



The Association Between Quality of Parent-Adolescent Relationship and Adolescents' Sexual Activity

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Introduction

- 38% of U.S. high school students report having had sexual intercourse, and 46% report not using a condom during sex (Szucs et al., 2024).
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) impact 10 million adolescents aged 15-24 each year and cause preventable chronic conditions such as pelvic pain, infertility, and birth complications (Shannon, C. L., & Klausner, J. D., 2018; CDC, 2019).
- Longitudinal case data show that Latinx adolescents who receive frequent, emotionally supportive, and identity-affirming parental communication on sexual topics report lower engagement in risky sexual behaviors, greater confidence in sexual decisions, delayed sexual initiation, and display higher use of contraceptives (Cabral, 2022).
- Family relationships correlate with a child's sexual understanding and behavior, seen in adolescents' sexual knowledge acquisition and subjectivity (Astle & Anders, 2022), sexual decision-making and initiation (Flores, 2017; Evans et. al., 2019), and risk engagement, including compulsive sexual behavior, substance use and unplanned pregnancy (Efrati & Gola, 2019; Cabral 2022).

Research Questions

- How does the quality of parental-child relationship influence an adolescents' engagement in sexual activities?
- Is there a gendered difference between an adolescents' maternal relationship and their awareness on sexual topics?

Multivariate

- Logistical Regression demonstrated that the interaction between sexual education and sexual activity was significantly associated with gender. Males (n=1899) had higher odds of sexual activity (OR = 1.59, p = .001) than females (n=1988), but increasing knowledge had a weaker effect on sexual activity for boys than for girls. See Figure 3.
- Young adults reporting higher maternal relationship quality (OR=4.26) and high sexual health knowledge (OR=4.68) had substantially greater odds of being sexually active compared to low-closeness or low-knowledge peers.

Discussion

- Maternal closeness and sexual health knowledge independently predicted higher odds of sexual activity. This suggests that warmth and open communication may increase an adolescents' comfortability with disclosing or initiating sexual behavior.
- Notably, sexual health knowledge differed by biological sex. Boys showed a smaller increase in sexual activity as knowledge increased (in comparison to girls), potentially reflecting gendered norms around risk-taking, communication, or parental monitoring.
- Higher sexual health knowledge may be a result of becoming sexually active rather than a cause and closer maternal relationship may reflect better communication rather than increased behavior.
- Future research is needed to determine the role of other covariates (e.g. income, race/ethnicity, religion, education, sexuality) and their impact on familial expectations and gendered norms that shape both activity and knowledge.

Methods

Sample

- The sample includes 3887 respondents, adolescents at least 15 years old, who answered family and sexual and reproductive health related questions from the Wave 1 of the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (ADD HEALTH). This is a nationally representative survey with high (80.3%) response rate conducted in 1994-1995.

Measures

- **Maternal-Adolescent Relationship Quality:** Measured using a summed composite score of 8 questions on adolescents' emotional closeness with their mother and perceived maternal approval of sexual activity and contraceptive use.
- **Sexual Activity:** Participants indicated whether they have engaged in sexual intercourse on a binary scale (0=never, 1=yes) answering "Have you ever had sexual intercourse? [When we say sexual intercourse, we mean when a male inserts his penis into a female's vagina]".
- **Sexual Health Knowledge:** Calculated using the standard deviation of adolescents' perceived understanding of reproductive processes, fertility timing, contraception use, and pregnancy likelihood. Possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Results

Bivariate

- Chi-square test of independence showed that young adults with a high quality relationship (n=883) with their maternal figure were significantly more likely to report sexual activity (72.1%) than those with moderate (48.1%) or low (34.9%) relationship quality, $X^2=271.92$, 2 df, $p<.0001$. See figure 1.
- Adolescents with low sexual knowledge were more likely to report no sexual activity (63.9%) as opposed to those with moderate (49.6%) or high (34%) levels of knowledge, $X^2=213.87$, 2 df, $p<.0001$. See Figure 2.

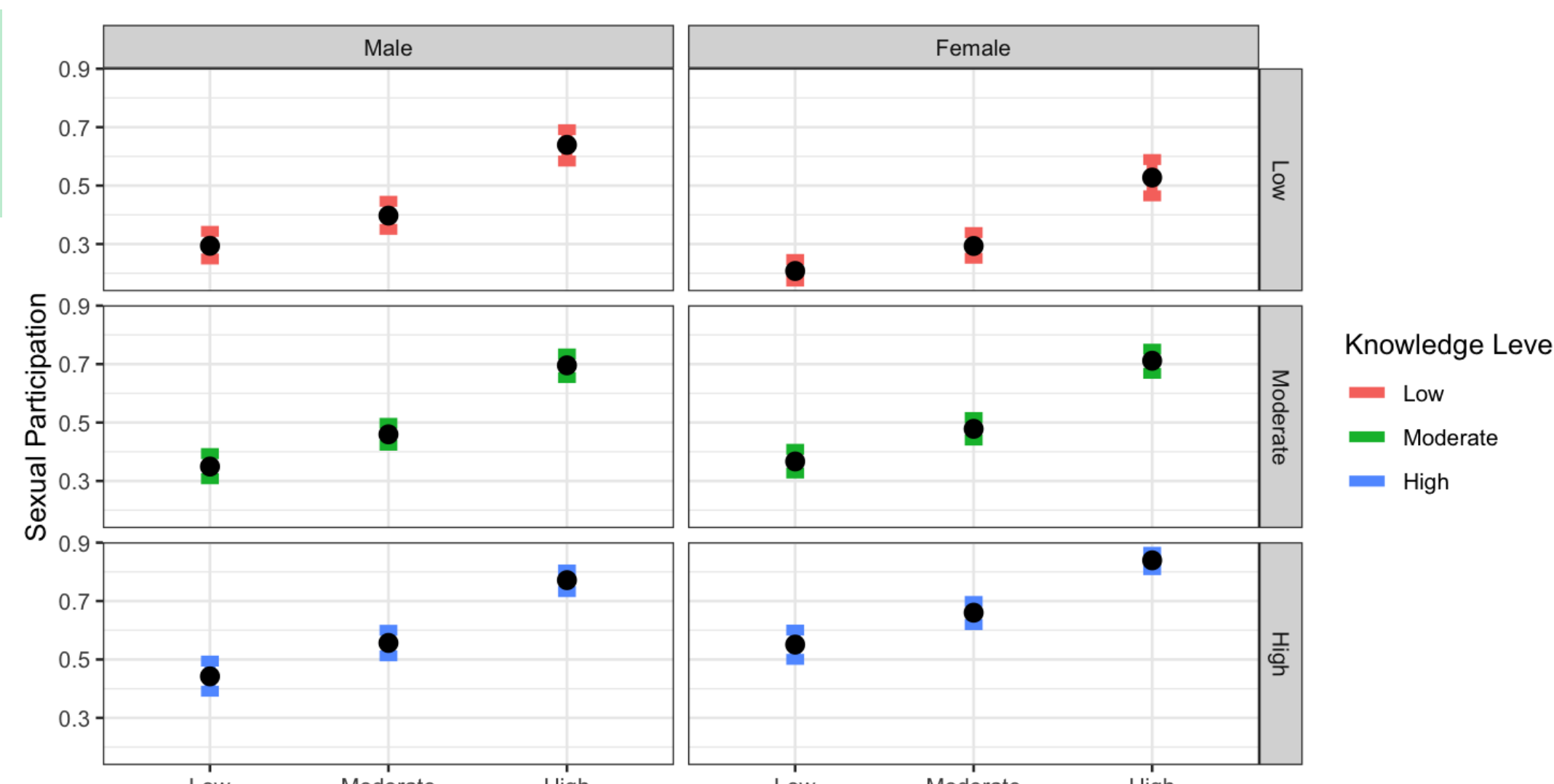


Figure 3. Patterns of Sexual Activity Differ by Adolescent-Maternal Relationship Quality, Knowledge, and Biological Sex

Figure 1. Proportion of Adolescent Sexual Activity by Maternal Relationship Quality

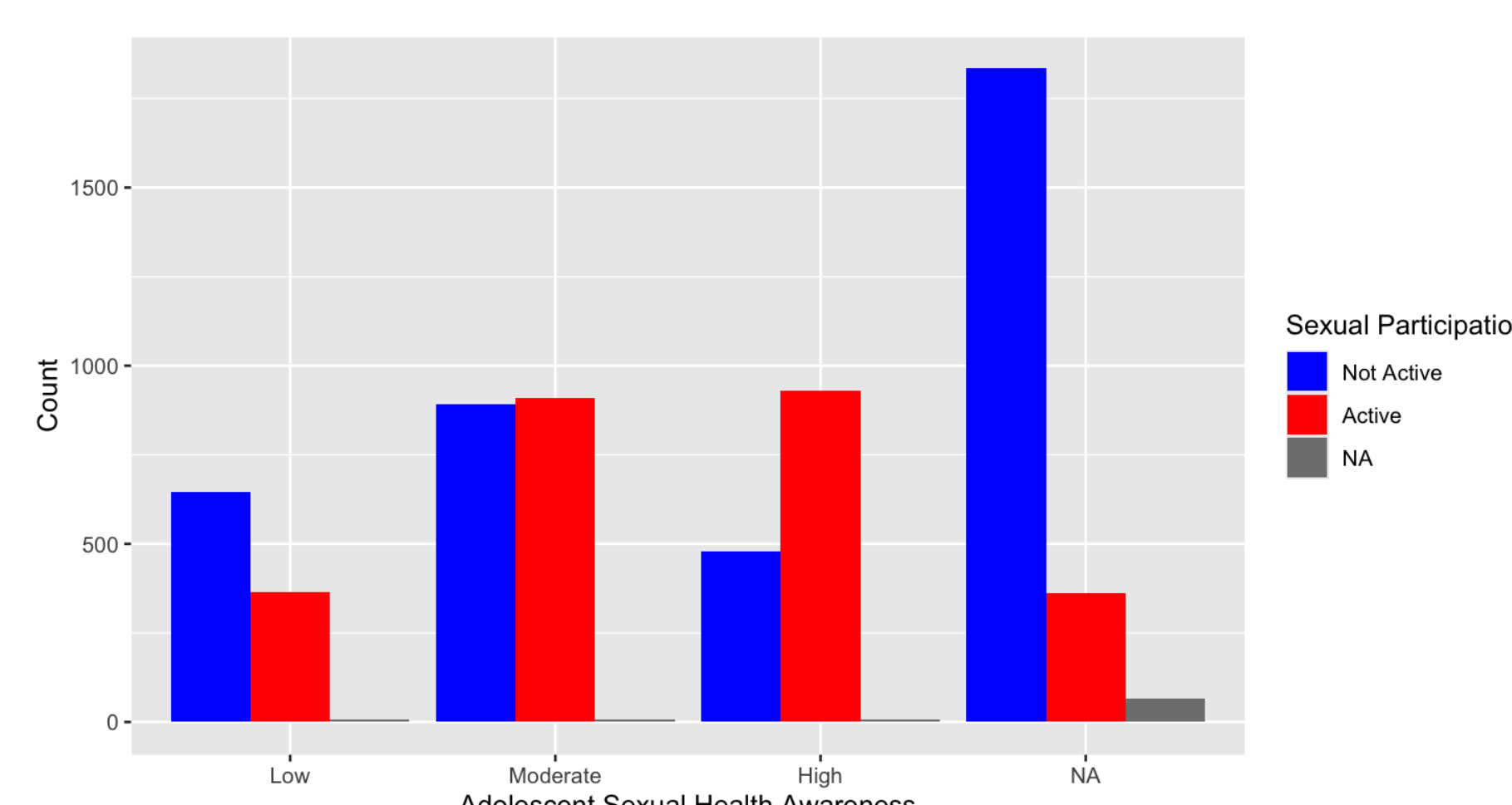
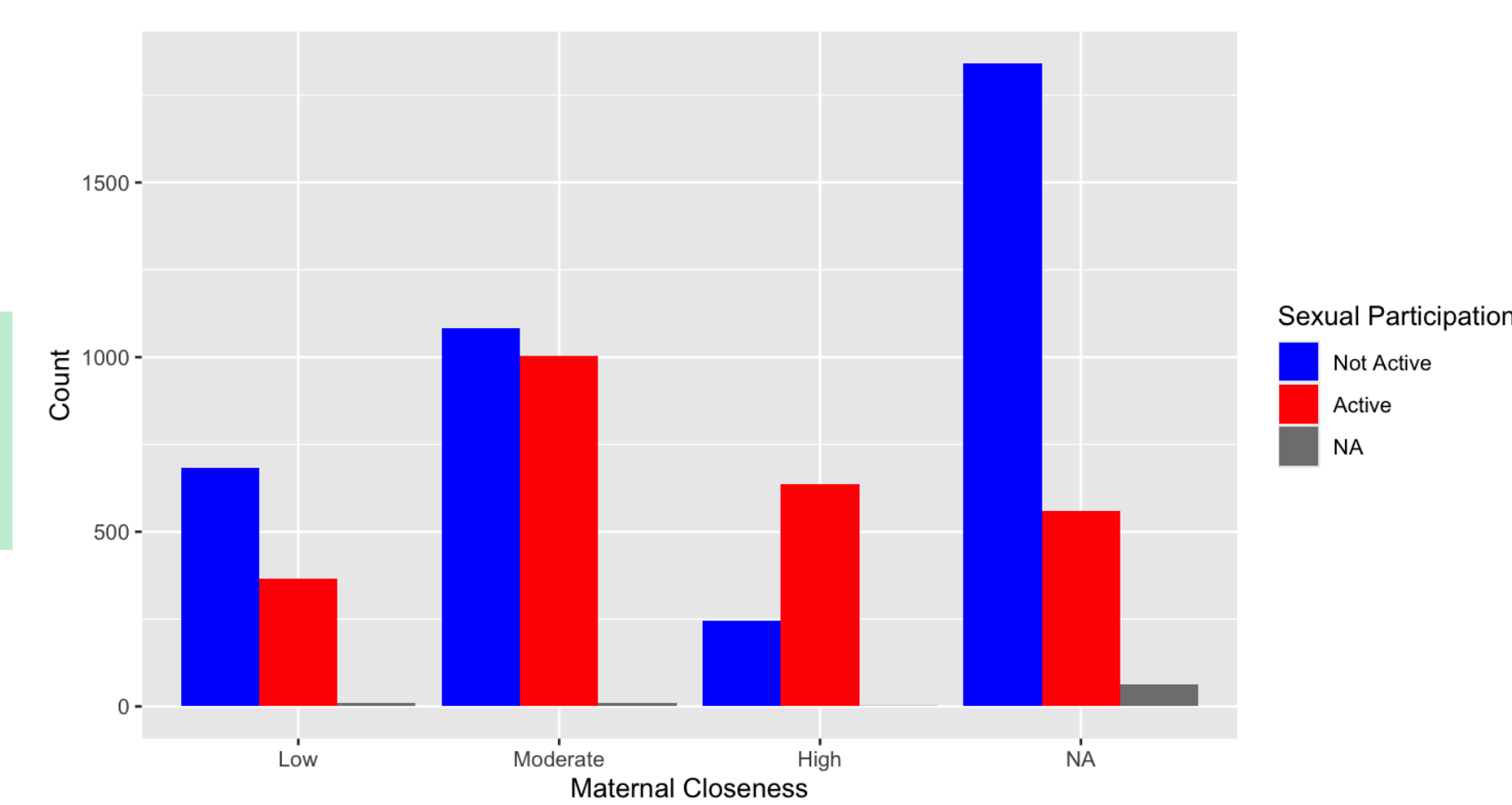


Figure 2. Proportion of Adolescent Sexual Activity by Degree of Sexual Health Knowledge