addressing the complex interplay between health outcomes and the availability of crucial support from peers, family, and schools.

Finally, a life course perspective considers the interconnectedness of experiences and events across different stages of life, emphasising the importance of considering the cumulative effects of social, cultural, and personal factors on individuals' development and wellbeing (Elder Jr. 1994). A life course perspective underscores the importance of understanding how social, cultural, and personal factors interact over time to shape an individual's development and well-being.

Using an intersectional life course approach, our study focused on young adults' recollections of their formal and informal sex education experiences in childhood and adolescence. We proposed the following research question to address the nascent literature on the sexuality development of Asian sexual minority (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other identities) youth:

> *Research Question (RQ):* How do culture and family play a role as informal sources of sex education in the sexuality development of undergraduate students who have multiple minority identities as Asian sexual minority youth?

To explore this question, we conducted a secondary qualitative analysis on data from a subset of participants from a parent study, Let's Talk About Sex [Education] (Bloom et al. 2022), specifically focusing on individuals who identified as Asian and as a sexual minority youth. Although transgender participants were part of the original study, none identified as both transgender *and* Asian. Thus, in the remainder of the paper, whenever describing our sample specifically, we will use the term 'sexual minority youth' instead of LGBTQ+ youth, as our final sample did not include transgender participants. In addition, while we understand that heterogeneity exists in the general Asian population, we will use "Asian" as an umbrella term to refer to AAPI identities to protect the anonymity of participants, though we recognise that the term "Asian" itself warrants critical evaluation.

Methods

Sample and Participant Recruitment

For this secondary data analysis, we analysed a sub-selection of in-depth interviews (IDI) from a larger parent study, Let's Talk About Sex [Education]] (Bloom et al. 2022) and selected interviews from students who self-identified as Asian and as a sexual minority (*n*=9). A detailed description of the recruitment process of this mixed-methods parent study can be found in the main paper (Bloom et al. 2022). (Bloom et al. 2022)

Data Collection

IDIs were conducted between November and December 2019 by a small team of undergraduate and graduate research assistants trained in qualitative data collection. Students provided written informed consent and were told they could stop the interview and their participation in the study at any time. Interviewers were guided by a semi-structured IDI guide adapted from Columbia's Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation (SHIFT) study, a comprehensive research project that examined undergraduate sexual health (Santelli et al. 2018), that was iterated upon throughout data collection. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes to complete. Participants were remunerated with a $25 gift card. The study protocol was approved by the UCSD Human Research Protection Program and by the San Diego State University (SDSU) Joint institutional Review Board (IRB), with reliance approval from the IRBs at UCLA and UCSB.

Current Analysis

A secondary thematic analysis was conducted using the interviews of participants who identified as Asian and as a sexual minority youth (*n*=9). The study team iteratively developed a hierarchical codebook containing only topical parent codes before beginning formal data analysis. To further develop the codebook, the first (cisgender woman, bisexual, Vietnamese) and second (cisgender woman, bisexual, Taiwanese/Jewish) authors independently coded the same transcripts and wrote memos that noted potential codes to add to the codebook. Coding a single transcript at a time, the first and second authors finalised the codebook after three rounds of consensus coding. After establishing consensus between different code applications and use, the first and second authors split up the remaining interviews to independently code. Afterwards, they switched interviews to validate each other's coding. In a second round of coding, a collaborative and non-blind approach was employed. This involved the examination of previously coded segments where the coders were able to see the coding applied by the other person. It was not conducted blindly; instead, the intention was to build upon the initial coding framework established in the first round. Coding discrepancies were discussed with the senior authors (cisgender woman, queer, white and cisgender woman, heterosexual, white, respectively). After the coding process concluded, the study team reviewed each other's memos and created coding summaries to identify the most salient themes.

Results

The majority of the sample focused on in this paper identified as bisexual (*n*=7), one participant identified as gay, and another as asexual. Eight participants identified as Asian, and one participant identified as multiracial. Details of the demographic characteristics are included in Table 1. In line with a Life Course Framework, the results are divided into three sections: 1) latent cultural factors; 2) the downstream effects of latent cultural factors; and 3) the impact of deficient familial sex-related discussions.

Latent Cultural Factors

Participants noted that there were cultural factors impacting their family's attitudes toward sex. These cultural factors were first evident at an early age; they continued to be

reinforced throughout adolescence and young adulthood; and they impacted experiences of sex, sexuality and relationships. They included Hesitance and Stigma Around Sex, Self-Sufficiency, and Filial Piety.

Hesitance and Stigma Around Sex—Participants described feeling uncomfortable discussing sex and relationships with their families. Several participants (*n*=4) describe their family dynamic being uncomfortable, closed off, or hesitant to discuss sex and sexuality. This dynamic was seen not only among parents and their children, but between siblings as well.

> "My brother I feel it was just very small talk about my sex life and hooking up. I think in those talks I wasn't able to-I think he's-I don't know. I don't think he has the right idea about gay sex too. So it's always like I don't talk too much about these things." -Participant 54

> "My father is a first generation Filipino-American, so they're very strict. They never really talked about intimacy and sex…I was never really aware of that kind of stuff. It's just not very open." -Participant 16

Among the participants who recalled the discussions they had around sex and relationships with their families, some remembered their family using stigmatising language about these topics.

> "...the conversation around physical intimacy with my mom in particular was really difficult…basically, my mom asked me about six months into our relationship if I was having sex with this person and I did not want to lie to her because I was trying to be open with her about everything and so, I told her yes. Her initial reaction was to tell me to go to hell and that was really shitty, obviously." -Participant 37

> "[in response to having sex before marriage] She responded by saying, 'Well, that may be in the States, but we're Vietnamese, you're Vietnamese, you're always going to be Vietnamese, and you should respect our cultures, our traditions, and follow this, because the American ways are wrong.'" -Participant 10

> "My stepdad's white, so the cultural boundary is kind of different, in a sense that – I mean, he's still my dad, so I'm not going to just go and talk details with him…he's not necessarily going to judge me. Whereas, like Filipino culture, it's like you're almost instantly judged normally." -Participant 29

While the parents of participants overtly expressed disapproval of their child having sex, they also expressed quiet disapproval (another type of stigma) when they discovered their child's sexual orientation—often by denying their child identified as non-heterosexual.

> "... My junior year of high school, I was dating my first boyfriend, and my mom snuck up on me. She really thought I was lying and sneaking out but then she saw me holding hands with him. But I think growing up both my brother and my mom was very suspicious and very—it was kind of obvious… My mom was always just like, "Oh, I don't want to believe it. I just don't want to think about it" but my brother growing up… So my coming out experience was never I told them or wanted to, they just found out. " -Participant 54

> "[Discussing how she came out to her parents] I actually didn't. I put it on my [college] application and my mom saw it. And then she thought I was just doing it to get into college. So, I came out, but then she didn't believe me." -Participant 29

In these instances, participants were not able to disclose their sexual orientation to their families on their own terms. In addition to dealing with being outed, participants' parents denied that their child identified as non-heterosexual altogether. In sum, the hesitance to discuss sex, overt disapproval of sex, and denial of participants' sexual orientation identities synergistically contribute to a culture of stigma around sexuality.

Self-sufficiency: By Choice or Forced?—Approximately half the participants (n=4) found themselves independently exploring their sexualities by seeking other informal resources of sex education.

> "I do not know if it's necessarily that I was nervous or hesitant to ask [my mother] questions about this stuff, it's more of the way I am, I am very self-sufficient, so, I would have looked it up before or I went to someone else to ask them...." -Participant 9

> "...I feel in terms of sex education just growing up I feel like it was all independent just kind of to myself. I had to learn a lot of things on my own including sexual education and even just my sexuality and just this whole gay culture and how queer people interact." -Participant 54

> "...family wise, they did not prepare me at all but that's fine. I did independent study." -Participant 11

Some participants describe a family environment in which their default behaviour involves prioritising self-sufficiency and independence, and where the inclination was to only broach subjects with parents when absolutely essential. It was unclear for all participants, however, whether the expectation to be self-sufficient was due to families refusing to provide sex education, or due to the shame associated with asking their families about sex education.

Filial Piety—The final latent cultural factor was filial piety, a key value in many Asian cultures which can be represented through fulfilling familial hierarchy by displaying respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors (Kyu-taik Sung 2001). Among other expectations, filial piety can mean the role of the child is to ensure that their parents only "see and hear pleasurable things" (Kyu-taik Sung 2001). In this context, filial piety manifested in participants holding back from initiating sex-related discussions with their parents.

> "Interviewer: Okay. Would you be open to talking to them about it?
>
> Participant: If they wanted to, yes definitely, but I definitely wouldn't start … initiate the conversation." -Participant 55

In cases where discussions were initiated by parents, participants would often conceal their true feelings about their parents' attitudes toward sex.

> "So yeah, the conversations I would say were sort of started by them [parents]...And I just kind of thought: I appreciate that you value your own beliefs,

but it's not right for me. But I didn't say that, because it didn't seem appropriate to bring up at the time, so yeah." -Participant 10

Filial piety entails an expectation that children avoid causing disruption or stress to their parents, thereby hindering participants from initiating discussions about sexuality (both their individual sexuality and sexuality in general) and leading to a reluctance to fully express their feelings and beliefs.

The Downstream Effects of Latent Cultural Factors

The three latent cultural factors described above affected how parents discussed sex with children, which had downstream effects on participants' sexual behaviours as adolescents and young adults. These latent cultural factors manifest in the form of restrictive dating rules, limited sex-related discussions with non-parental family members, and a tendency to seek informal sources of sex education.

Rules Around Dating—Parents of participants did not often initiate discussions around sex and relationships. When they would, conversations would focus on restrictive rules around dating. Restrictive rules encouraged participants to conceal their relationships from their parents, or put off dating until progress had been made regarding education and/or a career.

"I am Vietnamese…I would say in terms of relationships...my mom is very, "Oh, you should put your studies first and not really focus on relationships until after college," and then we do not really talk about sex that often, I do not really remember if she ever gave me a talk specifically about sex." -Participant 9

"It was sort of expected from my parents that I wouldn't date or get interested in anyone until high school. Then they pushed that off to college, and then third year of college. And then well, why not the third year of medical school? And then why not until you finish your residency, when you're 30? And I'm just, okay, that's a rule I'm not going to follow, but you don't need to know that." -Participant 10

Altogether, lack of open dialogue and restrictions about dating influenced participants to further conceal other key parts of their life, especially around their identities as queer people. Participant 54 explained:

"But like I said, dating has never been a conver-- I think they don't really think like at middle school or high school you would think about dating or want to date. It was even harder for me because I never wanted to date girls. I think being in the closet has forced me, made me build so many habits of: I don't want to talk to my parents or my family about certain things and I'm going to keep this kind of boundary." -Participant 54

In the above, restrictive rules about dating signalled that parents were not a safe place in which to discuss sex, forcing them to resort to anticipatory concealment.

The Role of Non-Parental Family Members—While conversations between non-parental family members and participants were infrequent due to hesitance and stigma

around sex, cousins and siblings could play a role in participants' attitudes toward sex and relationships. Participants discussed how parents would talk about the sex-related behaviours of cousins and siblings, allowing participants to infer their parents' attitudes toward sex while avoiding direct discussion about their own sex lives.

> "My mom is talking to me about menstruation and stuff. I knew from my cousins and stuff that if I got pregnant as a teenager they would no longer support me, and that was the only thing that we talked about sex-wise." -Participant 16

> "I know she [participant's mother] did talk about periods and puberty and stuff like that, but I do not remember if she has ever gone over sex health education with me, I just know that she worries. Like even with my brother and his girlfriend she worries that something might happen in terms of if he accidentally gets her pregnant or something like that." -Participant 9

One participant also described how a sex-related discussion with her aunts in Việt Nam had allowed her mother to share her opinions on relationships and sex.

> "But this was like last summer, I believe, when I visited Việt Nam for the first time in years, decades even. And I spoke with them [other family members] for the first time, and they shared family gossip with me… And I think that may have brought up the conversation, and that sort of encouraged my mother to say, 'That's why you should always be safe, and just not do anything till you're already married, because then they kind of have to stay with you.' Meanwhile my aunts were just like, just do whatever feels comfortable, as long as it makes you happy. You don't even really need to wait until marriage, or if you don't want to, divorce is also an option." -Participant 10

Importantly, in the above discussion, the he aunt's opinions prioritised happiness, comfort and choice, which were not present in many of the participants' retellings of their parents' advice.

The Impact of Lacking Sex-related Discussions with Family—Since participants lacked having sex-related discussions with their parents, they tended to seek informal sources of sex education especially through the Internet. One participant described the impact of learning about sex through pornography.

> "Then through the Internet, I learned a lot but I also feel that I developed a lot of unhealthy habits. For example, how they talk about the porn industry and I'm sure people learn, I definitely have learned parts of sex education through porn or what I thought was healthy but I see behaviours today that aren't healthy that definitely stem from what I got through the Internet." -Participant 20

In addition to pornography, participants also sought informal sources of sex education by learning through experience. One participant describes using an internet dating app, Grindr, to explore his sexuality.

> "I was on Grindr when I was 15... I was pretty much just lying to folks about being 18… I very much looked like a high school kid and so I just wish I just wasn't out there…I think that is when I started to really want to do sex all of the time. I would

say at one point I fell into an addiction of sex; I was really thinking about sex all of the time… I really wish I didn't do Grindr because again, I was very illegal… I was just very naive and I really wish someone had took care of that kid at that time." -Participant 54

Nearly all participants described how any sex-related discussions they had with their parents occurred after they had first experienced sex. Participant 10 described events as follows.

"After adulthood, yeah. After I'd already reached college-aged years. It was kind of disappointing to me that we didn't have these sorts of conversations back when I think it would be most helpful to have those conversations, like when I was actually in the process of growing up and going through puberty…It feels a little bit late, considering I've already been doing things, and figured stuff out for myself like years and years ago, and this sort of help isn't really helpful anymore." -Participant 10

For this and other participants, sex-related discussions with parents were not only unhelpful, but triggered feelings of disappointment and resentment.

Conceptual Model

The results from this study can be better understood by means of the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, which demonstrates the interactions between particular themes and when they were most relevant across the life course.

Latent cultural factors (stigma, self-sufficiency, filial piety) are positioned at the far left of the model. They can be viewed as both being established at the beginning of childhood and reinforced throughout the life course. Stigma surrounding sex, self-sufficiency, and filial piety are ever-present in the familial environment and shape experiences and behaviours across the life course. More specifically, stigma around sex, self-sufficiency, and filial piety contribute to a lack of sex- and sexuality-related discussion and restrictions around dating.

Lack of sex- and sexuality-related discussion, and restrictions about dating, serve as the tangible manifestations of the latent cultural factors—effect of stigma around sex, self-sufficiency, and filial piety. As a result of rules about dating, participants feel compelled to conceal their sexual orientation identities and relationships from their families. Additionally, participants vicariously learn about their parents' attitudes towards sex and sexuality, based on observations of their parents' reactions to other family members. A lack of sex-related discussions contributes to participants seeking other means of informal sex education through other family members, the Internet, and by learning through experience. While these sources of informal sex education are not inherently harmful, they can have a negative impact on participants' sexuality development, such as the impact of being exposed to unrealistic depictions of sex through pornography (Kohut, Fisher, and Campbell 2017).

After having sexual experiences, participants reported being able to have sex-and sexuality-related discussions with their parents in early adulthood, however, several participants viewed these discussions as "too late," leading to potential resentment toward parents. This

resentment reinforces the hierarchical family structures associated with filial piety, as well as stigma around sex.

Discussion

The guiding question for this secondary qualitative analysis was: "how do culture and family play a role as informal sources of sex education in the sexuality development of undergraduate students who have multiply-minoritised identities as Asian sexual minority youth?" Through thematic analysis, we found that the families of Asian sexual minority youth were insufficient sources of informal sex education. Latent cultural factors place strain on Asian sexual minority youths' sexuality development beginning in childhood, with consequences that manifest well into young adulthood. Stigma about sex in the family environment contributed to forced identity disclosureThis stigma further contributed to the barriers that discourage Asian sexual minority youth to initiate sex-related discussions with their parents, since doing so challenges the value of filial piety—a value that emphasises childrens' role in maintaining harmony and order in the family (Gao et al. 2012). Finally, we found that Asian sexual minority youth may not prefer their parents to serve as their primary source of sex education due to the expectation of self-sufficiency placed on children in the family, leading Asian sexual minority youths to seek sources of sex education by themselves.(Koh, Shao, and Wang 2009; Li 2006) Overall, our findings highlight how externalised stigma that is specific to Asian American family environments impede sex-related discussions, a major form of informal sex education.

In line with previous research on the relationship between early exposure to pornography and risky sexual behaviours (Tolman and McClelland 2011; Lin, Liu, and Yi 2020), participants in our study reported that online pornography consumption encouraged them to engage in unhealthy sexual behaviours. Consistent with the previous literature, we found that dating apps pose danger to minors due to a lack of an age verification process (Dietzel 2021). If adverse experiences through dating apps occur (e.g. coercion, sexual violence, cyber sexual harassment, stalking, trafficking), based on our study findings, we anticipate that Asian sexual minority youth may face barriers to seeking help from their parents. Additional research is needed to explore help-seeking and disclosure among Asian sexual minority youth and other young people who are vulnerable to coercion and other forms of violence. While there are potential adverse consequences of using the internet as an informal source of sex education, we should also consider the benefits of these informal sources, especially for sexual minority youth. The internet and other apps can be a powerful tool for sexual minority youth and multiple-minority youth to find community and learn about how others with shared identities navigate their sexuality and sexual health. Both the negative and positive impacts of the internet as an informal source of sex education were reported in the parent study focused on LGBTQ+ youth broadly (Bloom et al. 2022). Overall, informal sources of sex education require nuance to appropriately leverage them for intervention. Our findings describe the adverse consequences of seeking informal sex education—consequences that Asian sexual minority youth may be uniquely vulnerable to— and highlight the urgency of utilising the familial environment (defined on sexual minority Asian youths' terms) as a healthy form of informal sex education.

Our study provides new insights regarding identity and relationship disclosure that are unique to Asian sexual minority youth. Regarding identity disclosure, our findings offer a distinct perspective that differs from that relevant to non-Asian sexual minority youth. While a recent narrative review highlights "coming out" as a significant milestone for sexual minority adolescents (and is noted as a common theme in the literature), our study offers a contrasting perspective (Baams & Kaufman 2023). Specifically, we found that the disclosure of sexual identity to their families among Asian sexual minority youth is often restricted, with parents discovering their child's sexual orientation without openly acknowledging or addressing it. This unique experience may stem from the necessity to navigate cultural norms, such as adhering to hierarchical family structures of filial piety and the expectation for children to be self-sufficient (Sandil et al. 2015; Li and Orleans 2001). In this study, participants specifically describe a familial environment in which children refrained from initiating discussion with parents unless deemed necessary. This finding holds particular significance, as much of the current US literature draws from the experiences of non-Asian sexual minority adolescents (Baams and Kaufman 2023).

Within our sample, participants shared their experiences of concealing relationships from their families. This finding is consistent with the current literature, which focuses on non-Asian American youth (Khera and Ahluwalia 2021; Shaligram et al. 2022). In the broader literature on Asian-American individuals, relationship concealment is referred to as the "cultural closet," which parallels the process of LGBTQ+ individuals disclosing their sexual orientation identities to their families (Khera and Ahluwalia 2021). Relationship concealment in the cultural closet can be attributed to two primary reasons: Asian individuals dating earlier than their parents deem acceptable and/or Asian individuals dating outside of their ethnic or religious group (Bejanyan, Marshall, and Ferenczi 2014; Farver, Narang, and Bhadha 2002). The pressure to hide relationships from their families may result in distance between Asian individuals and their families of origin, prompting Asian individuals to seek social support from chosen families, mirroring the experiences of many LGBTQ+ individuals (Khera and Ahluwalia 2021). The existing literature on the cultural closet focuses specifically on non-LGBTQ+ Asian individuals, presenting it as a distinct and parallel experience to closeting among LGBTQ+ individuals. Our study builds upon this literature by demonstrating that these two closets are not separate and parallel, rather, they are inextricably linked and cannot be disentangled from each other.

Consistent with the intersectionality framework that informed this study, the distress associated with identity concealment in sexual minority individuals and relationship concealment in Asian individuals should not be viewed as additive. It is important to understand that these "two closets" articulate with the broader social systems participants live within, namely, racism in relation to whiteness, and homophobia, in relation to heterosexism. These systems work together to create the circumstances in which staying hidden these two closets is necessary. As a result of experiencing the unique stigma associated with racism and heterosexism, the distress associated with concealment has a multiplicative effect on the psychosocial wellbeing of Asian sexual minority youth (Crenshaw 1991; Bowleg 2008; Pachankis and Jackson 2023). In summary, due to intersecting systems of oppression, and in turn, intersecting stigma, Asian sexual minority youth are subjected to both relationship concealment as well as identity concealment, and

the associated distress accumulates exponentially, exerting a multiplicative effect on the psychosocial wellbeing of Asian sexual minority young person.

Building upon these insights, future research—both qualitative and quantitative—could employ an intersectional framework to explore which the multiple types of concealment in the familial environment as well as the impact of these concealments. This may help inform both educators and public health programme planning and intervention to better address the gaps in sex and sexuality education for populations that would benefit from the implementation of a culturally-informed and more sensitive lens. Overall, relationship and identity concealment in Asian familial environments, especially for Asian sexual minority youth, impede conversations around sex, leaving Asian sexual minority youth to explore their sexuality using alternative forms of informal sex education or by engaging in sexual activities they may not be ready or prepared for (i.e. learning by experience).

Limitations and strengths

The findings from this study should be considered with its limitations in mind. Most notably, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations of our sampling procedures. The larger parent study used snowball and convenience sampling. While these strategies may be effective in recruiting participants with marginalised identities, they are less effective in recruiting a sample that reflects the heterogeneity of a diverse target population (Atkinson and Flint 2001). The Asian population in the USA encompasses diverse countries and cultures, leading to variations in experiences and perspectives. This diversity should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings, as the experiences of Asian sexual minority individuals likely differ based on their specific cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, while the larger parent study did include transgender students, we were unable to recruit participants who identified as both Asian and transgender. In addition, it is important to recognise that the analysis described here was completed after the conclusion of data collection. A more iterative data collection and analytic process would have allowed us to further probe for other related themes that might be helpful in understanding the role of US Asian families as informal sources of sex and sexuality education.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is also essential to consider its strengths. The study offered findings which complement existing quantitative findings in the literature documenting a lack of sex- and sexuality-related parent-child communication among AAPI youth (Trinh et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2013). The study also offers insight into the unique perspectives of Asian sexual minority youth in the USA, whose life experiences are largely shaped by their intersecting Asian and sexual minority identities. Additionally, gathering the experiences of college students proved advantageous, offering a balance between participants' ability to recall experiences earlier in their life course and the reflective distance afforded by their current stage of life. Furthermore, the retrospective nature of the study allowed us to explore participants' upbringing as sexual minority children in US Asian households, as well as the long-term impact of participants' upbringing on their current sex lives as young adults. Our study was also robust in its analytical methods. Each interview underwent coding by two independent coders, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. The overall analytic approach was further strengthened as the analytical leadership was

provided by two researchers who share identities with the study sample, promoting cultural insight and empathy. Lastly, the analysis was validated by senior authors who represented an out-group, aiding the development of a well-rounded and rigorous interpretation of the data.

Conclusion

Our study carries important implications for practice and research. Future interventions to promote cross-generational sex- and sexuality- related discussions must be culturally informed, with an understanding that hesitation about discussion about sex and sexuality may be deeply rooted in cultural norms. Our findings indicate that future research should also explore the role of non-parental family members as a point of intervention, since they can be helpful sources of informal sex education. This recommendation is consistent with the current literature. A 2023 scoping review of family involvement in Asian-American health interventions, identified diverse types of family members involved in interventions as an entry point for future research (Ali et al. 2023). Such research should also consider a broader concept of family beyond biological relations. In many Asian cultures, family can also include multiple other community members who contribute to one's upbringing (Khubchandani 2022). The findings from this study also emphasise the Asian sexual minority youth community as a population that should be prioritised for carefully tailored and culturally responsive sex education. As young people who hold intersecting minoritised identities, Asian sexual minority youth face unique challenges in their family environment and in formal education settings. In addition to the stigma around sex and sexuality more broadly, Asian sexual minority youth must also face their families' stigma and prejudice toward LGBTQ+ and queer identities. Intersectional stigma may discourage youth from viewing their families of origin as a potential source of support causing them to rely on social support from a 'family of choice' instead. Overall, the findings from this study highlight the need for further exploration of the sex and sexuality education needs of the Asian sexual minority youth population.

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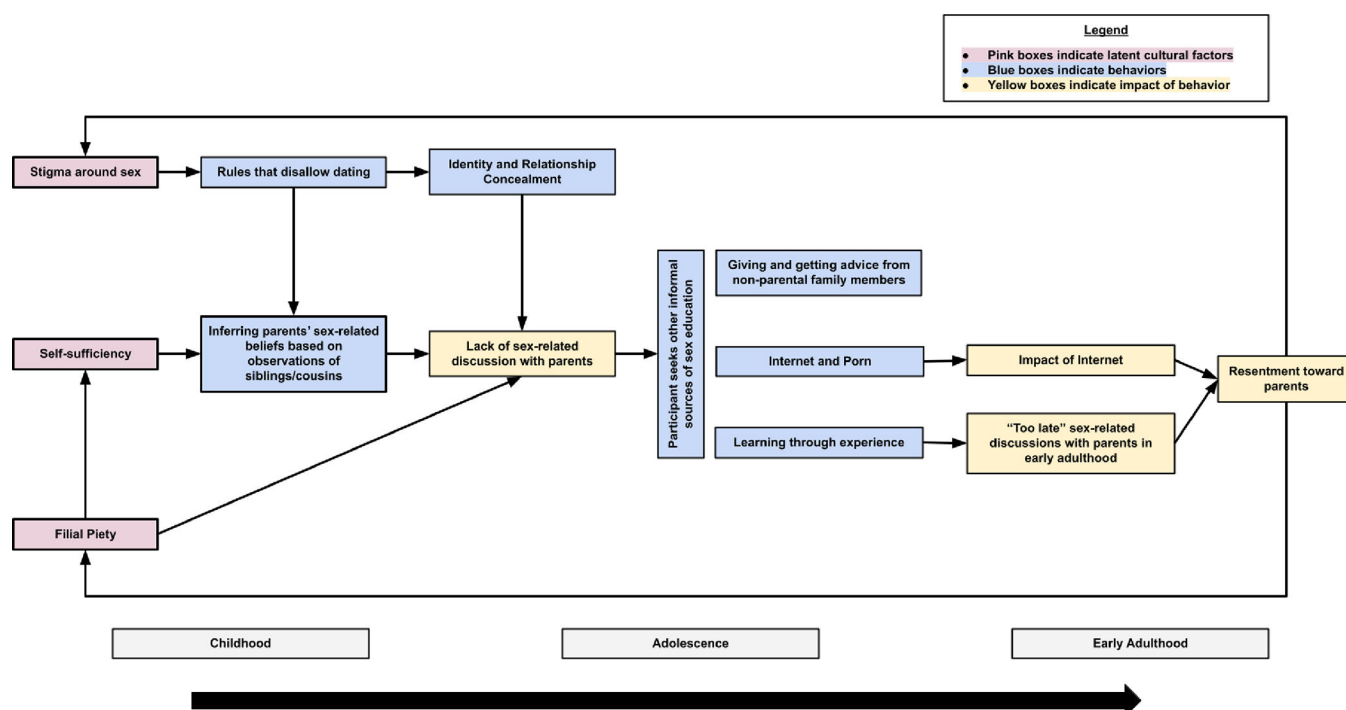
Figure 1.
Conceptual model: Impact of cultural factors on behaviors and health related to sex and sexuality across the life course.

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Table 1.

Participant demographics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnic Identity
9	19	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	AAPI
10	21	Cisgender Woman	Asexual	AAPI
11	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	AAPI
16	21	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	White, Hispanic/Latino, AAPI
20	19	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	AAPI
29	21	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	AAPI
37	20	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	AAPI
54	20	Cisgender Man	Gay	AAPI
55	20	Cisgender Man	Bisexual	AAPI