

# College Students' Sexual Consent Communication And Perceptions of Sexual Double Standards: A Qualitative Investigation

**CONTEXT:** Affirmative consent standards adopted by colleges and universities are meant to decrease miscommunication that may lead to sexual assault. However, they may not take into account sociocultural factors that influence consent. In particular, the role of gender norms needs to be better understood.

**METHODS:** In-depth interviews about college students' sexual activity, including sexual consent communication, were conducted with 17 female and 13 male students at a large southern university during the spring 2013 semester. The interview protocol and analyses were guided by Carspecken's critical qualitative methodology, which seeks to understand both participants' explicit statements and implied underlying meanings and values. Themes and subthemes were identified through inductive analyses.

**RESULTS:** Two overarching themes emerged: Students perceived a sexual double standard, and males viewed obtaining sex as a conquest. Subthemes related to the first theme reflected endorsement of traditional views of women's sexuality (the notions that "good girls" do not have sex, that women should privilege men's sexual needs over their own and that women "owe" men sex once men have "worked" for it). Subthemes related to the second theme reflected males' beliefs that sex is a commodity that pits women and men against one another, and that women can be "convinced" to have sex if they initially refuse.

**CONCLUSIONS:** College students' consent communication may be influenced by gender norms that challenge assumptions of affirmative consent standards. Cultural shifts in students' views of sexuality may be necessary for affirmative consent policies to be effective.

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Sexual consent communication among college students has become salient in peer-reviewed literature and mainstream media<sup>1</sup> because of federal mandates regarding campus sexual violence<sup>2,3</sup> and the passage of state legislation<sup>4</sup> requiring institutions of higher education to adopt affirmative consent policies. For example, according to California legislation, affirmative consent means "affirmative conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity...Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent."<sup>4</sup> Affirmative consent and other "yes means yes" standards posit that misunderstandings of nonverbal or subtle cues will be alleviated when college students more explicitly communicate consent, and thus rates of sexual assault will decrease.<sup>5</sup> However, these initiatives have been criticized by a number of researchers, who argue that miscommunication is not the root cause of sexual assault.<sup>6–10</sup> Consequently, it is important to more thoroughly examine sexual consent, particularly in light of the adoption of these policies by institutions of higher education in the United States.<sup>11,12</sup> Researchers have examined several behavioral factors that may influence consent communication,<sup>13–17</sup> but the influence of less tangible factors, such as gender and cultural norms, has not been well examined.

The endorsement of "hegemonic gender roles rooted in the social dominance of men over women"<sup>18(p.33)</sup> is preva-

lent on U.S. college campuses.<sup>19</sup> Such norms reinforce traditional sexual scripts that depict men as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers.<sup>7</sup> These scripted roles dictate that men initiate sexual activity, often via nonverbal cues, and women respond to men's advances.<sup>20,21</sup> They therefore create a sexual double standard, permitting more sexual freedom for men while restricting women's sexual expression, which could influence consent communication. For example, women are expected to carefully navigate their responses as gatekeepers and not overtly emphasize their own sexuality (e.g., by providing an "enthusiastic yes"), appear sexually assertive or autonomous (which could result in being labeled a "slut") or openly negate men's sexuality (which could result in being labeled a "cock tease").<sup>20–23</sup> Men, as initiators, generally do not face social repercussions for engaging in sexual behavior or expressing sexuality.<sup>2,24</sup> Taken together, the power imbalance and gender-assigned sex roles that exist among college students may contribute to men's preference to assume consent until they hear otherwise and women's preference for men to ask for consent.<sup>7,25</sup> Researchers have not explicitly examined the extent to which these gender and cultural norms influence consent communication among college students. Thus, despite the extensive work examining sexual double standards,<sup>1,26–38</sup> an exploratory

analysis in the context of consent communication would be fruitful.

In a previous study, we assessed heterosexual college students' perception of consent to vaginal-penile sex occurring in social settings (e.g., at a bar or a party).<sup>39</sup> Several themes emerged that were related to gender norms and their potential influence on how college students communicate and conceptualize sexual consent, but went beyond the focus of the original investigation. These gendered themes, which were unexpected, could provide a meaningful contribution to the consent literature, so we explore them here.

## METHODS

### Study Design

The study was conducted at the flagship campus of the University of Arkansas in the spring of 2013. The campus is residential and has an active Greek life (approximately 40% of first-year students pledge a Greek organization). Students enrolled in introductory courses often taken as electives by a diverse range of students were recruited via e-mail to participate in one-on-one interviews about "college students and sexual activity." To be eligible, students had to be at least 18 years old. Although there were no eligibility criteria related to sexual orientation or behavior, all participants identified as heterosexual and indicated that they had engaged in vaginal-penile sex; thus, findings are discussed in the context of heterosexual sexual encounters. The primary author conducted all interviews in a private office space on campus. Upon arrival, participants were given a consent form, and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could skip questions or terminate the interview if they felt uncomfortable. Participants received a gift card for compensation. The study protocol was approved by the university's institutional review board.

The interview protocol and subsequent analyses followed guidelines set forth by Carspecken, which are aimed at understanding not only participants' explicit statements, but also the social and cultural contexts that those statements imply.<sup>40</sup> Interviews were semistructured, but dialogic, with open-ended questions intended to be nonleading. Follow-up questions depended on participants' responses to lead-off questions. Participants were first asked about what they perceive to be normative sexual behaviors among college students, including their perception of normative consent communication. Next, they were asked about their own sexual and consent behaviors—for example, how they communicate consent and how they interpret a potential partner's response if they make a sexual overture. At the end of the interview, participants were asked a series of demographic questions. The interviewer took notes during all interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes (range, 68–167). Transcripts were combined with the interviewer's notes to create a thick record.<sup>40</sup> All personal information was redacted to maintain confidentiality.

### Analyses

According to Carspecken, the goal of analysis is to use individuals' "speech acts," or "claim statements," to understand their perceptions of how their world functions and of themselves, others and the larger culture.<sup>40–43</sup> For this study, we were interested in participants' claims about the college environment (their world) as it relates to sexual consent.

After selecting participants' claim statements that were relevant to the research questions, we used two methods of analysis to organize data for coding. First, we applied meaning field analysis, which consists of deconstructing and reconstructing participants' claims in order to draw a range of possible interpretations from their perspectives. Second, we applied reconstructive horizon analysis to each interpretation to determine the extent to which it represents a foregrounded or a backgrounded claim. A foregrounded claim is linked to the claim statement in an obvious, literal way, whereas a backgrounded claim sets the stage for its meaning in a larger cultural context. For example, consider the statement "I never say yes to sex verbally." A foregrounded claim interpretation is "I don't use verbal indicators to communicate consent." A backgrounded claim interpretation is "Verbal consent does not fit cultural standards of consent communication." Both interpretations could be applied to this statement and are relevant for understanding the participant's worldview. Our earlier study of college students' perceptions of sexual consent communication in social settings suggested that cultural norms play a role;<sup>39</sup> the goal of the analyses presented here was to examine backgrounded claims that might lead to a better understanding of that role.

We used an inductive analytic approach to code the backgrounded claim statements, meaning that coding categories emerged from the data. (Because our primary research questions in the original study were not related to the influence of gender norms on consent, we had not planned for a deductive approach.) Codes consisted of simple labels that capture the claim statements' meanings. Initial codes were reviewed and organized into larger categories on the basis of similarity and shared meaning. We continued to look across codes and combined categories as appropriate until we arrived at themes that we believed did not overlap conceptually and thus should not be combined. These larger categories are presented as overarching themes. Subthemes are made up of codes that provide further detail and clear examples of the overarching themes.

### RESULTS

Interviews were conducted with 30 college students—17 females and 13 males (Table 1). The majority of participants were older than 20, white and in their third or fourth year of school. Two overarching themes emerged: endorsement of a sexual double standard (which had three subthemes) and the notion that obtaining sex is a conquest (two subthemes).

**Table 1. Number of college students participating in a qualitative study of perceptions of sexual consent communication, by selected characteristics, Arkansas, 2013**

Characteristic	No.
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	17
Male	13
<b>Age</b>	
18–20	8
≥21	22
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White	17
Black	8
Latino	3
Biracial/multiracial	2
<b>Class standing</b>	
Freshman	3
Sophomore	5
Junior	14
Senior	8
<b>Relationship status</b>	
Single and not dating	13
Single and dating/hanging out with someone	10
In a relationship	5
Married	2

### Endorsement of a Sexual Double Standard

The first overarching theme—the existence of a sexual double standard—was endorsed by all participants. Subthemes indicated that in students’ perceptions, “good girls” do not have sex; women are responsible for caring for men’s egos; and since men “put in work” for sex, women owe it to them.

•**Good girls do not have sex.** Participants both explicitly and implicitly endorsed the conceptualization that women who have sex, or “too much” sex, are less desirable than women who refrain from sex or have relatively few partners. Women and men discussed different expectations in terms of sexual partnerships based on gender; men tended to be more explicit. A 20-year-old male described gender differences in number of sexual partners as follows:

“It’s deemed socially acceptable, in a sense, that a guy can have as many partners as possible or whatever, because he’s seen as that guy [with a favorable reputation]... But for a woman, she has negative labels. She’s a ho, she’s a slut.”

Similarly, a 19-year-old male articulated that girls who have not had sex “typically” are viewed more favorably than others—“they’re a lot nicer, they know what they want in life.” And a 22-year-old male said that women who engage in sex with multiple men are “heartless.”

Less explicitly, a 21-year-old female described how women consume alcohol in order to have an excuse for sex because engaging in intercourse is inconsistent with being a “good girl”:

**Participant (P):** “I have this one friend who gets drunk so she can have an excuse to have sex... She says, ‘Oh, I had sex with such and such,’ and it’s like, ‘Oh, I was drunk.’ She uses that as an excuse. Sometimes she’s not... drunk, but

she... and a whole lot of people use that as an excuse to why they hooked up with someone.”

**Interviewer (I):** “So friends have used alcohol consumption as an excuse to have sex?”

**P:** “Yes! Well, the girls.”

**I:** “Just the women?”

**P:** “Yeah, so they have a reason to have sex. Or else, they are just being kind of, well, you know, trampy.”

Participants also noted that “good girls” are supposed to wait for men to initiate sex. Deviating from this script is problematic, as a 19-year-old female pointed out: “Girls are supposed to be like ‘wait.’ And then see what the guy does—like he’s supposed to lead the way, and we’re supposed to kind of let him direct whatever is going to happen.” When asked how women should respond to men’s advances, she replied, “Girls are supposed to just kind of pull away and... act like the feminine girl... If you’re too forward, ... you’re kind of just slutty.”

Another example of a participant’s endorsement of a sexual double standard is evident in a 22-year-old male’s response to being asked why he had felt conflicted about dating a particular woman: “It’s like when you get a new car. You don’t want a lot of mileage on it.” This participant reported that he ultimately had had sex with the woman, but that he had not pursued a romantic relationship with her. He had considered her a suitable sex partner, but not a desirable romantic partner, because of the number of sexual partners he perceived her to have had. This point was emphasized in a comment he made about how he envisions adult relationships: After college, he said, “you want a wife and not a woman who’s done all these people.”

Participants also endorsed a sexual double standard through discussions of “having standards.” Men stated that women who “respect” themselves, and do not have sex with “just anybody,” “have standards,” whereas women who have sex with “a lot” of men, or from whom it is easy to obtain sex, do not. At some point during the interview, all men mentioned that women who have standards or who want to appear as though they do will refuse sex outright or at least initially. Women also stated that women who do not have standards have sex with “a lot” of men.

“Having standards” was contextually specific: Women were considered not to have standards if they engage in sex with men whom they are not romantically interested in or romantically involved with. Fourteen of the 17 women in our sample referenced a situation in which they had avoided or refused intercourse in order to demonstrate that they have standards. Additionally, seven women described a sexual event that they had wanted at the time, but that they later wished they refused because they believed that it had made them appear to not have standards.

Some men rationalized that women refuse sexual advances because they need to act as if they have standards, but the refusal is not genuine. For example, a 22-year-old male stated:

“Yeah, the guy is going to try... If she don’t move your hand when it’s on her, you know, she wants it. But she has

to act like she has standards, so she has to move away, but you have to try.”

The label “having standards” was applied to men differently. Participants stated that a man does not have standards when he engages in sexual activity with an unattractive woman. One 21-year-old male stated, “If you sleep with an ugo [an ugly person], you have no standards.” A 20-year-old male stated: “Yeah, I wanted to have sex that night, but she wasn’t the most attractive lady, so I drank a few beers... so my standards would get lower.” A 19-year-old female stated, “Some guys—when they want to get laid—just have no standards. They will sleep with anyone, no matter how unattractive.”

Other examples of female participants’ endorsement of a sexual double standard included using the words “sluts” and “hos” to describe other women who engage in sex. A 19-year-old woman referred to another woman as a “jezebel” because she engaged in recreational sex outside of a romantic relationship. In contrast, neither women nor men in our sample applied negative terminology to men. Instead, participants seemed to accept that men engage in sexual intercourse outside of committed relationships.

•**Women caretake men’s egos.** A second subtheme addressed the expectation that women need to be kind and put men’s needs ahead of their own. Women were keenly aware of how they are “supposed” to act in certain situations in response to men—for example, when a man purchases alcohol for them at a bar. One 22-year-old female stated:

“Accepting [an alcoholic drink purchased by a man] might be an indicator that you might be interested [in having sex] or you might not. Sometimes you get nice guys that are just, ‘Oh, you ladies have a good night,’ and they’ll leave you alone. But there are some guys that kind of want to stay around you because they bought you a drink, because they have that expectation....So the main thing that makes you feel bad in saying no would be hurting his feelings and feeling like in some way I perhaps owe this person something.”

Similarly, another 22-year-old female participant indicated that she had agreed to have sex in order to avoid feeling guilty about hurting her partner’s feelings:

“Even though I really didn’t want to, I ended up doing it, because I didn’t want him to feel bad or like something was wrong with him. Guys are really touchy about that stuff.”

Echoing this sentiment, five additional women reported having consented to sex they did not want in order to avoid upsetting their male partners, and eight women described instances in which they had felt bad or guilty, or had experienced some other negative emotion, for refusing sex for that same reason. Furthermore, some women implied that they did not think it is acceptable for women not to accommodate men. For example, one 19-year-old female said that if a man is “preparing [himself] to take this girl home and do whatever,” and she rejects his invitation for sex, it is “a huge blow to the ego....I know girls who would just go to sleep on the couch, and I don’t think the guys are too happy about it....It obviously sucks for him that he’s not getting laid that night.”

•**Men put in “work”; women “owe” sex.** The third subtheme demonstrates a double standard in how sex is conceptualized as an exchange between women and men. When discussing how college students communicate consent to casual sex, inevitably participants discussed social gatherings in which alcohol is consumed. Both women and men indicated that consent, as well as sex, is negotiated through men’s putting in “work” (in the form of purchasing alcohol) in an attempt to woo women; to repay men, women “owe” sex. One 21-year-old female described men’s role in this exchange as follows:

“I know how they all operate, and I know when they’re wanting to go after a certain girl. They’ll literally dedicate their whole night to that one girl, buying them drinks, talking to them the whole time. They don’t really ever leave their side, and that’s when you know they’re putting in work for it.”

Men are also aware that they need to work for sex, as one 21-year-old male explained:

“I know that sounds bad, but money impresses girls....I’d watch guys drop lots of money on girls. It’s not even necessarily one girl. They’ll buy a round for the girl and her girlfriends...so she will have sex.”

Women noted feeling pressure to repay men, as the comments of a 22-year-old female indicate:

**P:** “A lot times, I do feel like girls do feel that pressure, especially if they’re at the fraternity house. If they go to sleep there, they’re expected to basically reciprocate for staying there.”

**I:** “Have you ever felt that way?”

**P:** “Yes.”

Similarly, a 21-year-old female stated that if a woman accepts alcohol from a man at a bar or club, she “should” engage in sexual activity with him:

“If you take drinks all night from a guy, you are sort of telling him you will have sex....Some girls will drink all night, letting him pay for it without having sex, but she probably should do it.”

Most men (nine of the 13 in our sample) and some women (seven of 17) supported the interpretation that if a woman accepts alcohol, she is implicitly consenting to sex. However, gender differences emerged in the nuances of these interpretations. Some men perceived that women’s merely consuming alcohol signals willingness to have sex, as reflected in a 23-year-old male participant’s comments:

“If she is drinking a bunch, or even just partying a little, ya know, having a few drinks or shots or whatever, you know she is looking to have sex. Like, that’s why she is partying and drinking...It’s like a way of saying, ‘Hey, I am interested....I’m willing to do it.’”

Relatedly, men sometimes perceived women’s accepting an alcoholic drink as an indicator of consent. A 20-year-old male stated, “If I see her drinking, I know that it’s game on....Just like she took the drink, so I know she wants me to know ‘I’m interested, I’m willing.’”

In contrast, women said that accepting a drink could indicate interest or consent, but should be considered

tentative and not a definite communication of consent or agreement to sex. On the one hand, women stated that they may accept a drink from a man they are not sexually interested in simply to obtain a free drink. For example, a 21-year-old commented, "I didn't really like him, but getting a free drink is always nice." On the other hand, women stated that they may accept a drink as an opportunity to flirt, get more acquainted with the man, or signal interest in or potential agreement to sexual activity later in the evening. A 23-year-old, related, for example, "Guys have bought me drinks before, and it's usually a way to break the ice to initiate things which have led to sex." The distinction seems to come down to the fact that men perceive women's acceptance of alcohol as more definitive in terms of consent.

Unfortunately, 14 women described situations in which they had felt obligated to have sex with a man because he had spent money purchasing alcohol. Furthermore, five women and seven men indicated that they would not be surprised if a man forced sex on a woman after she had accepted drinks from him during a social gathering; rather, they would believe that she had "asked for it" to some extent. On the other hand, eight women described situations in which they had accepted drinks from men, but had not thought that doing so obligated them to have sex. As a 21-year-old female said, "Of course I have taken drinks from guys, but that doesn't mean I want to have sex with them." Some women also described situations in which they had accepted the drink as an indicator of their interest in sex, which would be somewhat consistent with men's interpretation.

### **Obtaining Sex Is a Conquest**

The second overarching theme, that obtaining sex is a conquest, was reflected in comments of all 13 male participants. This theme comprised two subthemes: Men view obtaining sex and consent as a competition, and they try to "convince" women to have sex, although they do not see this as coercive.

•**Obtaining sex and consent is a competition.** When male participants discussed past sexual encounters or consent negotiation, they seemed to suggest that obtaining sex (and consent) is a competition, with clear winners and losers. Men aim to come out as winners, which generally means obtaining sex. For example, a 20-year-old male perceived that by leaving a public social space with a man, a woman indicates willingness to engage in sex: "If she leaves the bar with me, it's like game on; we are gonna have sex." Similarly, another 20-year-old male stated his perceived objective: "It's more like get yours...and hopefully, by the time it's over, she's gotten hers...and if not [pause, shrug]. It's the sad truth." A 22-year-old male stated, "Who wants a quitter? So keep trying"—in other words, the conquest is more important than the partner's consent.

•**Men try to convince women.** The statement about not wanting to be a quitter transitions into the final subtheme: Men try to convince women to have sex. This subtheme

emerged when men were probed about specific consent cues. Some men specifically stated that they prefer when women are vague in expressing consent. According to these men, ambiguity in consent communication makes it easier to advance sexual behavior further than a woman may desire, because they can cite miscommunication if she becomes upset or angry. In this view, if communication is clear, and refusal is obvious, then a statement of no should be interpreted as the stopping point. If consent is ambiguous, however, refusals can be "up for interpretation." For example, a 20-year-old male reported the following:

"I had some experiences...where I've convinced the woman, you know, to change her mind, because the whole time you're wondering if she wants to do it but is saying no to put up the little friction to make me work for it."

Similarly, other male participants stated that when women's refusals of sex (whether verbal or nonverbal) are subtle, they try to "convince" them to have sex. For instance, a 22-year-old male stated, "Yeah, if she doesn't really seem sure when she says no, she can be convinced... But if she's confident—like, 'no, back up'—then you back up."

When asked how they convince women, men said that they "try again" or use verbal persuasion. For example, a 20-year-old male offered the following explanation:

"If [the refusal is] real soft, it's like that's not really clear to me, you know, so I'm going to try again. And if it's still soft, it's like okay, I've got some options here. I could probably convince her, you know. I might try a little something here... just to kind of wear her down."

Finally, men implied that clear consent communication is women's responsibility, and if women's refusals are not clear, men have a right to try to convince them. Indeed, one 20-year-old male's comments suggest that the act of acquiring sex from women, regardless of whether they consent, is a "sport" for men: "If he knows that she doesn't want it and he tries, like it's almost sport for him."

### **DISCUSSION**

Our findings suggest that traditional gender norms, which constrain women's sexuality and support men as sexual initiators, still exist and seem to influence students' perceptions of consent and consent communication. Women in our sample seemed to make intentional decisions about whether to consent to sex on the basis of these gender norms. Participants implied that women who have sex are inferior to women who refrain. Women used derogatory labels to describe women who engage in "too much" sex and altered their own behavior to avoid negative social repercussions. This dynamic not only demonstrates a sexual double standard, but also, and more importantly, highlights that affirmative consent may be perceived as unrealistic for women. If women provide an "enthusiastic yes" (as promoted by affirmative approaches<sup>20,22</sup>), they run the risk of negative social repercussions. Thus, women may opt to be subtle in their consent communication to avoid such repercussions.

Additionally, women were keenly aware of how men might perceive their reactions when men initiate sex, and they have learned to adjust their behaviors. This was evident most notably in women's descriptions of attempting to avoid hurting men's feelings (i.e., caretaking egos) and of what women "should" do with respect to having sex with men who "put in the work." On the other hand, men did not mention being concerned about women's feeling uncomfortable even when they described trying to convince women postrefusal. This contrast is consistent with findings from other work showing that women subject themselves to feeling discomfort in order to prevent men from feeling that they have been rejected or that their needs are not being met.<sup>44,45</sup> For instance, viewing sex as an exchange sometimes resulted in women's engaging in potentially unwanted sexual activity because they felt socially pressured (e.g., after they had accepted drinks from a man). This mind-set could also provide opportunity for victim blaming (e.g., the perception that if a woman did not want to have sex, she should not have accepted a drink). Women should have the right to refuse sex regardless of what has previously transpired. However, our findings suggest that women may consent to sex, and thus have sex, because they believe that they "owe it" to men. Women also seem to be insinuating that men are motivated solely by their desire to obtain sex and have little regard for women's feelings.

Participants also endorsed a sexual double standard in their perceptions related to men's putting in work and feeling that they are then owed sex. A result of these perceptions is that sex gets conceptualized as a commodity.<sup>45</sup> Abstinence-only sex education discourse tends to position sex in this manner by reinforcing messages about maintaining one's "value" by avoiding sex until marriage (particularly for women).<sup>1,22</sup> Although sexual double standards are not new,<sup>1,26-38</sup> some have argued that contemporary young adults and college students do not endorse these traditional views.<sup>46</sup> Our participants still seem to endorse these cultural norms, which seem, in turn, to influence consent communication. Certainly, these findings are preliminary; we recommend that additional work continue to examine potential influences of sexual double standards on consent communication.

Another problem linked to viewing sex as a commodity is the underlying endorsement of the fallacy that men are interested only in having sex (and not in having relationships), whereas women are interested only in relationships or other gains, such as free drinks (and not in sex). Unfortunately, such conceptualizations tend to pit women against men. In such adversarial situations, someone is going to win (the person who acquires the desired commodity) and someone is going to lose; the resulting dynamics between women and men could translate into sexual violence.<sup>45</sup>

These dynamics seem to position women in a "double bind."<sup>29</sup> As our participants discussed, if a man purchases drinks and a woman has sex with him, she runs the risk of developing a negative reputation. However, if a woman

accepts drinks, but does not have sex, she is also viewed negatively.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, if she refuses the drink, she is not appropriately caretaking his ego. It seems impossible for women to come out the "winners" in this competition. Additionally, several men discussed different tactics for convincing women to engage in sex postrefusal. For example, men stated that after women refuse verbally, they continue to pursue sex through continued physical attempts; in such instances, men rationalize that women's refusals are not adequately assertive. This raises the question of whether trying to convince women to have sex postrefusal is any different from coercion. That the men who described attempts to convince women postrefusal did not seem to conceptualize women's refusals as genuine is problematic.

Men's descriptions of trying to convince women to have sex are concerning in light of the gender dynamics we found associated with how these students reported consent communication. If college women are concerned about caretaking men's egos, they may think that overtly refusing will hurt men's feelings. Yet, if women are passive in their refusals, men may ignore these refusals or perceive them as token,<sup>1,35,37,38,44</sup> and feel justified in trying to convince, or pressuring, women who are not sufficiently assertive. Such dynamics may create opportunistic offenders—men who believe that trying to convince women postrefusal is not the same as coercion. This cycle reinforces victim blaming by suggesting that women need to refuse more assertively to ward off men, even though our findings and those from other work suggest that men hear and understand even "soft" refusals.<sup>25,47</sup>

### Limitations and Strengths

Although this study provides a nuanced examination of consent communication and aspects of refusal communication, there are important limitations to note. Our study was limited to a small sample at one university, who were recruited via e-mail; findings from this convenience sample should not be considered generalizable. Unfortunately, we were not able to track a response rate, as we do not know how many individuals were sent the recruitment e-mail or how many actually opened it. As a result, there may be bias in terms of type of student who opted to participate in the study.

One of the study's major strengths is its use of Carspecken's methodological approach, which allowed for an in-depth analysis of some of the backgrounded themes that inform college students' understanding and communication of sexual consent. This approach provided us the opportunity to assess how cultural and gender norms influence consent communication and how consent communication continues to reflect a sexual double standard.

### Conclusion

Despite our study's limitations, the findings have preliminary implications for affirmative consent policies, which are designed to reduce miscommunication that is thought to result in sexual assault. Given that college students' sexual encounters tend to align with the traditional sexual

script,<sup>20,21</sup> such initiatives inevitably emphasize that men should ask for consent and women should clearly communicate their willingness or refusal. However, if a man's status improves as he increases his number of sexual partners, as our findings and others<sup>2,24</sup> suggest, and he believes he can convince women who, in his view, passively refuse, what would be his motivation for more direct, explicit consent communication?<sup>2,48</sup>

Affirmative consent policies also promote the sex-positive ideal of “enthusiastic consent.” This is a paradigm shift away from the “no means no” mantra toward a more positive “yes means yes” conceptualization of consent.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, our findings suggest that it may not be realistic to expect women to be direct when communicating their sexual desires, especially their enthusiastic yes, because of concern about developing a negative reputation. Although affirmative consent policies are intended to be gender-neutral, previous research<sup>13,20,21,49</sup> and our findings suggest that college students defer to the traditional sexual script, in which men initiate sex and women gatekeep. Thus, consent promotion initiatives may, whether intentionally or not, perpetuate a sexual double standard and women's gatekeeper status. Although it may appear as if being the gatekeeper empowers women to freely navigate their sexuality, that power still occurs in response to men's initiation; without men's initiation of sex, women would not have the opportunity to say yes or no.

Although preliminary, our findings suggest that gender inequities exist. Our findings lend support to those of others,<sup>7,29,43,44,50,51</sup> who argue that sexual assault prevention programming should use a sociocultural approach to address how features of rape culture, such as patriarchal masculine ideology and other contextual factors (e.g., alcohol use, partying), are linked to sexual violence. Given the exploratory nature of our findings, but their consistency with previous work, we suggest that additional research continue to assess how gender norms influence consent negotiations among college students.

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