

The hymen between myth and evidence

the hymen has, over the centuries, been invested with more social, moral and even legal significance than any other piece of human flesh (Blackledge)

Myth

Hymen, a piece of skin that partly covers the opening of the vagina in women who have never had sex (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 16.06.2025)

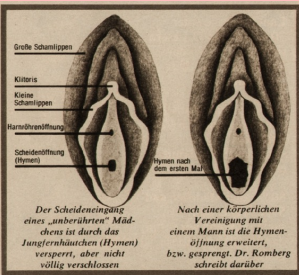


Fig. 1: Pr. BRAVO1970-19

thin membrane at the entrance to the vagina that tears during the first sexual intercourse, hymen (DWDS, 16.06.2025, own translation)

When the male penis penetrates the virginal vagina, the small bridge of mucous membrane that partially closes the vaginal entrance and that is called the hymen is naturally torn. (Wagner & Thomasius 1933: 323, Deutsches Textarchiv (DTA), own translation)

"We accept what you are saying, but please, don't tell our daughters! If they learn that there is no hymen to be broken, how will they behave?" Just like with any kind of belief that serves emotional purposes, there seem to be plenty of reasons to hold on to it, even when contradicted by scientific evidence. (Cinthio 2015: 185)

The hymen as a marker of virginity is upheld by various interests (e.g. by women who justify their moral behavior (see the option of petting), by men to secure their offspring and to be the wife's sole partner, state institutions and families who represent a health interest, surgeons who earn money from hymen construction, etc.) (see Berger & Wenger 1973)

Evidence

- The corona vaginalis has very few nerve cells and no nerve cells at the edge of the corona vaginalis. Only a very deep tearing of the mucous folds would be painful (Mangler et al. 2022: 813)
- If the vulva is wet due to arousal, injuries are rare or non-existent during intercourse due to the natural elasticity (ibid.)
- Nevertheless, 30-50% report bleeding during first intercourse (ibid.). Whether this is caused by microtrauma to the hymen itself or other parts of the vulva and vagina (due to lack of lubrication or other causes) has yet to be tested (ibid.: 814)
- The structure consists of folds of mucous membrane, it was formed in the embryonic phase and has since remained (see Blackledge 2004:145; Mangler et al. 2022:814, Stein et al. 2012: 440ff.)
- The corona vaginalis varies in shape, appearance, texture and color (see Fig. 2)
- If the virginal passage is closed, too small or septate, a surgical opening is necessary

it is a mistake to assume that a thin membrane grows across the vagina, dividing it, and that this membrane ...bursts in defloration. (Galen, 129 – c. 216 AD)

But what makes the whole thing truly tragic is the certain fact that the hymen, an unclear, unstable natural thing [...] does not deserve the trust that is expected of it. Just as it often blocks when it should not, it not so rarely proves to be soft and flexible and can be pushed aside in the act without tearing [...] (Bölsche 1903:163f., Deutsches Textarchiv (DTA), own translation)

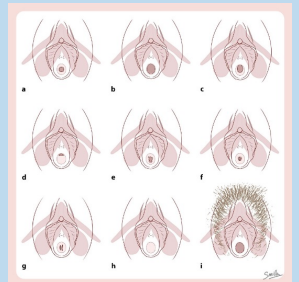


Fig. 2: Variants of the corona vaginalis: a Corona annularis (ring-shaped wide); b Corona annularis (ring-shaped narrow); c Corona semilunaris (crescent-shaped); d Corona alta (high-set); e Corona fimbriata (fringed); f Corona ciliiformis (sieve-like small openings); g Corona septata (septate); h Corona imperforata (atresia, no opening); i Caruncula coronalis (mucosal folds) (cf. Mangler et al. 2022: 813)

Cultural practices that twist the evidence

The cultural concept «virginity» is inscribed into the body when doctors or lay persons

- ...test or certify «virginity» by looking at the hymen
- ...reconstruct or construct «virginity» by suturing the vaginal tissue so that the size of the opening is reduced
- ...differentiate between «virgo intacta» and «non-virgo» which "can lead to modification of diagnostics and treatment." (Mangler et al. 2022:811)

A qualitative discursive analysis of German Sex Education Material reveals an overlap of traditional and non-traditional discourse positions:

Data

Collection of German sex education material via Google and keyword search in print material:

Source	No. of articles
Bundesinstitut für öffentliche Gesundheit (including loveline.de, 2009-24)	17
DDR (print, 1977-78)	3
Profamilia (online, 2009-23)	8
BRAVO (print, 1966-2007)	47
BRAVO (online, 2010-22)	52
Mädchen (online, 2016-21)	51
Gesamt	178

Method

Qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2022) using MAXQDA, the codes are categorized into two categories and several subcategories:

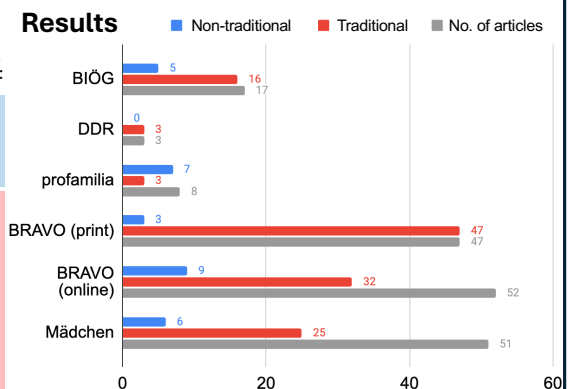
Non-traditional discourse positions

- «Virginity is not evident from the hymen»
- «Less than half of people with vulvas bleed during 1st sex»
- «Psychological reasons lead to vaginal dryness, cramping and pain»

Traditional discourse positions

- «Virginity is the integrity of the hymen»
- «Virginity is very rarely recognizable by the hymen»
- «An intact hymen is recognizable»
- «The hymen is worth protecting»
- «The hymen can stretch or tear during the first sex, it can hurt, but it doesn't have to. Sometimes it tears earlier»
- «The hymen tears the first time you have sex»
- «The hymen tears during activities other than sex»

Results



Conclusion

- The corona vaginalis cannot be considered as a marker of «virginity» which is still common praxis and legal in many countries (Mangler et al. 2022:810 ff.)
- The inscription of virginity into the body in the shape of a closed membrane shows the profound effect of the virginity dispositif within the discourse. The surgical construction of a virginal hymen is the inscription of a cultural concept into the female body
- German sex education material reproduces «traditional» values and non-medical «facts» about the hymen (even side by side in the same article)
- The prevailing vagueness and entanglement of different definitions enables the strengthening of a vague concept and is fundamentally necessary for the existence of an ideologically motivated concept (see also Berger & Wenger 1973)

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