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Original Research

Making Progress? An Examination into the Development of Undergraduate Students' Consent Beliefs in the United States and Canada

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Abstract: Research has consistently shown that sexual violence (SV) is a problem among universities in the US and Canada. Following the #MeToo movement, additional scrutiny has been placed on universities to address SV and promote consent, with many institutions adopting affirmative consent (AC) policies. To date, research findings on university student consent practices have repeatedly shown the same trends in how students communicate consent with their partners. Few studies have explored the beliefs of university students who, in theory, should have a heightened sexual consent knowledge from enrollment in relevant courses and exposure to consent programs and campaigns. This research study examined the consent beliefs of undergraduate students enrolled in human sexuality courses in two midsized universities in the US and Canada to explore alignment with university AC policies and ideologies. Participants responded to online qualitative prompts about how they understand and communicate consent. Through thematic analysis, several key themes were identified, including themes of AC and institutional tensions. The authors found that participants' beliefs about consent often aligned with university consent principals; however, many students were caught between the ideals endorsed by universities and the realities of undergraduate social culture, impacting their consent practices. The authors' findings raise important questions about the effectiveness of university AC campaigns and demonstrate the need for sociocultural considerations to be better reflected in ongoing institutional efforts.

Keywords: *Consent, Thematic Analysis, Undergraduate Students, Sexual Violence, Institutional Response*

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Introduction

Sexual violence (SV) on university campuses is a pervasive social problem with devastating and life-long consequences for students. SV refers to nonconsensual sexual acts committed by an individual against another person or a group of people, including sexual assault and sexual harassment. In Canada and the US, alarming rates of sexual assault have been reported, with research suggesting that between one in five (Muehlenhard et al. 2015) and one in four (Senn et al. 2014) female university students will experience sexual assault while enrolled in university. Sexual consent is the distinguishing factor between SV and a consensual sexual

encounter (Shumlich and Fisher 2018), making it clear that sexual consent is often lacking in university students' sexual encounters.

In 2017, the #MeToo movement brought forth renewed urgency and societal pressure for postsecondary institutions to address SV on their campuses (Gronert 2019) and highlighted the continued failure to address important structural and institutional forces that were contributing to the relenting causes of SV. While many institutional responses to SV exist, different legislative requirements on the creation and implementation of SV policies, programs, and resources exist (Quinlan et al. 2016). For example, religious-based or conservative postsecondary institutions often fail to incorporate SV initiatives, despite making up a substantial proportion of higher education in North America (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017). This variation in legislation creates significant diversity in institutional responses, their effectiveness, and their associated impact on their students. When SV responses are incorporated, they are often situated outside of sociocultural contexts, failing to address existing campus norms, such as hypermasculine norms (Quinlan et al. 2016), binge drinking behaviors (Cox et al. 2019), and high levels of rape myth acceptance, causing many SV responses to be ineffective, receiving valid criticisms of institutional proactiveness and inadequacy of existing mitigation strategies (Garcia and Vemuri 2017; Quinlan et al. 2016; Ricci and Bergeron 2019).

Institutional responses to address SV in the US and Canada have primarily centered around adopting affirmative consent (AC) policies (Barranco 2015; Gilbert et al. 2019). AC policies and campaigns teach undergraduate students that an explicit, verbal confirmation is required for a sexual activity to be consensual (Jozkowski et al. 2017; Marcantonio et al. 2018). The central idea of universities' AC messaging is that there is a standard, uniform way to communicate consent, which ignores power differences and social influence, and how identity and positionality play into consent dynamics, particularly for marginalized students (Schowengerdt et al. 2021). Such messaging also overlooks the consent practices of 2SLGBTQ+ students, which have been found to be more flexible and fluid and do not always follow heteronormative sexual scripts (Bauer 2021; Mortimer et al. 2019). Research has also consistently shown that university students favor less explicit forms of consent. Studies have found that university students tend to use nonverbal cues to initiate sexual activities and interpret consent from their partners, such as sexual scripts and shared euphemisms that are understood to indirectly communicate interest in a sexual activity (e.g., Netflix and Chill) (Jozkowski et al. 2018; Curtis and Burnett 2017; Hermann et al. 2018; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). While verbal consent has been found to be uncommon, university students have been shown to idealize verbal consent because of minimized opportunities for misinterpretation or misunderstanding (Brady et al. 2018), suggesting a discrepancy between their consent beliefs and practices.

Since the #MeToo movement, there have been a considerable number of studies conducted on university students' consent practices. Despite this, few studies have explored how specific groups of students understand and view consent. In theory, university students should have a heightened understanding of sexual consent due to institutional efforts and knowledge generated through offered courses, yet existing literature does not still consider this question. To address this gap, this study examined the consent beliefs of undergraduate university students attending two midsized institutions in the US and Canada, who were enrolled in courses focused on human sexuality. Specifically, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to explore the consent beliefs of university students who are exposed to campus sexual consent education and SV prevention programming and initiatives at their postsecondary institutions and who elected to enroll in human sexuality courses (thereby suggesting a heightened interest and awareness of consent-related topics) and (2) to assess the extent to which institutional AC principals are reflected in these students' beliefs about sexual consent, thereby considering whether their consent beliefs differ from the consent beliefs of general university student populations.

Methods

This article reports on a subset of findings from a large mixed-methods research project. Data were collected in Fall 2019 from undergraduate students enrolled in human sexuality courses at two large urban universities in the US and Canada. These elective courses attract a diverse undergraduate population, with class sizes often reaching enrollments of 500 students each. Both courses were held in person, but used the same interactive textbook, hosted by Top Hat, an online education platform. At the beginning of each chapter, several open-response questions based on the chapter topic were posed to students. These questions were for participation points only and were not graded or reviewed; students could view their classmates' responses, and those responses were submitted electronically within the Top Hat textbook.

Recruitment efforts were led by the head teaching assistants, who conducted verbal recruitment in class and utilized the online course management systems (D2L, Brightspace) for online outreach. Details about the research project were also included in the course syllabi. Students had to consent for their responses to be used for research purposes, and their participation did not impact their grade in the course. Six-hundred and twenty-three students consented to participate in the larger research project. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 50, with a median age of 20 and an average age of 20. Participant demographic information is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Category	*Subcategory*	*Frequency*	*Percentage*
Sex	Female	381	63.2
	Male	222	36.8
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	493	81.8
	Bisexual	42	7.0
	Gay/lesbian	29	4.8
	Asexual	7	1.2
	Queer	3	0.5
	Other	28	4.8
Relationship status	Single	354	58.7
	In a relationship	249	41.35
Race*	White	316	52.4
	Asian	267	44.3
	Hispanic/Latin	29	4.8
	American	28	4.6
	Pacific Islander	21	3.5
	Black	13	2.2
	Arab/Middle Eastern	10	1.7
	Indigenous	4	0.6
	Other		

* Participants self-identified their race and selected all options that applied, so the following percentages are greater than 100.

In this article, the authors present the consent beliefs of 221 students (103 in the US, 118 in Canada) enrolled in human sexuality courses at two midsized postsecondary institutions, based on the qualitative analysis of their responses to four open-response questions:

1. What is sexual consent?
2. What indication(s)/behavior(s) do you need to give to a partner(s) to get sexual consent?
3. What indication(s)/behavior(s) do you need to give to a partner(s) to give sexual consent?
4. What are some ways that you would imply/tell your partner(s) that you are looking to initiate sexual intercourse?

Analytical Process

Data were analyzed following the six-steps for thematic analysis (e.g., data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching, reviewing, and defining theme, and producing), outlined

by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were initially stored and organized using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using NVivo (Version 12.6). Two researchers (authors redacted) familiarized themselves with the data by importing data into NVivo, and also familiarized themselves with participants' responses for each question, taking notes and initial impressions before coding the data using a reflective coding strategy. Codes were then discussed and compared to discuss central phenomenon and repeated patterns, resulting in the creation of a combined codebook. The data were then deductively coded to consider the overarching themes presented in them. Final themes were created though a collaborative analytical process (Pelias 2018), where the research team came together to review, develop, and finalize the findings.

Findings

Thematic analysis resulted in five main themes representing the consent beliefs of participants: AC, Respect, Safety, Context, and Institutional Tensions. Participant's quotes are presented subsequently to describe each theme.

Affirmative Consent

AC is the notion that consent for a sexual activity occurs only when there is affirmation. Unsurprisingly, this theme was present among many participant responses, likely due to their exposure to AC programs and initiatives embedded in their institutions. Participants echoed main components of AC policies encouraged by postsecondary institutions, including obtaining verbal, clear, nonambiguous consent, and receiving a voluntary "yes." For example, one participant stated: "the only definitive way to determine consent [is] through a clear question answered by a clear, enthusiastic yes." Other participants asserted that without a vocalized "yes," consent has not been given. One participant said: "you should never assume the other person consents until you have verbal confirmation." Similarly, participants believed that the absence of a verbal declaration renders the sexual interaction nonconsensual. One participant wrote: "they have to literally say yes and voice they want to be sexually touched. Otherwise to me it is not consent." Other respondents reflected institutional shifts from a "no means no" approach to consent, to a "yes means yes" approach, stating that the absence of a "no" does not constitute consent, including one participant who stated: "Silence is not consent." Similarly, another wrote: "Just because someone isn't explicitly saying no doesn't mean they're saying yes."

The idea of combating ambiguity with clear communication about personal expectations or desires in a sexual encounter was empathized by other students, one of whom stated: "Make sure you are clear and direct so you can receive their consent. You shouldn't be ambiguous or [leave] it up to 'implying' something because this is not really getting consent." Participants held similar beliefs with verbally communicating intentions to verify a partner's

consent. For example, one participant explained: "I think it is important to always ask and make your intentions clear. You shouldn't ask them to make out if your true intentions are to have sex." Direct communication was believed to remove uncertainty, and some described this directness as appealing or attractive. One participant wrote: "The clearer the consent is, the more reassuring it is to your sexual partners that you are into engaging in sexual activities with them, which is a great turn-on." These findings challenge the commonly cited negative beliefs of verbal consent among university students and suggest that institutional pillars of consent are being incorporated into the sexual beliefs of this student sample.

Respect

Participants described the direct relationship between consent and respect, and that seeking and securing consent was a way to demonstrate care for a partner. Example, one participant's definition of consent was: "A special boundary that is respected between two people's bodies and space that you can only cross by asking." Another participant wrote: "Consent ensures that sexual encounters [are] enjoyed by all parties involved, and creates an environment of safety, compassion, and trust within a sexual setting." Adhering to a partner's boundaries was emphasized by participants, and many valued discussing sexual interests to promote comfort and trust. One participant wrote: "People can say things like 'I'd really like to kiss you right now' or 'can I hug you?' or 'would you like to have sex?' And then from there you can ask if there is anything that person doesn't want to do or feels uncomfortable with." Another shared that each partner should be "fully aware of what they are agreeing to and is able to voice out their opinion of whether they are okay with going forward with the sexual act." As such, participants incorporated consent to ask questions and be attentive to their partner's needs. One participant wrote: "I will also often ask my partners questions, such as 'is it okay if I do this?' In doing this, I know that they are comfortable with the actions taking place and they have consented to the actions." For participants, conversations about consent were a demonstration of respect for a partner and their boundaries, and not merely enacting institutional expectations of consent.

Participants believed that one person's interests should not have priority over another person's interests. One participant wrote: "Sexual consent means that both parties involved in any sexual act must agree to the act and both be on the same page of what they want to do/are going to do." Participants emphasized mutuality and equal investment in a shared sexual interaction. Stated one participant: "[Consent is] the continuous act of ensuring that any sexual activity you are doing with someone is mutual, continuous, and desired." Participants consent practices also included checking in with their partners. For example, one wrote:

> I think it is important to have an open dialogue when engaging in consent, always checking in to make sure the other person or people are enjoying it and are wanting the action to continue and to make sure you ask between every change if they feel comfortable or if they are willing to do it or if they want to stop.

Participants asserted that consent is reversible and recognized the importance of following the boundaries set by a partner. One participant stated: "Consent can change whenever, and if it is rescinded than the other partner should follow the wishes of the other with no exceptions." Similarly, another wrote: "if someone consents, and then 20 minutes later decides they no longer want to engage in sexual activities, you have to respect their decision."

There were some participants who said that these values of consent intimate interactions as well as sexual interactions. Wrote one participant: "Sexual consent is the permission one must give another in order to be talked to, touched, or have sexual relations with." Another explained: "It doesn't have to be sexual intercourse, it could just be touching someone or kissing them." The theme of respect gives insight into why participants may enact AC pillars into their sexual encounters. For these participants, consent was understood beyond a requirement to engage in sexual activities and was instead enacted to demonstrate respect for another person, thereby reflecting personal ethics, morals, and values.

Safety

Regardless of the form of consent that is obtained, participants shared the belief that consent is compulsory in all sexual interactions to ensure a safe sexual experience. Wrote one participant: "It is a mandatory requirement when engaging or about to engage in these forms of activities that all parties have to express and abide by." Others asserted that the absence of obtaining consent from a partner renders an interaction sexually violent. For example, one participant stated: "Consent must be given, if not, sexual activity is considered rape or a form of sexual assault." Another participant explained that a lack of consent could hurt a partner: "Sexual consent is something that must be established before pursuing any sexual acts to assure that no one gets harmed emotionally, physically, or mentally." Participants recognized numerous ways that sexual encounters could be harmful, which influenced them to enact specific sexual consent practices and hold certain beliefs about consent. For example, many participants stated in their responses that a person should not be harmed if they stopped consenting. One participant asserted: "Everyone has the right to change their mind during a sexual interaction and stop. This should be respected by the other party and the person should not feel pressured or threatened in any way." They believed that consent should create an environment in which each partner feels comfortable saying "no." Wrote one participant:

> At any time, any of the parties involved are free to change their minds about engaging in any of the sexual behaviours. Even if people have gotten naked and penetration has occurred, anyone is free to stop the activity and leave.…At any time, someone may decide the "yes" they gave earlier is actually a "no" now.

Participants recognized how power dynamics can influence consent. Explained one participant: "many people can feel pressured into doing things that they really do not want to do, yet allow them to happen anyway, which can be very damaging to the individual." Participants emphasized that consent must be voluntary and not coercive. "It has to be a pressure-free, non-manipulative situation," wrote one participant. Participants' responses echoed that consent must be a clear decision, free from influence, due to the recognized harm that this may cause. Wrote one participant: "Sexual consent is when the person who you are initiating any sexual act with is conscious, capable of understanding what is about to happen, and is able to make a decision on their own will." Notably, some participants asserted that power and influence went beyond interpersonal dynamics and included broader social norms and cultural contexts. Said one participant:

> Sexual consent is a huge issue in places such as university or one-night stands, as there tends to be a lot of drinking/drugs/partying and the people use situations in which they are in a stronger position mentally or physically to take advantage of someone else. Additionally, participants believed that each partner should be informed about the parameters of the encounter and aware of potential consequences.

Participant responses also highlighted highly discussed topics within postsecondary institutions surrounding the safety of their students. For example, many participants asserted that sexual encounters where both partners are intoxicated were believed to be nonconsensual: "Sexual consent cannot be given if one person is intoxicated or drugged, and if both people are intoxicated [it] is the responsibility of the less intoxicated person to deny sexual actions." A previous sexual interaction also does not imply agreement for any future sexual interaction. Explained one participant: "Your partner cannot just assume you will always be willing to have sex with them if you have done it before, so you need to make sure you are giving your consent each time."

Exploitation and abuse in a sexual context and not taking advantage of people in vulnerable positions was also highlighted in participants' responses. Wrote one participant: "Sexual consent cannot be given when an individual is unconscious or under the influence, when it involves an individual of power or when an individual is under the age of consent."

Open and honest conversations were believed to promote safer sexual encounters. Explained one participant: "Clear, specific, and enthusiastic verbal consent should be given

where possible, to avoid miscommunications [it] lets your sexual partners know that you're clearly consenting to specific sexual activity in that moment." Participants also believed that verbal expressions of consent promoted safety more than nonverbal expressions. One participant wrote: "It's safest to just tell your partner blatantly if you're enjoying something or not." Overall, participants discussed the limits of a clear vocalized "yes" (e.g., intoxication) and used safety as a foundational pillar to navigate their consent practices. Thus, the findings for this theme position safety, pleasure, and clarity as potential motivating forces for students to apply AC principals to their sexual encounters.

Context

Some participants rejected the belief that there was a uniform way to communicate consent, often because of contextual factors that influenced their consent practices. Additionally, many participants believed that verbal and nonverbal cues were equally valuable to communicate and interpret consent. One participant talked about gleaning information from nonverbal communication: "Body language can tell you all kinds of things. If they are trying to get away, look uncomfortable, or saying they're not sure, they are not consenting." Participants noted that effective and clear communication can be nonverbal. Explained one participant: "Consent does not have to be verbal. However, it is important to communicate with sexual partners." Participants said they relied on observing their partner's interest and enjoyment of a sexual activity as expressions of consent. One participant wrote: "[consent] is 100% about being comfortable and enjoying it." Another participant wrote: "nonverbal cues [show] equal levels of enthusiasm toward activities [and] this advances potentially to the next step, smiling, being happy, showing enjoyment, gripping/grabbing, etc." In fact, many participants used the word "enthusiasm" in their definitions of consent, including this participant: "Sexual consent is showing enthusiasm and desire to be with someone." Many participants deemed that "enthusiasm" could be observed from a partner in both verbal and nonverbal ways and appeared to be a key method of confirming their partner's consent. For example, one participant talked about engaging with a partner when they make a physical advance: "[consent] could include things such as happily reciprocating when a partner does something physical to initiate sex, such as grabbing a thigh."

Other participants discussed how nonverbal cues are essential to ensure the safety and consent of a partner. For example, one participant wrote:

> If the two of you are doing something and it seems like your partner is either shy and somewhat retreating from you, that is a big red flag to stop what you are doing and check to make sure things are okay.

Participants also talked about how euphemisms, context clues, and coded language could be used to express sexual interests and signal consent. Wrote one participant: "We have code

words. When I tell my partner I'm doing 'laaaauuuunnndry' it means we have lots of waiting time and we need to fill up that time." Another participant explained:

> Recently I had a partner who I was kissing in his kitchen and he asked if I wanted to spend the night. I knew he was really asking if I wanted to have sex. So I told him I couldn't sleep over but that we could move to the bedroom to have sex.

Other participants believed that sexual interests and consent could be communicated digitally, or that online spaces could serve as platforms to establish consent for in-person sexual encounters. For example, one participant talked about texting: "Some ways that would tell your partner that you are looking to initiate sexual intercourse might be through texting explicit messages with your partner."

Lastly, participants asserted that consent communications could vary among people who shared a history of sexual activity. As one participant stated: "if you are very familiar with the body language of your partner, you may be able to perceive consent through the form of body language/touch." They believed that familiarity with a partner would allow for different expressions of consent without compromising mutual understanding. Explained one participant: "[consent] is dependent upon the situation and may look different for different people or at different stages of a relationship." Overall, these findings suggest that participants rejected AC as a universal concept that always applies to all people, experiences, and situations. Thus, this theme reveals the nuances of consent practices and suggests that participants were conscious of various contextual factors that can shift consent practices, such as nonverbal cues, coded language, digital communication, and partner familiarity.

Institutional Tensions

Some participants described consent beliefs that directly countered university endorsements of AC principles. For example, some participants described how verbal expressions of consent could be seen as removing pleasure from a sexual encounter, swaying their decision to enact AC, "The best answer is asking the question and getting an answer or some form of verbal approval, [but] this can be seen by some people as a mood killer, so sometimes I opt to other methods," wrote one participant. Other participants described more conservative ideas of consent, such as not resisting a partner's sexual advance to indicate their consent: "I would accept their advances by getting physical myself as well which should be sufficient in telling them that I consent." Similarly, one participant asserted that "continued kissing or touching without saying no or physically stopping the interaction" was sufficient in demonstrating consent. Another participant believed in ongoing or implied consent in relationships, "I am currently in a long-term relationship so there is an underlying assumption of consent." Participants gave examples of stereotypical sexual scripts and the gendered dynamics between

heterosexual men and women. Some of them talked about common experiences that could result in a sexual activity. Explained one participant:

> [There] is a feeling you get when you talk to someone that you can tell there is flirting going on and there is potential for a sexual experience, at least I feel like from a guy's perspective (girls can be very expressive with their nonverbal cues). For example, if you are downtown with a girl at a bar and dancing, and the dancing turns from a friendly dance to a more provocative or physically close style of dancing, then you could ask the other partner if they would be interested in getting a drink later on, go out later, or if there is real sexual tension go back to your place later.

These stereotypical scripts were believed to be often culminated in penetrative sex:

> There are steps within a sexual script that lead up to intercourse. For instance, with vaginal–penile penetrative sex, there is typically some kind of foreplay. If both parties have communicated interest, I would consider foreplay to be the next step in initiating sexual intercourse.

Some participants continued to enforce gender norms in their consent practices, for example, one participant wrote: "Well I'm a male so that wouldn't really matter as girls usually don't ask for consent." While participants in this study were enrolled in institutions and registered in courses focused on human sexuality, the authors continue to see instances of participants who do not apply AC principles to their sexual encounters, instead providing and/or obtaining consent in alternative ways.

Discussion

This study examined the consent beliefs of university students who, in theory, should have a heightened knowledge of sexual consent from being exposed to consent and SV programming at their postsecondary institutions and being enrolled in courses focused on human sexuality. The purpose of this article was to examine if institutional AC principals were reflected in these students' consent beliefs and explore if their consent beliefs differed from previous studies with samples of undergraduate students in general.

The authors' findings showed institutional AC standards were reflected in most participants' beliefs about consent. They saw a general endorsement that receiving a verbal confirmation from a partner was required for a sexual interaction to be consensual. Participants' responses consistently presented a verbal, clear, and voluntary "yes" is essential to having a consensual sexual experience, and they reported that the absence of a "yes" could result in harm, thus imitating AC standards endorsed by their respective universities. In fact, the Canadian university's website states, "No means no. Maybe means no. I don't know

means no. Only an active, enthusiastic yes means yes," and "Consent is never implied, and the absence of a no is not a yes." Similarly, the American university's website emphasizes that "consent requires clear communication from all partners involved. Check-in with your partner(s) before starting a sexual activity and when moving to a new or different sexual activity and wait for their response before proceeding." Thus, the authors' findings suggest that the consent ideals promoted by universities' AC policies and ideologies have resonated with this demographic of undergraduate students and that they have internalized these ideals. These findings present a shift from previous studies that have overwhelmingly found that university students opt for nonverbal communication of consent, and as such, these findings suggest that consent beliefs may differ across student samples.

Making Progress?

Participants' responses appeared to prioritize the consequential nature of consent or, more precisely, the consequences of nonconsent. Recognizing the implications of consent, participants believed that without a verbal, clear, and voluntary "yes," a sexual experience would become harmful or violent. Responses emphasized that each person involved in the sexual activity as autonomous as well as accountable. In this way, the authors found that consent was centered around responsibility; partners were responsible to adhere to the parameters of the sexual encounter and uphold their portion of the agreement. Findings from these themes provide evidence that undergraduate students have embraced the parameters for a sexual experience set by universities, recognizing their role in defining the line between a consensual sexual experience and a sexually violent one and integrate those beliefs into their sexual encounters.

The authors' findings also suggest that certain university students may see themselves as agents accountable for what happens before, during, and after a sexual interaction. This reflects the efforts of universities and the #MeToo movement wherein both emphasize the necessity of consent, without which a sexual experience could become sexually violent. To be clear, the authors' intention is not to dismiss the importance of the university interventions or the #MeToo movement in helping people identify or recognize transgressive sexual experiences. Rather, their findings suggest that undergraduate students have developed a binary understanding of consent and SV such that the absence of a verbal, clear, and voluntary "yes" renders a sexual experience sexually violent. This finding has serious implications for university policies and undergraduate students' perceptions of their and other people's sexual experiences, and it signals the importance of more nuanced conversations around consent and SV, particularly in relation to non-heteronormative sexual encounters, which can follow different sexual scripts and expressions of consent (Bauer 2021; Mortimer et al. 2019). As other scholars have argued (Schowengerdt et al. 2021; Bauer 2021; Harris 2018), there is an urgent need for universities to embrace the complexities of consent,

rather than prioritizing campaigns with catchy mantras (e.g., "yes means yes") or advancing standardized, uniform consent practices (e.g., AC policies).

While participants' beliefs about consent often aligned with university policies or ideologies, the authors found that some participants' beliefs of consent countered institutional ideals despite ongoing institutional efforts. Some participants framed consent around traditional gender roles, describing situations where the heterosexual man makes advances on the heterosexual woman, and she decides whether to accept or deny his advances. While the belief that men are sexual initiators and women are sexual gatekeepers (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999) does not necessarily contradict the values embedded AC principles, this finding reinforces gender roles and does not allow for heterosexual men and women to deviate from traditional sexual scripts. These rigid norms are also problematic because they can situate men as potential perpetrators of SV and women as potential victims when the expectations of who seeks consent and who gives consent are not followed.

The authors' findings suggest that undergraduate students attribute some issues of consent to the broader university context. Participants talked about the norms of one-night stands and party culture, both of which reflect social practices that are embedded in undergraduate student life (Jensen and Hunt 2020). Similarly, participants acknowledged how the consumption of drugs and alcohol can complicate consent practices and facilitate incidents of SV, and they identified these substances as characteristic of students' social experiences. The links participants made between drugs/alcohol and the university context suggest that students confront challenges as they try to apply pillars of AC and safety to their sexual experiences in an environment where drugs and alcohol are ubiquitous. While this finding is not unique to this study (Jozkowski et al. 2017; Jozkowski et al. 2018; Jensen and Hunt 2020), this tension illustrates how undergraduate students are caught between the ideals of consent endorsed by postsecondary educational institutions and the realities and pressures of undergraduate social culture. These tensions between personal practices of consent and institutional ideology of consent do not render the personal practices as wrong; these tensions offer a critique of current institutional approaches to consent that fail to recognize the socio-sexual norms of university students that they are trying to serve.

Core Elements of AC Policies

Tensions between participants' descriptions of ideal consent practices and their consent practices were also observed. Participants in this study recognized verbal expressions as the model for communicating consent; however, participants also reported using nonverbal expressions such as body language, physical cues, and even coded language to discuss and obtain consent to adhere to social or cultural norms. This dissonance suggests that undergraduate students subscribe to institutional ideologies of AC, but do not always apply this ideal to their personal experiences. While the contrast between how consent is

understood compared to how it is practiced has been uncovered in other research (author redacted), this finding renews questions about the effectiveness of university AC campaigns (Schowengerdt et al. 2021).

Participants often integrated core elements of AC policies, such as respect, safety, and communication, into sexual practices, even when their practices did not align with traditional AC requirements. For example, some participants described how the familiarity that accompanies a relationship shifts consent dynamics, and consent to sexual activity is implied and less explicitly sought. This belief does not align with consent principles endorsed by universities, which emphasize that consent is ongoing, must always be obtained, and must never be assumed; however, this belief does suggest that core AC principles are still integrated into consent practices to create mutually understandable permission, despite not achieving an explicit verbal confirmation. Participants appeared to be caught between the ideals endorsed by universities and the realities of undergraduate sociocultural norms.

Safety was another prominent theme in participant responses, likely a result of universities dichotomizing sexual experiences around consent and SV (Schowengerdt et al. 2021), while #MeToo encouraged firm definitions of what constitutes a consensual sexual experience (Pugh and Becker 2018). The authors' findings demonstrate that undergraduate students find consent to be critical in preventing and stopping SV. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has shown that students perceive consent to be the main way to address SV on campus (Yule and Grych 2020). Participants valued a person's right to a safe sexual experience and the ability to retract consent, asserting that people should check in with their partner(s) throughout an experience to verify their safety, comfort, and consent. Participants again discussed elements of AC, and appreciated open, honest communication and ongoing, continuous expressions of consent that could be achieved through actions or words. Participants emphasized that people in vulnerable positions can be exploited or abused during a sexual experience and that their consent could be manipulated or coerced, especially when drugs or alcohol are involved. The emphasis on alcohol and power dynamics in participants' responses suggests that participants' beliefs were a product of their social environment, as these topics have been heavily explored and discussed within postsecondary institutions. These findings suggest that undergraduate students integrate institutional ideologies into their sexual practices in a way that complements the sociocultural norms and recognizes the nuance of consent. These findings raise important questions about the extent to which university efforts have advanced undergraduate students' consent practices.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, recruitment and data collection occurred within interactive textbooks used in university courses, and as such, it was important to anonymize participant responses and demographic information; however, the authors were unable to

examine how participants' demographics influence their views of consent. Additionally, the participant response rate for this study was low, considering the course sizes. Second, while open-response questions were beneficial to not restrict participant submissions, this also impacted the authors' ability to ensure uniformity across participants' responses, which resulted in some responses being more detailed than others. Similarly, the use of preestablished prompts and the anonymity of the textbook meant the authors could not probe students about their written responses for clarity or to ask subsequent questions. Despite these limitations, using online technology to explore traditionally stigmatized research areas, such as topics related to sexuality, has been shown to improve participants' comfort in responding to research questions and reduce potential interviewer effects such as desirability bias (Kelly et al. 2013).

Recommendations and Future Directions

This study brought forth many avenues for future research and the next steps for administrative use to expand upon and explore within their institutional response. This study did not assess the effectiveness of institutional policies and programming; however, scholars and university administrators should consider conducting a program evaluation of ongoing consent and SV policies and programming to gain insight into their effectiveness. The authors found that despite intuitional efforts, students' consent practices adhere to social and cultural norms. University administrators should reframe university consent policies and programming to remove a "one size fits all" approach and expand to incorporate nuance based on campus sociocultural norms. Future research should adopt an intersectional approach to expand our understanding of how demographics and social factors impact the beliefs and practices of consent among university students.

One logical continuation of this study would be to assess students' consent beliefs since the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for this study were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which consequently caused in-person courses and programming to be suspended at postsecondary institutions. As students have returned to campus, institutional policies and programs have likely not been revisited, because the primary focus of postsecondary institutions has continued COVID-19 management. In addition, students returning to campus after semesters of isolation may have potentially exacerbated existing campus sociocultural norms, such as hazardous drinking culture and hypermasculine norms, potentially impacting students' beliefs, understanding, and views of consent and increasing SV risk on campuses.

Conclusions

This study sought to fill a critical gap in the existing consent literature by examining if AC principles were endorsed and reflected in the sexual encounters of university students who

were enrolled in human sexuality courses at two midsized postsecondary institutions, which could suggest an increase in their knowledge and understanding of sexual consent and SV. The authors found that there is a discrepancy between university ideals and student sexual practices, as many students recognized and understood the importance of verbal, explicit expressions of consent, but their responses suggest that they do not always apply these principles to their own experiences based on social and cultural factors. These findings suggest that while the verbal requirement of AC may not be reflected in university students' sexual experiences, other aspects of AC principles and policies, such as safety, respect, and pleasure, are well endorsed by students. The authors recommend university policies and campaigns to refrain from teaching a singular and uniform approach to consent. Instead, institutional polices and campaigns should reorient their efforts to educate students on the core elements of consent and the nuances of consent. Reorienting to reflect elements of consent could also shift university students' view of consent from one of a consequential nature (e.g., without consent, it is SV) to one that is focused on promoting sexual health, safety, and respect.

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The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this article.

Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants and received ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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