

Title: UK University Students' Perceptions and Negotiations of Sexual Consent

Authors: Liam Wignall¹, Jade Stirling¹ & Ryan Scoats².

¹Bournemouth University; ²Coventry University

Author contact: lwignall@bournemouth.ac.uk

Journal: Psychology & Sexuality

Abstract:

There is a growing recognition of the importance of trying to understand how sexual consent is understood and negotiated, yet research in this area is still developing. In particular, there is a need to better understand how young adults, a group significantly more likely to be victims of sexual assault, negotiate sexual consent across a range of cultural settings. Utilising semi-structured interviews, this research explores 20 British University students' perspectives and behaviours regarding sexual consent. Through thematic analysis, three key themes were identified: consent is often assumed in sexual settings; consent is understood to be important, but often taboo to discuss; and consent can be negotiated in complex ways. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the realities of how consent is being enacted and understood and have implications for campaigns which aim to reduce instances of sexual assault on campus.

Key words: Casual Sex; Consent; Hook-ups; Sexual Assault; Sexual Consent

Introduction

Statistics show that 20% of women and 4% of men have experienced sexual assault (Rape Crisis England and Wales, 2019). Sexual assault includes a wide range of both contact (e.g. forced physical contact, such as unwanted sexual touching) and non-contact (e.g. exposure to sexual material, such as being sent explicit images) sexual offences with an unwilling victim, performed using force, threats or when the victim is incapacitated and cannot consent (Campbell, 2008). Approximately 90% of victims know their perpetrator, which can act as a barrier for reporting and acknowledging sexual assault (McGregor, 2005) – consequently, actual instances of sexual assault may be higher than reported statistics. The National Crime Survey found 83% of victims did not report their experience of sexual assault to the police (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, sexual assault impacts victims in numerous ways; it is detrimental to mental and physical health, and can impact their lifestyle post-assault (Rainn.org, 2019).

Research indicates that individuals aged 16-24 years are significantly more likely to be a victim of sexual assault (Office for National Statistics, 2019). College and university students fall under this age category, with one in four respondents of the NUS 'Hidden Marks' survey reporting that they had experienced some kind of sexual assault whilst being a student (NUS, 2010). Certain aspects of student lifestyle, such as drinking or hooking-up culture (Bogle, 2008), may contribute to higher rates of sexual assault (Duval et al., 2018; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Testa and Livingston, 2009). Women and transgender students' risk of sexual assault have also been found to be disproportionately higher than men and cisgendered students (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2007). Consequently, there have been pressures on universities to address the problem of sexual assault on university

campuses (Jozkowski et al., 2018), and a need to conduct research on university/college campuses (Moylan and Javorka, 2020).

Consent is integral to understandings of sexual assault, yet it is not as widely researched (Beres, 2007). Whilst sexual assault has been broadly defined as sex without consent, there is not an agreed definition of what sexual consent is. Exemplifying this, in a sample of U.S women with a history of sexual victimisation, Cleere and Lynn (2013) found 75% of participants failed to acknowledge their experience as a sexual assault, despite meeting legal definitions and participants discussing a lack of consent involved. Similar variations in definitions of sexual assault are present in student populations (Haugen et al., 2018), raising important questions about how university students understand sexual consent.

Intricacies of sexual consent

Sexual consent is ambiguous, and understandings of consent differ on an individual level (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Righi et al., 2019). There is agreement that sexual consent is about a mutual and un-coerced agreement to engage in sexual activity (Beres, 2007).

However, difficulties arise in how individuals should reach this mutual agreement. Consent can be given explicitly, implicitly, verbally or non-verbally (Willis and Jozkowski, 2019).

Explicit verbal consent is arguably the most discussed form of consent in popular discourse and media depictions of consent, such as verbally stating, “I will have sex with you” and is reflective of legal concepts of consent (Munro, 2010), but is unrealistic of how individuals actually give sexual consent (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), and can be seen as socially unacceptable (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012). Indeed, Humphreys and Herold (2003) found most students do not give consent in this way, perceiving it lacks romance and spontaneity.

This can lead to potential discrepancies between how students think consent should be discussed and how it actually is negotiated.

Consent can also be defined as an internal state of willingness - both partners should perceive the other as internally willing to engage in sex (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). However, this is more difficult to negotiate than verbal consent as one cannot see an individual's internal state, highlighting the over reliance of interpreting the internal emotions of one's partner through body language (Powell, 2008). This is further complicated when an individual's external actions do not correspond to their internal willingness e.g. not wanting to have sex with a long-term partner but feel obliged to do so (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). Indeed, research highlights the variability in external emotions and behaviours as cues for sexual consent (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), and the ability to misinterpret cues as consent (Jozkowski et al., 2019).

Negotiating consent through interpreting a partner's body language with a mix of verbal and non-verbal cues is arguably a type of sexual script (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts are cultural ideas of how individuals are supposed to interact in a sexual setting, providing a framework for how to process physical and feelings related to sex. These scripts are not explicitly taught or passively learned but are imbued with meaning which constantly change with new social interactions (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001). Given how little sexual consent is openly discussed in educational settings (e.g. Willis, Jozkowski and Read, 2019) and the reliance of non-verbal cues in popular culture examples (e.g. Willis et al., 2020), it is logical to understand the complexities involved in negotiating sexual consent.

Sexual consent plays a vital and influential role in the law as it is used as a criterion for the legal definition of sexual assault and rape (Munro, 2010). Therefore, interpretation

of consent affects court judgements (Humphreys and Herold, 2007), with hearings normally requiring the victim to prove that they did not consent during sex (Block, 2006). This may partly explain lower conviction rates for sexual assault and rape due to the need for evidence of a lack of consent, alongside the related culture of victim blaming (Bows and Herring, 2020; Randall, 2010). Due to the ambiguity of what sexual consent is and how it is understood, described above, instances of sexual assault or rape may not make it to court. Victims may not label their experience as sexual assault and may even perceive their experiences as normal (Deming et al., 2013). Such ambiguity can lead to misinformation on what sexual assault is and can subsequently lead to re-victimisation (Littleton et al., 2017), highlighting the important need to understand how students conceptualise and negotiate consent.

Negotiation of sexual consent

Given the hook-up or casual sex culture associated with university students (Bogle, 2008), and the increased awareness of instances of sexual assault on US campuses (Fedina et al., 2018), research has explored how sexual consent is negotiated among student samples. Studies document how students prefer to negotiate consent using more non-verbal than verbal cues (Beres et al., 2004; Hall, 1998; Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999), with students preferring to assume consent (Humphreys, 2007), although gender itself also plays a role in how consent is negotiated. For example, Willis et al. (2019) interviewing U.S. college students found passive behaviours are consistent with traditional heterosexual gendered sexual scripts in which men normally initiate and consent to sex and women have barriers to be overcome (see also Marcantonio et al., 2018b; Wiederman, 2005).

Non-verbal behaviours, such as not resisting sexual advances, are indicative of how consent is often negotiated by U.S college students (Marcantonio et al., 2018a). Refusal cues are also openly looked for by partners to evaluate if the partner is exhibiting signs of “active participation” (Beres, 2010: 5). Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) found U.S college students described consent as an obvious thing to pick up on, and that it did not need to be verbally communicated, mirroring previous research (e.g. Beres, 2010). Relatedly, Righi et al. (2019) found that younger U.S. student samples followed a similar pattern or recognising the importance of verbal consent but choosing to convey consent non-verbally or look for an absence of refusal. Given the obvious possibility for miscommunication to occur, there has been an increased focus on teaching students how to give clear and explicit refusals for sexual activities (Marcantonio et al., 2018a).

Although many campaigns address the importance of gaining consent before having sex, they do not always address the definition of consent or highlight how consent should be discussed (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Rowe and Hills, 2020). Often campaigns assume there is a shared understanding of consent without promoting consensual sex and how to obtain and express consent (Brady and Lowe, 2020; Johnson and Hoover, 2015). Indeed, many students do not fully comprehend what it means for their idiosyncratic sexual experiences (Borges et al., 2008). Whilst sexual assault is continually the topic of conversation with recent campaigns such as #METOO (Harris et al., 2019), discussions of consent are still a taboo and difficult to discuss topic, particularly given how discussions of consent are often absent from traditional sexual scripts (Blunt-Vinti, Jozkowski and Hunt, 2018). For campaigns which promote discussions of consent and aim to reduce instances of

sexual assault, it is important to explore if these campaigns have lasting impact on university campuses (see also Stirling et al., 2020).

The majority of the research described above has used U.S. college students when exploring sexual consent, potentially due to the high instances of sexual assault on US college campuses (Moynan and Javorka, 2020). Yet sexual assault is also a problem within UK university settings (Stirling et al., 2020). This paper will seek to investigate understandings and negotiation of consent in a UK setting. This is particularly important given the instances of sexual assault on UK university campuses (Stirling et al., 2020). This study will contribute to the literature through providing the qualitative understandings of sexual consent of current UK university students and how they negotiate it with their partners.

Method

Participants

Twenty cis-gendered, heterosexual, white university students (13 females), aged 19-27 years ($M = 21.25$, $SD = 2.23$) were recruited. Nine participants were recruited through a university research programme in exchange for participatory credits; the remaining students were recruited through social media adverts seeking participants for research into sexual consent and, upon completion of the study, were entered into a prize draw for £100 worth of vouchers. Eligibility criteria were that participants had to be over 18 years old and studying at the university where data collection occurred.

Procedure

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews began with demographic information, then questions related to sexual consent

were asked, including how participants define and negotiate consent; how important it is to discuss consent with sexual partners; and potential barriers to discussing sexual consent. A pilot study was conducted to check ordering and the wording of the questions (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). During the data collection process, the second author kept a reflexive log to aid in the data analysis process.

Participants were given an information sheet and consent form prior to the interview, and informed that they could stop the interview at any time. All interviews were conducted in a private room (Elmir et al., 2011), transcribed and analysed by the first second. Data was stored on a secure university server. Once interviews were transcribed and anonymised, original audio recordings were deleted.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using inductive, semantic thematic analysis, consisting of a six-stage process of coding, recording and theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012). The first and second author coded the data and developed themes independently. These themes were compared and contrasted for inter-rater reliability with the researchers cross-checking potential themes and sub-themes, discussing each one in-depth, before mutually agreeing on the final labels and definitions. The themes were compared back to the literature to check for internal coherence. Once analysis was complete, the themes were cross-checked with participants to check for a coherence.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from MASKED FOR REVIEW. The principles of the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics were followed. All participants

signed consent forms prior to the interview, were given opportunities to ask questions throughout and reminded of their right to withdraw. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were given information of charities which dealt with issues of sexual assault. To preserve anonymity, names have been replaced with participants numbers in this article.

Results

All participants agreed upon the importance of sexual consent. However, there were complexities in how participants defined consent and how they thought consent should be discussed. Thematic analysis identified three themes: 'assumed consent', 'consent as important but undiscussed' and 'consent as negotiated' (see figure 1).

Insert figure 1.

Assumed consent

Throughout participants' narratives, common stereotypes of consent persisted, mirroring some of the sexual scripts described in the introduction. This theme explored the contexts of relationships and hook-ups. The authors identified how participants often described consent as something which was assumed until otherwise indicated, through a refusal to participate. However, the context was described as important for negotiating consent.

Lack of refusal

When asked how participants look for signs of consent when initiating sexual interaction, most participants focused on looking for signs of aversion, rather than signs of enthusiasm. For example, P18 (male) said they "look out for any sign that someone is pulling away, hesitant or uncomfortable". Similarly, P16 (female) said, "you do need to look at the

person's body language - if they are pulling away you should probably ask them if they're okay". If a partner does not refuse sex verbally or physically, this is interpreted as consent. The same logic was used during sex, when checking their partner had not changed their mind. As P14 (female) said, "it's checking that they still want to carry on". When a partner displays refusal behaviour or shows signs of uncomfortableness, participants understand these cues to be indicative of withdrawing consent. P2 (female), said they look for "some sort of sign that they don't want [sex], or they want this". Similarly, P3 (male) said they look to see if the other person is "shying away from certain things or flinching". If the partner does not display this refusal, it is seen as consensual. While participants seemed to express an understanding about the need to be aware of their partner's actions, it highlights the heavy reliance on interpretation of behavioural cues.

While physical cues were important for interpretation of refusal, a lack of verbal aversion was also read as consent. Most participants understood not verbally expressing "no" to be a form of consent. For example, when asked to define consent, P11 (female) said, "just doing it and not saying no". Similarly, P15 (male) said, "I guess if they don't say anything against it" with P20 (male) adding, "well they hadn't told me otherwise". A lack of verbal refusal is also how participants stated they negotiated their consent when engaging in sexual activities, with P16 (female) saying, "I just go with it until I don't feel comfortable and then I will say something... rather than giving consent, I let them know if I don't consent, if I'm not comfortable". Similarly, P3 (male) said, "I don't really have to give any verbal consent if I'm happy to go along with it. If I'm unhappy, I will say no". Participants focused more on how to withdraw consent, through body language and verbal refusal, rather than

emphasising the need for consent to be given; consent seems to be assumed until otherwise.

Consent in relationships

Participants discussed how consent is negotiated differently in relationships compared to casual hook-ups. Sex was assumed as a normal part of a relationship with consent not needed to be actively discussed. For example, P2 (female) said, "I think negotiating consent in a relationship doesn't always have to be there because you're in the relationship already, and you've made that consent already". Similarly, P9 (female) said, "Because there is an underlying understanding, you're in a relationship so those kinds of things are okay now almost". While this was the view for established relationships, the importance of consent differed depending on the timepoint of the relationship.

Consent was important to discuss in the early stages of a relationship. For example, P17 (male) said, "It's kind of an implicit contract... or is negotiated within the first instances of the relationship". Similarly, P7 (female) said, "You could discuss consent before you get into a relationship, you can discuss what you would do in different situations and how you would react". However, as the relationship becomes more established, discussions of consent are not viewed as necessary. For example, P20 (male) said, "I don't know if it's something that is discussed as much". Similarly, P8 (female) said, "In a relationship you kind of give consent at the start and then sometimes it's just assumed for the whole relationship". Participants suggested consent does not need to be discussed because partners should be comfortable enough in a relationship to indicate if they do not wish to have sex. For example, P9 (female) said, "I think in a relationship the responsibility falls more on the individual to discuss what they really are up for that day". Similarly, P15 (male)

said, “if it’s unwanted the other person will say, it’s not hard”. The focus is on the lack of refusal rather than confirmation of consent.

You can just tell

Participants described how consent was not something that needed to be openly discussed; instead, it was an internal feeling of knowing when an individual consented to sex. This involved making assumptions based on contextual factors. For example, P14 (female), said, “From the mood, you can tell how that person is feeling”. Similarly, P10 (female) said, “you don’t necessarily need to ask, but you can just know, and tell from how someone is acting”. Sex was also described as something that “just happens”, implying that there was not necessarily time to discuss consent. For example, P20 (male) said, “it just happens you don’t need to explicitly address it”. P7 (female) said, “You can’t always plan things ahead, it just happens”. Participants sexual scripts did not include stopping to check sexual consent.

Participants also emphasised the importance of social settings, particularly in a hook-up context. For example, leaving a nightclub setting with somebody to go back to their house is assumed as consent and willingness to have sex. For example, P16 (female) said, “I think people assume if you bring someone home [from a nightclub] then it means you’re going to have sex. But of course, it doesn’t”. When asked about how consent was negotiated in a hook up, P15 (male) said “It’s obvious, if you bring someone back, you bring someone to your room [for sex] that you are going to bring them back for sex”. P13 (female) said verbal consent is given through asking, “Do you want to come back to mine?”. Acceptance is normally framed as a mutual agreement for sex. However, this was not the case for all participants. For example, P14 (female) said, “You agree to take someone back, but that’s the first step of consent”. Similarly, P2 (female), said:

I know of a lot of girls who have gone home with a guy because they just wanted a kiss, or a cuddle, and they've tried to fuck them. They've been like actually no I'm too drunk let's not do this and the guy has been like what's the point, why am I here, why would you waste my time?

Participants emphasised these problematic, often gendered, assumptions. P14 (female) said, "Even if girls take guys back home, they feel if they take someone back home then decide they don't want to sleep with them, they feel pressured because they don't want to mess the guy around". Similarly, P16 (female), said, "If you bring someone home, I think there's a massive assumption that you are going to have sex that night... there's pressure to have sex".

Consent as important, but undiscussed

Consent was framed as important and necessary and participants stated it should be negotiated prior to sexual activity. For example, P13 (female) said, "Consent is really important," with P7 (female) adding, "Consent is very important - if a partner says 'no', it's a straight no". Some participants stated consent should be discussed before a sexual encounter. As P8 (female) explained, "I think you have to establish consent first before you progress". Similarly, P9 (female) said, "I think consent is the first thing you should talk about". Participants also understood the consequence of a lack of consent, with P2 (female) stating, "[Consent] is the most important thing - without consent, it's sexual assault".

However, consent was also framed as awkward to openly discuss with partners, often leading to sex happening without an explicit discussion prior. Verbal consent was framed by participants as a taboo subject within sexual intimacy, potentially stemming from

the awkwardness related to asking a partner if they would like to have sex. For example, when asked if people ask for permission to initiate sex, P8 (female) said, “Probably not though... it’s quite an awkward question, especially if they say no you’re like oh okay then”. Similarly, P1 (female) said, “Consent is really non-verbal, and you don’t really sit down and say, ‘Do you want to have sex?’ and say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ It doesn’t really happen like that”. Asking for consent was deemed to detract from the potentially spontaneous nature of sex, with P19 (female) saying, “[Asking for consent] takes the whole spontaneity out of it and the romance out of it saying ‘can I kiss you’, ‘can I do this’, ‘can I do this’.” Similarly, P15 (male) said, “Asking for sexual consent is awkward and embarrassing”. Consent is framed as a potential barrier to sex as it limits romance and spontaneity. Thus, most participants stated they would not negotiate consent by asking for it.

Consent as negotiated

Although participants described consent as awkward to openly discuss, some participants indicated that they used alternative ways to negotiate sexual consent. Participants used various methods demonstrating the complexities of consent and how to overcome potential barriers.

Reassurance as consent

While participants generally avoided verbal consent, some participants described phrases they used to check in with their sexual partner. For example, P16 (female) said, “Whoever you’re having sex with, you should ask them, ‘are you okay with this?’”. Using similar language, P3 (male) said they ask, “Are you alright?” to their partner during sex. This phrase was framed as a means of seeking continual consent, creating a sense of reassurance.

Participants wanted to balance the need to check in with their sexual partner, but without sounding awkward. This type of checking in was also present in for participants in relationships, particularly when trying new sexual activities. For example, P1 (female) said, “If it is something different that you want to try out or you want to do it for a certain occasion, and you talk about it before”. Similarly, P6 (male) said, “I don’t know about other peoples’ relationships, but we would be so open about [negotiating consent] and be like ‘I want to try this’”. Sexual consent in these instances was framed as something to check in on during sex when trying new things, rather than asking explicit permission beforehand.

Reciprocity

When discussing strategies to negotiate consent, participants emphasised the importance of body language and contact; specifically, participants described how they would often mirror body language or behaviours to show consent, or vice versa. For example, P18 (male) said, “You touch their leg and they touch yours, mirroring actions and reciprocity”. When asked to expand, P6 (male) said, “If you have taken an item of clothing off and they have reciprocated, that’s consent”. Similarly, P16 (female) said, “If they let me touch them, then they touch me, I take that as consent”. Participants described how these behaviours could become increasingly more intimate, with P18 (male) stating that they may start off “tickling the arm” before becoming more intimate. As P4 (male) stated, “It’s a build up to that you don’t just dive straight in, you start kissing then you go into something else, then sex”. Here, engaging in tactile behaviours is a way of checking for consent. P4 (male) added, “They may respond one way to you, or differently, then you know, ‘Okay, I’ll back off a little bit’, if not, you carry on”. Mirroring behaviours was described as a clear sign of consent; however, participants did not state how they initiated these behaviours.

Open online chat

Participants described how technology has been incorporated into discussions of sexual consent. The ability to send explicit messages asking for sex, normally on dating apps of social networking apps, is a clear way of negotiating sexual consent. This method was framed as an easy way to broach the subject of sex. For example, P3 (male) said, “Chatting about sex is becoming easier with people, doing it sober, through apps like Tinder”. Similarly, P5 (female) said, “My friend was getting messages asking, ‘Do you want a one-night stand?’...I guess that is consent in itself as you say yeah why not”. Online messaging about sex was not framed as socially unacceptable or awkward, compared to asking in person. Participants also liked that messages could be saved and viewed later on, with P17 (male) saying, “It creates a digital record, and it’s kind of like emblematic of behaviour the same way in a club, just virtually... Well it’s like explicit consent”. Similarly, P1 (female) said, “Even if it’s like talking online before you meet up, there will be a transaction of ‘Shall we meet up for sex?’ and people both agree”. Through being explicit, there could be no suggestion of miscommunication of signs or body language.

However, participants were clear to indicate that consent to sex online does not mean that sex will happen offline, and that individuals can withdraw consent if they change their mind. For example, P3 (male) said, “They can confirm that [they want sex] when they meet in person, as obviously just messaging doesn’t mean someone is not going to change their mind at some point”. Similarly, P10 (female) said, ““just because you matched and spoke on Tinder, it doesn’t mean they definitely want to have sex”. Participants understood consent to be an on-going process that needs negotiating due to fluctuations depending on the context and the people involved.

Discussion

Drawing on 20 in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with university students, this study examined understandings of sexual consent. The present study, to our knowledge, is the first qualitative analysis of UK university students' understandings and negotiation of sexual consent, focusing on how individuals negotiated this in different contexts. Three key themes were identified: 1) Consent is assumed; 2) Consent as important but taboo; and 3) Consent as negotiated. Although participants demonstrated a clear consensus that sexual consent is important, the fact that consent was not clearly negotiated highlights both the complexity of the topic as well as the potentially problematic ways in which consent might be understood and enacted.

Looking first at how consent was assumed, similar to other research (Jozkowski et al., 2014) the present study found the absence of refusal to be perceived as indicative of consent. This assumption of consent is mirrored in the work of Beres (2010) where participants looked for signs of aversion; either physical or verbal cues to express discomfort. However, unlike Beres' (2010) research, participants in our research did not discuss expressing signs of enjoyment to show active participation. This may have been due to participants' difficulty in discussing consent, as discussions around sex are taboo (Beres, 2007). Additionally, the negative labels which women are subject to for articulating a desire and enjoyment of sex may discourage them from doing so (Jackson and Cram, 2003).

Other methods of determining consent also relied on the interpretation of situational cues. Participants often understood consent to be interpreted as behavioural actions (Muehlenhard et al., 2016); with no clear articulation of the consent being given. Supporting previous research, non-verbal cues, such as going home together, were indicative of consent

(Beres, 2010; Jozkowski et al 2018). However, it is problematic to assume 'Do you want to come back to mine?', means someone has consented to engage in sex. This expectation of sex has the potential to lead to instances of sexual assault, as individuals may assume the other person is willing when they are not (Jozkowski et al., 2014). Indeed, Jozkowski et al. (2018) suggest that while men often interpret these particular cues (such as going home with someone) as consent to sexual activity, women tended to view them as indicators of sexual interest, but not consent. Both men and women in this study referenced these sexual scripts, but the women were clear that sexual interest or choosing to go home with somebody does not equate to consent. As our participants discussed, the differing interpretations of these cues could lead a certain amount of pressure to have sex.

Participants agreed that sexual consent was important, needed, and generally defined it in the same way that much research does: as an agreement (Beres, 2007). Yet, participants found it difficult to discuss consent and it was clear that participants' conceptualisations of consent differed to how they negotiated consent, if they did at all (Jozkowski et al., 2014). Often, participants' discussions of how they obtained consent did not reflect an explicit 'agreement' (Humphrey and Herold, 2007) but tacit understandings. This approach may be demonstrative of cognitive dissonance (Festingers, 1957), where people have two contradictory beliefs on negotiating consent; participants emphasise how important (explicit) agreement is, yet also see attaining verbal consent as impractical. Although participants viewed consent as important, it is still somewhat socially unacceptable to have explicit conversations about it (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012) – further research could explore stigma related to discussing sexual consent with partners, potentially with a focus on cognitive dissonance. Perhaps as a way of dealing with these conflicting

views, the spontaneity and romance related to sex were emphasised in participants' narratives. Asking for sex can be awkward, and, as participants described, often sex "just happens" without *explicitly* consenting (Humpreys and Herold, 2003).

Consistent with previous findings (Marcantonio et al., 2018b), consent was not negotiated within already established romantic relationships. It was assumed that after giving consent once, this consent covered sexual activities beyond that initial situation (Righi et al., 2019). This approach to consent likely reflects the perceived impracticality of having discussions every time participants engaged in sexual behaviours with a romantic partner. Problematically, however, there were assumptions that those who wanted to withdraw consent should feel 'comfortable' enough to vocalise this. Although in some instances this is likely possible, this approach does assume that power dynamics with the relationship are as such that individuals have the necessary agency to voice their desire to not engage.

Despite the relative absence of any in depth discussions of consent, some participants did still make active attempts to establish whether particular sexual behaviours were desired or not. Examples of participants seeking 'Assurance Consent' (i.e. continually 'checking in' with one's sexual partner for reciprocity) suggest that participants did still attempt to establish consent. However, seeking assurance could still lead to misinterpretations. These instances highlighted how alternative, less formal means of verbal consent were used when negotiating consent (c.f. Beres, 2007), confirming consent in ways that were not as direct or awkward as "will you have sex with me?"

Although participants recognised that asking for consent can be awkward, there were occasions where these explicit discussions were possible. Participants' discussions of online communication showed that participants negotiated consent explicitly through

online messages that were direct and sexual in nature. A possible reason why participants felt they could ask for sex directly online but not face-to-face, is the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), which makes individuals act differently online than they would in person. Suler (2004) argues that not being able to observe another person physically when communicating, can reduce an individual's concerns for impression management. By being "invisible" online, individuals may care less how they come across to the respondent. Therefore, asking directly for sex may not be awkward, as they have no concern for upholding norms which they may uphold in-person. Although participants may view this as verbal consent, this online behaviour mirrors what happens in social setting and the problems associated with it, such as misinterpretation of communications.

The current study finds that a need for explicit consent may act as a barrier in sex, but individuals are utilising other ways of communicating sexual consent to overcome this issue. Many of these strategies, however, lead to the assumption of consent (present in all participants' narratives). Consequently, campaigns desiring to highlight the importance of consent, and thus potentially reducing instances of sexual assault, should aim to address consent in a manner that acknowledges how individuals actually convey consent. Approaches which recognise the cognitive dissonance many hold around wanting open discussions around consent, but not feeling comfortable in having them, can help to open up the dialogue around consent.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. Notably, the study only draws on the experiences of heterosexual students and the experiences of non-heterosexual students' negotiation of consent may be markedly different due to their different sexual narratives (Hammack and

Cohler, 2009). Similarly, the sample does not include trans participants and future research should explore how trans university students negotiate sexual consent. Despite advertising to a wide range of students, the sample only consisted of white students. Future research should explore the experiences of Black students, potentially adopting an intersectional approach (e.g. Worthen and Wallace, 2017).

Conclusion and future research

The findings of this study suggest that participants do not always negotiate sexual consent. Instead, consent is often assumed or interpreted through body language and behaviours, which can lead to incorrect assumptions and difficulties in communication. However, some individuals highlighted verbal strategies relating to confirmation of enjoyment. Future work seeking to reduce instances of sexual assault should be realistic about how consent is navigated by young people, seeing the negotiation of consent as a complex and often misunderstood process. While campaigns emphasise an affirmative consent approach and the importance of gaining verbal consent, this is not reminiscent of how sexual consent is actually discussed by the university students in this sample. Further research could work alongside charities and campaigns aimed at reducing instances of sexual assault on campuses, drawing on the examples presented in this article for how consent is negotiated.

References

- Beres M (2007) 'Spontaneous' sexual consent: An analysis of sexual consent literature. *Feminism & Psychology* 17(1): 93-108. Doi:10.1177/0959353507072914
- Beres M (2010) Sexual miscommunication? Untangling assumptions about sexual communication between casual sex partners. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 12(1): 1-14. Doi: 10.1080/13691050903075226
- Beres M, Herold E and Maitland S (2004) Sexual consent behaviors in same-sex relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 33(5): 475-486. Doi: 10.1023/B:ASEB.0000037428.41757.10.
- Block S (2006) *Rape and sexual power in early America*. UNC Press Books.
- Blunt-Vinti HD, Jozkowski KN and Hunt M (2018) Show or tell? Does verbal and/or nonverbal sexual communication matter for sexual satisfaction? *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 45(3): 206-217. Doi: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1501446
- Brady G and Lowe P (2020) 'Go on, go on, go on': Sexual consent, child sexual exploitation and cups of tea. *Children & Society* 34: 78-92. Doi: 10.1111/chso.12358
- Bogle K (2008). *Hooking up: Sex, dating, and relationships on campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Borges AM, Banyard VL and Moynihan MM (2008) Clarifying consent: Primary prevention of sexual assault on a college campus. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 36(1-2): 75-88. Doi: 10.1080/10852350802022324.
- Bows H and Herring J (2020) Getting away with murder? A review of the 'rough sex defence'. *The Journal of Criminal Law Online* first. Doi: 10.1177/0022018320936777
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77-101. Doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Burkett M and Hamilton K (2012) Postfeminist sexual agency: Young women's negotiations of sexual consent. *Sexualities* 15(7): 815-833. Doi: 10.1177/1363460712454076
- Campbell R (2008) The psychological impact of rape victims. *American Psychologist* 63(8): 702-717. Doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.63.8.702..
- Cantor D, Fisher B, Chibnall S, Townsend R, Lee H, Bruce C, and Thomas G (2015) Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct. Washington, DC: Association of American Universities. Available at: http://www.aau.edu/uploadedFiles/AAU_Publications/AAU_Reports/Sexual_Assault_Camp

[us_Survey/Report%20on%20the%20AAU%20Campus%20Climate%20Survey%20on%20Sexual%20Assault%20and%20Sexual%20Misconduct.pdf](#) (accessed 02 July 2020).

Cleere C and Lynn SJ (2013) Acknowledged versus unacknowledged sexual assault among college women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 28(12): 2593-2611. Doi: 10.1177/0886260513479033.

Deming ME, Covan EK, Swan SC and Billings DL (2013) Exploring rape myths, gendered norms, group processing, and the social context of rape among college women: A qualitative analysis. *Violence Against Women* 19(4): 465-485. Doi: 10.1177/1077801213487044.

Duval A, Lanning BA, and Patterson MS (2018) A systematic review of dating violence risk factors among undergraduate college students. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21(3): 567-585. Doi: 10.1177/1524838018782207.

Elmir R, Schmied V, Jackson D and Wilkes L (2011) Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. *Nurse Researcher* 19(1): 12-16. Doi: 10.7748/nr2011.10.19.1.12.c8766.

Fedina L, Holmes J and Backes B (2018) Campus sexual assault: A systematic review of prevalence research from 2000 to 2015. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 19(1): 76-93. Doi: 10.1177/1524838016631129.

Festinger, L (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Frith H and Kitzinger C (2001) Reformulating sexual script theory. *Theory & Psychology* 11(2): 209–232. Doi: 10.1177/0959354301112004

Hall DS (1998) Consent for sexual behavior in a college student population. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* 1(10): 1-16.

Hammack P and Cohler B (2009) *The story of sexual identity: Narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Harris AJ, Terry KJ and Ackerman AR (2019) Campus sexual assault: Forging an action-focused research agenda. *Sexual Abuse* 31(3): 263-269. Doi: 10.1177/1079063218800471.

Haugen A, Rieck S, Salter P and Philips N (2018) What Makes It Rape? A Lay Theories Approach to Defining Rape Among College Students. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 40(1): 18-35. Doi: 10.1080/01973533.2017.1398091

Hickman SE and Muehlenhard CL (1999) "By the semi-mystical appearance of a condom": How young women and men communicate sexual consent in heterosexual situations. *Journal of Sex Research* 36(3): 258-272. Doi: 10.1080/00224499909551996.

Humphreys, T. (2007). Perceptions of sexual consent: The impact of relationship history and gender. *Journal of Sex Research* 44(4): 307-315. Doi: 10.1080/00224490701586706.

Humphreys T and Herold E (2003). Should universities and colleges mandate sexual behavior?: Student perceptions of antioch college's consent policy. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality* 15(1): 35-51. Doi: 10.1300/J056v15n01_04.

Humphreys T and Herold E (2007) Sexual consent in heterosexual relationships: Development of a new measure. *Sex Roles* 57(3-4): 305-315. Doi: 10.1007/s11199-007-9264-7.

Jackson SM and Cram F (2003) Disrupting the sexual double standard: Young women's talk about heterosexuality. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 42(1): 113-127. Doi: 10.1348/014466603763276153.

Joffe H (2012) Thematic analysis. In: Harper D and Thompson A (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons. pp.210-223.

Johnson AM and Hoover SM (2015) The potential of sexual consent interventions on college campuses: A literature review on the barriers to establishing affirmative sexual consent. *Pure Insights* 4(1): 5.

Jozkowski KN, Manning J, and Hunt M (2018) Sexual consent in and out of the bedroom: Disjunctive views of heterosexual college students. *Women's Studies in Communication* 41(2): 117-139. Doi: 10.1080/07491409.2018.1470121.

Jozkowski KN, Marcantonio TL, Rhoads KE, Canan S, Hunt ME and Willis M (2019) A content analysis of sexual consent and refusal communication in mainstream films. *The Journal of Sex Research* 56(6): 754-765. Doi: 10.1080/00224499.2019.1595503.

Jozkowski KN and Peterson ZD (2013) College students and sexual consent: Unique insights. *Journal of Sex Research* 50(6): 517-523. Doi: 10.1080/00224499.2012.700739.

Jozkowski KN, Peterson ZD, Sanders SA, Dennis B, and Reece M (2014) Gender differences in heterosexual college students' conceptualizations and indicators of sexual consent: Implications for contemporary sexual assault prevention education. *The Journal of Sex Research* 51(8): 904-916. Doi: 10.1080/00224499.2013.792326.

Klein V, Imhoff R, Reininger KM and Briken P (2019) Perceptions of sexual script deviation in women and men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48(2): 631-644. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-018-1280-x.

Krebs C, Lindquist C, Warner T, Fisher B, and Martin S (2007) *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf> (accessed 02 July 2020)

Littleton H, Grills A, Layh M and Rudolph K, (2017) Unacknowledged rape and re-victimization risk: Examination of potential mediators. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 41(4): 437-450. Doi: 10.1177/0361684317720187.

Marcantonio T, Jozkowski N, and Lo W (2018a) Beyond “just saying no”: A preliminary evaluation of strategies college students use to refuse sexual activity. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47(2): 341-351. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-017-1130-2.

Marcantonio T, Jozkowski KN and Wiersma-Mosley J, (2018b) The influence of partner status and sexual behavior on college women’s consent communication and feelings. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 44(8): 776-786. Doi: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1474410.

McGregor J (2005) *Is it rape?: on acquaintance rape and taking women's consent seriously*. London, UK: Routledge.

Moylan C and Javorka M (2020) Widening the lens: An ecological review of campus sexual assault. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 21(1): 179-192. Doi: 10.1177/1524838018756121

Muehlenhard CL, Humphreys TP, Jozkowski KN and Peterson ZD (2016) The complexities of sexual consent among college students: A conceptual and empirical review. *The Journal of Sex Research* 53(4-5): 457-487. Doi: 10.1080/00224499.2016.1146651.

Munro VE (2010) "An unholy trinity? Non-consent, coercion and exploitation in contemporary legal responses to sexual violence in England and Wales." *Current Legal Problems* 63(1): 45-71. Doi: 10.1093/clp/63.1.45.

NUS (2010) *Hidden Marks: A Study of Women Students' Experiences of Harassment, Stalking, Violence and Sexual Assault*. London: NUS.

Office for National Statistics (2019) Sexual offences in England and Wales. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017> (accessed 02 November 2019)

Peterson ZD and Muehlenhard CL (2007) Conceptualizing the “wantedness” of women's consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences: Implications for how women label their experiences with rape. *Journal of Sex Research* 44(1): 72-88. Doi: 10.1080/00224490709336794.

Pitts M and Rahman Q (2001) Which behaviours constitute “having sex” among university students in the UK? *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 30(2): 169-176. Doi: 10.1023/A:1002777201416.

Powell A (2008) Amor fati? Gender habitus and young people’s negotiation of (hetero) sexual consent. *Journal of Sociology* 44(2): 167-184. Doi: 10.1177/1440783308089168.

Randall M (2010) Sexual assault law, credibility, and “ideal victims”: Consent, resistance, and victim blaming. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 22(2): 397-433. Doi: 10.3138/cjwl.22.2.397.

Rainn.org (2019) Effects of Sexual Violence | RAINN. Retrieved 11 September 2019 from <https://www.rainn.org/effects-sexual-violence>

Rape Crisis England & Wales (2019). Retrieved 21 August 2019, from <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/statisticssexual-violence/>

Righi M, Bogen K, Kuo C and Orchowski L (2019) A qualitative analysis of beliefs about sexual consent among high school students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Epub ahead of print 11 April 2019. Doi: 10.1177/0886260519842855

Rowe E and Hills P (2020) The Effect of Passively Viewing a Consent Campaign Video on Attitudes Toward Rape. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11: 1741. Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01741

Smith TW, Son J and Kim J (2014) *Public Attitudes Towards Homosexuality and Gay Rights Across Time and Countries*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.

Simon W and Gagnon JH (1986) Sexual scripts. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15: 97–120. Doi: 10.1007/BF01542219

Stirling JL, Hills PJ and Wignall L (2020) Narrative approach to understand people's comprehension of acquaintance rape: The role of Sex Role Stereotyping. *Psychology & Sexuality Online first*: 1-16. Doi: 10.1080/19419899.2020.1745873.

Suler J (2004) The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 7(3): 321-326. Doi: 10.1089/1094931041291295.

Testa M and Livingston JA (2009) Alcohol consumption and women's vulnerability to sexual victimization: Can reducing women's drinking prevent rape? *Substance Use & Misuse* 44(9-10): 1349-1376. Doi: 10.1080/10826080902961468.

Van Teijlingen ER and Hundley V (2002) The importance of pilot studies. *Nursing Standard* 16(40): 33-36.

Wiederman MW (2005) The gendered nature of sexual scripts. *The Family Journal* 13(4): 496–502. Doi: 10.1177/1066480705278729.

Willis M, Hunt M, Wodika A, Rhones D, Goodman J, and Jozkowski K (2019) Explicit verbal sexual consent communication: Effects of gender, relationship status, and type of sexual behaviour. *International Journal of Sexual Health* 31(1): 60-70. Doi: 10.1080/19317611.2019.1565793.

Willis M, Jozkowski K, Canan S, Rhoads K and Hunt M (2020) Models of Sexual Consent Communication by Film Rating: A Content Analysis. *Sexuality & Culture* Online first. Doi: 10.1007/s12119-020-09731-7

Willis M and Jozkowski KN (2019) Sexual precedent's effect on sexual consent communication. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48(6): 1723-1734. Doi: 10.1007/s10508-018-1348-7.

Willis M, Jozkowski KN and Read J (2019) Sexual consent in K–12 sex education: an analysis of current health education standards in the United States. *Sex Education* 19(2): 226-236. Doi: 10.1080/14681811.2018.1510769

Worthen M and Wallace S (2017) Intersectionality and perceptions about sexual assault education and reporting on college campuses. *Family Relations* 66(1): 180-196. Doi: 10.1111/fare.12240.