



## Healthy Sexual Behavior Awareness among Adolescents: A Comparison by Dating Status

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### Abstract

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by physical, emotional, and social changes that shape sexual awareness and responsible behavior, which are essential for reproductive health and psychosocial well-being. In culturally conservative contexts such as Padang City, Indonesia, dating is often assumed to pose risks to adolescents' sexual behavior, yet empirical evidence remains limited. This study examined differences in awareness of healthy sexual behavior between adolescents who were dating and those who were not. The sample comprised 127 high school students in Padang City, including 55 adolescents in dating relationships and 72 who were not. Data were collected using the 35-item MESSRA Scale (4-point Likert scale;  $\alpha = 0.884$ ), measuring emotional understanding, decision making, self-evaluation, and self-confidence. The Mann-Whitney U test was applied, with additional exploratory analyses conducted by gender and Minangkabau ethnicity. The results indicated no significant differences in overall awareness of healthy sexual behavior or its sub-dimensions between dating and non-dating adolescents ( $U = 2013.000$ ,  $p = 0.874$ ), with a small effect size ( $d < 0.20$ ). These findings suggest that dating status does not substantially influence adolescents' sexual awareness. Factors such as comprehensive sexuality education, family communication, self-regulation, religiosity, and cultural values may play a more influential role. This study highlights the importance of inclusive, education-based sexuality programs for all adolescents, regardless of relationship status.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; Healthy Sexual Behavior; Sexual Awareness; Dating Status

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### Introduction

Adolescence is a fundamental stage in the life span of any human being as it involves critical changes in one's physical attributes, emotions, and social relationships (Uktamovna, 2025). Among other issues, the development of adolescent sexual behavior is one of the primary and most urgent issues of concern during this stage of development. It is especially critical because of the implications it poses in terms of the adolescent's reproductive health, emotions, and social positioning (Kågesten & van Reeuwijk, 2021). In many contexts, young people aged 15–24 years are most affected by sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, and in this age group, there has also been a significant decline in the use of condoms during sexual intercourse (WHO, 2024).

This inattention to the use of contraceptives puts adolescents at risk of having unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. In the case of Indonesia, the problem is compounded by the rapid changes in social and cultural expectations, and the equally rapid changes in information and communication technologies that impact adolescents' thinking and behavior (Volti & Croissant, 2024). Increasing access to sexually explicit material online is now leading to the risk of unprotected sexual behavior, which increases the number of adolescents in Indonesia who have not developed proper reproductive health awareness and prevention practices, with low condom use prevalence at under 13% in previous studies (Murti & Sari, 2023; Nilasari & et al., 2024).

Numerous earlier studies have pointed out that adolescents in dating relationships are more likely to engage in premarital sexual behavior. For example, in their secondary analysis of 12,935 male adolescents from the 2017 Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey (IDHS), Shakti, Ramani, and Baroya (2022) characterized dating status as the most influential predictor of premarital sexual activity, identifying it as an odds ratio (OR) of 362.5 (95% CI: 171.73–756.34). This result suggests that male adolescents who are or have been in a dating relationship are more than 362 times likely to participate in premarital sexual activities than those who have never dated.

Likewise, in a national survey of 41,885 unmarried adolescents ages 15-24 that spanned 34 provinces, Oktriyanto and Alfiasari (2019) report that dating relationships provided substantial odds of premarital sexual initiation (OR = 14.120), and the engagement of such activities as handholding, kissing, and sexual petting further increased the risk. In a more recent study, mentioned that adolescents with risky dating styles were 20.09 times more likely to engage in premarital sex than adolescents with healthier dating styles, which is a significant finding (Syafitriani, Ellysa, & Rany, 2022). These findings, when taken together, emphasize the dating status and sexual risky behavior correlation amongst Indonesian adolescents. This is particularly true in contrast to their non-dating peers.

The absence of studies comparing adolescents' awareness of healthy sexual behaviour with respect to dating status constitutes another research gap. Recent research from Indonesia validates dating status as a significant predictor of sexual behaviour. Adolescents in love relationships are more likely to engage in premarital/risky behaviours. For instance, one study found that the odds of premarital sexual initiation were 14.12 times greater among daters in a national sample of 41,885 adolescents aged 15-24 years (Oktriyanto & Alfiasari, 2019). Further, having a boyfriend/girlfriend positively correlates with sexual activity, including in the absence of sociodemographic factors such as age, which describes a sexually active population of 15-19 years (11.6%) and 20-24 years (40.7%); also, employment and substance use (Ashari, Widjanarko, & Shaluhiah, 2025). There is research indicating that romantic relationships and experiences shape sexual attitudes and knowledge, but awareness studies are scarce, and the majority of the literature addresses behaviours and overlooks the cognitive aspect (Hunersen, Li, Pinandari, & et al., 2023; Pinandari, Kågsten, Li, & et al., 2023). These studies justify the need to explore awareness regardless of behaviour.

Theoretically, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) Ajzen (1991) provides scaffolding for understanding the possible relationship between dating status and sexual awareness. The TPB suggests that the formation of behavioural intentions, in this case the formation of positive attitudes towards the practice of safe sex, is the result of one's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In dating situations, subjective norms (e.g., expectations from a partner/peers regarding sexual intimacy) and perceived control (e.g., in the case of setting boundaries) could affect awareness of safe(r) sex. The related components of Social Cognitive Theory Bandura (2001) that discuss observational learning and self-efficacy through romantic relationships situate the dating relationship as pivotal in the development of awareness of sexuality.

Recognising these variations offers the potential for more focused strategies for promoting healthy sexual practices in the adolescent population, as well as understanding the associated psychological, social, and relational dynamic. The objective of this study is to compare the level of awareness regarding healthy sexual behavior between adolescents who are in dating relationships and those who are not. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and age-appropriate sexual education programs that align with adolescents' needs. In addition, the results of this study may serve as a foundation for policymakers and health practitioners in designing preventive strategies to reduce risky sexual behavior among adolescents.

Adolescence, defined by the World Health Organization as the period from ages 10 to 19 years, represents a critical transitional phase from childhood to adulthood characterized by profound biological, cognitive, and social changes (Macapagal et al., 2018). Biologically, adolescents experience hormonal shifts leading to maturation of reproductive organs and secondary sexual characteristics, which influence body image and self-confidence (Susan Branje, 2022). Psychologically, this stage involves enhanced capacity for abstract thinking and identity formation, often accompanied by internal conflicts (Moshman, 2005). Socially, influence shifts from family to peers, who play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and norms (Scholte & Van Aken, 2020; Sukaesih, 2023).

Adolescent sexual behavior is a normative aspect of psychosocial development but becomes problematic without adequate understanding of risks and responsibilities. It encompasses a spectrum from non-penetrative affection to intimate activities driven by sexual desire (Hastuti, 2021). Influencing factors

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include internal elements (e.g., knowledge, attitudes, self-control) and external ones (e.g., peer pressure, media exposure, parental communication) (Hasanah, Utari, Chairunnisa, & Purnamawati, 2020; Umaroh, Kusumawati, & Kasjono, 2015). Unhealthy behaviors increase risks of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), psychological distress, and social stigma (Simanjuntak, Suryani, Meriwati, Supardi, & Riastuti, 2021).

Awareness of healthy sexual behavior encompassing recognition of urges, responsible decision-making, value alignment, and resistance to pressure is essential for navigating these challenges (Batat & Tanner, 2021; WHO, 2024). This awareness enables informed choices aligned with personal and cultural values. Empirical evidence suggests that romantic involvement (dating status) influences sexual behavior and awareness, with adolescents in relationships facing greater exposure to intimacy pressures and decision-making demands (Macapagal et al., 2018; Rosdarni, Dasuki, & Waluyo, 2015; Shakti et al., 2022; Ummah & Khairi, 2023). Self-control and parental supervision moderate these effects (Nugroho, 2022; C. D. S. Putri, Haryono, & Slamet, 2018). However, research specifically comparing awareness levels between dating and non-dating adolescents remains limited, highlighting a gap that this study addresses to inform targeted sexuality education.

## Method

This research adopted a comparative quantitative methodology incorporating an independent group design to examine the difference in awareness of healthy sexual behavior among dating versus non-dating adolescents (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research population was all tenth graders at a public high school in Padang City. A selected sample of 127 students (55 dating and 72 not dating) was obtained through purposive sampling based on the students' romantic relational status, with the inclusion criteria of being 15-17 years old and willing to participate (Palinkas et al., 2015)

An original instrument within the scope of school guidance and counseling and copyrighted by her, the MESSRA scale (Menyadari Seksual Sehat Remaja-Azahra), was used to collect the data. There are 35 items in the scale, each structured using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). The items are anchored on the WHO (2019) definition of sexual health, which encompasses the physical, emotional, mental, and social dimensions of a person. The instrument was intended to measure awareness in a holistic manner, using the knowledge, attitude, and behavior dimensions (S Branje, 2022). The scale development process involved a review of literature, a content validation by experts (Content Validity Index = 0.92), a pretesting phase (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ), and validation of the construct. In this study, the reliability of the instrument was Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ , which is commonly interpreted to mean that the instrument is internally consistent (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Scores for awareness were grouped and categorized as: low (35-69), moderate (70-104), and high ( $\geq 105$ ).

The collection of data took place in January - February 2024, after acquiring an ethical clearance from the university research ethics committee, along with an official go-ahead from the school. The questionnaire was conducted in an anonymous fashion, and during class, after informed consent was obtained, and the objectives of the study were explained. I conducted descriptive data analysis in order to compute mean, standard deviation, as well as minimum and maximum scores for each group. The Shapiro-Wilk was the normality test applied, and the result indicated the data distribution was not normal ( $p < 0.05$ ), therefore the Mann-Whitney U was the non-parametric test applied to compare the two independent groups with SPSS version 26 software for data processing (Field, 2018).

The observations and the sample representation of the target population were the main assumptions in this study. The response to the sensitive nature of the topic may have caused some bias, and these result also cannot be generalized to the broader population due to the limitations brought about by purposive sampling. These are the methodological and research scope limitations in this study: it was confined to just one school in Padang City.

## Result

This study involved 127 high school students divided into two groups based on their relationship status: 55 students who were currently in a dating relationship and 72 students who were not dating. Each participant completed a 35-item instrument measuring awareness of healthy sexual behavior, using a 4-point Likert scale. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample (N = 127)**

Variables	Category	Dating (n = 55)	Not Dating (n = 72)	Total (N = 127)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Man	24	35	59	46,5
	Woman	31	37	68	53,5
<b>Religion</b>	Islam	53	69	122	96,1
	Other	2	3	5	3,9
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Minangkabau	50	68	118	92,9
	Other	5	4	9	7,1
<b>Age</b>	16 years	18	24	42	33,1
	17 years	22	29	51	40,2
	18 years	15	19	34	26,8

The comparison of healthy sexual behavior awareness scores between the two groups is presented in the following table:

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by Dating Status**

	TOTAL	
	Dating	Not Dating
<b>Valid</b>	55	72
<b>Missing</b>	0	0
<b>Mean</b>	119.400	119.722
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	13.790	11.622
<b>Shapiro-Wilk</b>	0.931	0.962
<b>P-value of Shapiro-Wilk</b>	0.004	0.029
<b>Minimum</b>	70.000	89.000
<b>Maximum</b>	138.000	139.000

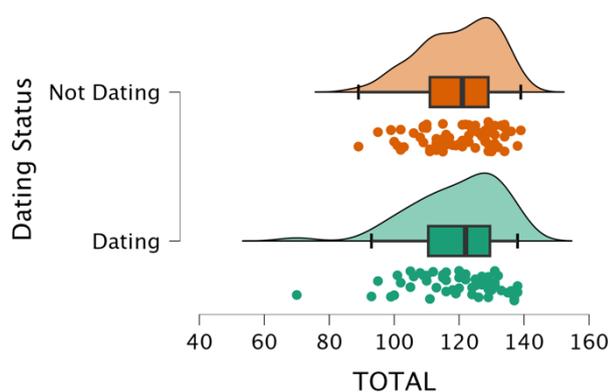
Descriptive statistics showed that the group of students who were dating had an average score of healthy sexual behavior awareness of 119.4, with a standard deviation of 13.79, a minimum score of 70, and a maximum score of 138. Meanwhile, the group of students who were not dating had an average score of 119.72, with a standard deviation of 11.62, a minimum score of 89, and a maximum score of 139.

Before conducting group difference tests, researchers first perform normality tests using the Shapiro-Wilk test on both groups. Test results indicate that the data from the second group lacks a normal distribution ( $p < 0.05$ ). To further verify the distribution shape, the standard Z-score skewness and kurtosis tests were performed. The z-score values for skewness and kurtosis in the latter group,  $Z < -1.96$  and  $Z > 1.96$  respectively, confirm the case for an absence of normal distribution in the group. Therefore, the non-parametric method of Mann-Whitney U test is chosen in accordance with the data level of ordinal and the distribution absence of normality (Field, 2018).

Considering the results of the normality test and the ordinal nature of the data (4-point Likert scale), the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to compare the awareness of healthy sexual behavior between teenagers who were dating and those who were not. This test serves as a non-parametric alternative to the independent samples t-test when assumptions of normality are not met and the groups are independent (Karch, 2021; Yusuf, 2014).

**Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test**

	Test	Statistic	df	p
TOTAL	Student	-0.143	125	0.887
	Mann-Whitney	2013.000		0.874



**Figure 1. Raincloud Plots**

The Mann-Whitney U test yielded a U statistic of 2013.00 with  $p = 0.87$  ( $> 0.05$ ), indicating no statistically significant difference in awareness of healthy sexual behavior between adolescents who were dating and those who were not. Visual inspection of the data distribution via raincloud plots (Figure 1.), further confirmed substantial overlap between the two groups, with similar medians, comparable spreads, and no evident separation in central tendency or shape. These findings are consistent with research by Wardani and Alfiani (2022), which suggested that factors such as sexual education, self-control, and social support have a more dominant influence on adolescents' sexual awareness than their relationship status. Similarly, Sakinah and Sos (2020) emphasized the importance of value-based educational approaches and open communication with parents in shaping healthy sexual awareness among adolescents, regardless of whether or not they are in a romantic relationship.

Awareness of healthy sexual behavior in adolescents is shaped by a variety of other determinants, including the quality of sexual education received, the nature of parental supervision and communication, cultural norms, and religious teachings. For instance, Agustina, Sulistiawati, and Styoboedi (2024) emphasized the importance of open and educational communication between parents and adolescents in fostering responsible sexual behavior. Such dialogue can aid adolescents in internalizing values that promote sexual responsibility.

These findings stand in contrast to several earlier studies that reported significant differences in sexual behavior based on dating status. For example, Umaroh et al. (2021) found that adolescents in dating relationships were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than those who were not. The divergence in results may be attributed to contextual factors such as cultural and religious variations and differing approaches to sexuality education across regions.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of adolescents' awareness of healthy sexual behavior, this study further analyzed four subdimensions: emotional understanding, decision-making, self-evaluation, and self-confidence. Each subdimension contributes uniquely to the formation of responsible and informed sexual behavior in adolescents at the following table 3.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Subdimensions of Healthy Sexual Behavior Awareness**

	Sub Understanding Emotions		Sub Decision-Making		Sub Self-Evaluation		Sub Self-Confidence	
	Dating	Not Dating	Dating	Not Dating	Dating	Not Dating	Dating	Not Dating
Valid	55	72	55	72	55	72	55	72
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	20.455	20.208	37.127	37.694	26.655	26.681	35.164	35.139
Std. Deviation	2.552	2.041	5.611	4.866	3.762	3.369	4.118	4.085
Shapiro-Wilk	0,633	0,663	0,625	0,652	0,633	0,657	0,635	0,636
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001	0.010	< .001	0.002	< .001	0.004	< .001	< .001
Minimum	12.000	15.000	23.000	23.000	12.000	14.000	21.000	20.000
Maximum	24.000	24.000	44.000	44.000	32.000	32.000	41.000	40.000

In the emotional understanding sub-dimension, which involves recognizing and managing sexual urges, no significant differences emerged between adolescents who were dating and those who were not. This finding suggests that emotional regulation in sexual contexts is shaped more by emotional intelligence, personal maturity, and self-control than by relationship status. A cross-sectional study in Bandung, Indonesia, supports this observation, showing that refusal skills, assertiveness, problem-solving, and self-control were strongly linked to reduced engagement in risky sexual behaviors among adolescents aged 15–19 years, regardless of romantic involvement (Sakinah & Sos, 2020). Similarly, Muthmainnah et al. (2023) reported that emotional self-awareness significantly correlates with self-restraint in romantic and sexual situations, particularly when reinforced by value-based education.

The decision-making sub-dimension, which assesses the ability to make responsible sexual choices, likewise showed no meaningful group differences. This result aligns with evidence that access to structured sexuality education plays a more decisive role in fostering deliberate and informed choices than relational status does. Widjanarko, Indraswari, Handayani, and Kusumawati (2023) found that adolescents exposed to comprehensive sexual education exhibited more intentional decision-making processes, independent of whether they were in a romantic relationship. A recent systematic review in Indonesia further reinforces this, demonstrating that sexuality education grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior significantly enhances behavioral intention and decision-making related to sexual health, with attitudes and perceived control emerging as primary drivers (Latuheru, Yosep, & Sriati, 2025).

In the self-evaluation sub-dimension, which reflects adolescents' capacity to assess personal values, boundaries, and readiness in sexual matters, levels of reflective self-assessment were comparable across both groups. Although dating is often assumed to challenge personal boundaries, the findings indicate that internalized family values and religious teachings act as powerful stabilizing forces. Pietkiewicz and Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek (2016) observed that self-evaluation is strongly influenced by family values and religiosity, which serve as protective mechanisms even in the presence of romantic engagement. This is consistent with a scoping review that identified religiosity and family communication as key protective factors against premarital sexual behavior in conservative Indonesian settings (Durham & McKinney, 2025; Fuadi & Irdalisa, 2024).

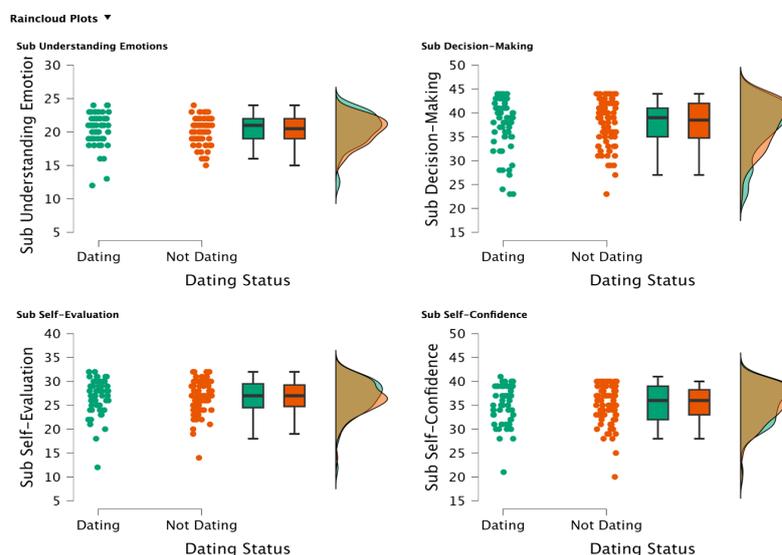
Finally, the self-confidence sub-dimension, which concerns the ability to assert sexual decisions and preserve autonomy, also yielded statistically similar scores between the groups. This suggests that assertive communication and boundary-setting skills can develop independently of dating experience, often through targeted interventions. Igbeneghu and Ademokoya (2020) showed that assertiveness training embedded in culturally sensitive counseling frameworks significantly increased sexual self-confidence among adolescents, irrespective of romantic involvement. A randomized controlled trial among adolescent girls similarly demonstrated that structured programs aimed at building sexual assertiveness skills enhanced self-efficacy and decision-making capacity in sexual situations, with effects that were not contingent on relationship status (Widman, Golin, Kamke, Burnette, & Prinstein, 2018).

Overall, the lack of significant differences across all four sub-dimensions indicates that dating status is not a primary determinant of awareness of healthy sexual behavior among adolescents. This pattern is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which posits that behavioral intention is primarily shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Studies applying TPB in Indonesian contexts have consistently shown that attitudes exert the strongest influence on sexual behavior, followed by subjective norms and perceived control, thereby limiting the relative importance of dating status compared with these core constructs (S. I. Putri, Hedo, & Apriananda, 2021).

These subdimensional findings collectively reinforce the overarching conclusion that dating status is not a determinant factor in adolescents' healthy sexual behavior awareness. Instead, a complex interplay of emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural factors appears to be at work.

**Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test and Mann-Whitney U Test on Subdimensions of Healthy Sexual Behavior Awareness**

Sub	Test	Statistic	df	p	Effect Size	SE Effect Size
Understanding Emotions	Student	0.604	12	0.547	0.108	0.179
	Mann-Whitney		5			
Sub Decision-Making	Student	-0.609	12	0.544	-0.109	0.179
	Mann-Whitney	2179.500	5	0.328	0.101	0.103
Sub Self-Evaluation	Student	-0.041	12	0.967	-0.007	0.179
	Mann-Whitney	1906.000	5	0.720	-0.037	0.103
Sub Self-Confidence	Student	0.034	12	0.973	0.006	0.179
	Mann-Whitney	2027.000	5	0.820	0.024	0.103
		1980.000		1.000	0.000	0.103



**Figure 2. Raincloud Plots of Healthy Sexual Behavior Awareness Subdimensions**

The lack of significant differences in the overall awareness score and across all four sub-dimensions emotional understanding, decision-making, self-evaluation, and self-confidence between adolescents who were dating and those who were not is both striking and meaningful. It suggests that being in a romantic relationship does not, in itself, substantially alter how young people understand, decide about, evaluate, or feel confident in handling sexual matters.

One possible explanation lies in the relative strength of other influences. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) reminds us that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are the primary

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drivers of intention and awareness. In this sample, these elements appear to remain stable regardless of dating status. For instance, emotional regulation seems more closely tied to self-control and emotional maturity than to romantic involvement, a pattern echoed in Indonesian research showing that life skills such as refusal ability and assertiveness protect against risky sexual behavior across relational contexts (Rizkianti, Maisya, Kusumawardani, Linhart, & Pardosi, 2020).

The same logic applies to decision-making. Access to structured sexuality education and cognitive readiness seem to matter far more than whether or not an adolescent is dating. Ballonoff Suleiman and Brindis (2014) found that adolescents exposed to comprehensive sexual education made more thoughtful choices, independent of their relationship circumstances. This is further supported by evidence that sexuality education framed within the Theory of Planned Behavior significantly strengthens behavioral intention and informed decision-making, with attitudes and perceived control playing central roles (Lin et al., 2021).

For self-evaluation or reflecting on personal values, boundaries, and readiness the similarity across groups is perhaps less surprising in the Minangkabau context. Family values and religiosity often provide a steady moral compass, helping adolescents maintain clear boundaries even when romantic relationships enter the picture. In conservative Indonesian settings, these factors consistently emerge as protective elements against premature or risky sexual behavior, regardless of dating involvement (Muthmainnah et al., 2023).

Likewise, the comparable levels of self-confidence suggest that the ability to assert decisions and maintain autonomy can develop independently of dating experience. Targeted assertiveness training, when culturally attuned, has been shown to enhance sexual self-confidence among adolescents, with effects that do not hinge on romantic status (Fahreza, 2023). Intervention studies with adolescent girls further illustrate how building sexual assertiveness skills boosts self-efficacy in intimate situations, again independent of relationship involvement (Widman et al., 2018).

Taken together, these findings indicate that dating status plays a surprisingly limited role in shaping awareness of healthy sexual behavior among adolescents in this sample. Instead, broader factors such as quality sexuality education, family communication, religiosity, and personal life skills appear to be more decisive. This aligns well with the Theory of Planned Behavior and calls for inclusive, culturally grounded sexuality education programs that reach all adolescents, regardless of whether they are currently dating.

## Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights into adolescents' awareness of healthy sexual behavior. Contrary to the common assumption that dating may be associated with lower awareness or poor self-control, the results clearly show that relationship status does not significantly affect how adolescents understand, manage, or make decisions related to sexual issues, either overall or in the four sub-dimensions (emotional understanding, decision making, self-evaluation, and self-confidence).

Rather than involvement in relationships itself, these findings point to other more enduring influences: values transmitted through family and culture, the quality and accessibility of sex education, and personal development in self-control and emotional maturity. In the context of Padang and the Minangkabau cultural setting, deep-rooted religious and traditional norms likely serve as a strong support system that helps maintain consistent levels of awareness among adolescents, regardless of whether they are currently in romantic relationships.

From a practical standpoint, these results have important implications. They suggest that efforts to promote healthy sexual development should not focus narrowly on adolescents' dating status, but rather adopt a more inclusive approach. Comprehensive and culturally sensitive sexuality education, delivered through schools, families, and community programs, can effectively reach all adolescents and help build the attitudes, norms, and self-control necessary for responsible sexual decision-making. By prioritizing these broader contextual factors, educators, counselors, and policymakers can create interventions that are realistic and responsive to the realities of teens' lives today.

Ultimately, this study reminds us that awareness of healthy sexual behavior is not determined by whether someone is dating. It is more influenced by the values they hold, the education they receive, and the support systems around them. These insights contribute to the ongoing conversation about adolescent sexual health and provide a foundation for designing programs that truly support adolescents in navigating this important aspect of their development.

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