

AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS  
INFLUENCING DEFINITIONS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the  
Valenti School of Communication  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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By  
Alexis Wilson  
December, 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been lots of discussion regarding several prominent members of Hollywood accused of sexual assault in which sparked several different movements. These movements have caused the issue of Sexual Consent to be brought to the forefront. The aim of this qualitative study is to identify the major factors that influence differing views of consent for college students. Undergraduate and graduate students 18–25 years of age were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews were coded and analyzed to determine similarities and differences between participant responses. It is hoped that this study will give a general understanding of consent and the factors that help to contribute to its meaning and messages.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sexual assault is a common crime that doesn't discriminate based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Rape—a crime that has lasting effects on victims' mental and physical health (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tilman, 2009)—is considered to be the most underreported crime with 68 percent going unreported (RAIN, 2017). Estimates suggest that one in six women and one in 33 men have been victims of rape (National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control, 1998). In Texas, there were 19,537 victims of sexual assault in 2015; of those assaults, most perpetrators were considered to be acquaintances of the victims (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2015). By definition, acquaintance rape—also known as date rape—is typically perpetrated by someone who has had some type of previous relationship with the victim (Porges & Peper, 2015). The relationship doesn't always have to be that of an intimate one to fall in the category of acquaintance rape. Acquaintance rape is a social issue that is often ingrained in the sex offender's personality and socialization (Burnett, Mattern, Herakova, Kahl, Tobola, & Bornsen, 2009).

#### **Defining Rape and Consent**

Rape is defined as a crime of "unwanted sexual contact" (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015); however, personal definitions of rape often differ from legal ones. The legal definition of rape in many states is "nonconsensual sexual penetration" (Fisher, 2009, p. 55). According to Burnett et al. (2009), male students legitimize

whether rape has occurred based upon whether or not the legal system is involved. When the perpetrator is found guilty, rape has occurred. Jozkowski & Peterson (2014) note that sexual assault has been defined as nonconsensual sexual activity obtained through force, threat, intoxication, and/or intimidation (p. 1). The United States Legislature defines consent as “actual words or conduct indicating freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact” (Decker & Baroni, 2012, p. 1088). In some states, laws explicitly speak to the topic of consent; however, in other states, the law implies consent. In these states, “lack of consent” must be established by either “use of forcible compulsion or the victim’s incapacity to consent” (Decker & Baroni, 2012, p. 1085). Although there are varying definitions of rape and consent, the key term in both is nonconsensual.

A strong correlation exists between sexual assaults and consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014), making consistent understandings of consent imperative. Consent requires a person to give permission for sexual activity with another person (Kemp, 2010). According to the University of Michigan (2016), consent is given freely and can be withdrawn at any time during the sexual act by any party. Consent must be voluntarily given in order for sexual activity to take place.

Consent can be given verbally or nonverbally; however, nonverbal cues are more explicitly used than verbal cues (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). According to Jozkowski and Peterson (2014), “the more intimate the relationship among the people involved in the sexual encounter, the fewer verbal indicators of consent needed” (p. 1). However, nonverbal cues such as body language are easily

misinterpreted (Harris, 2018). Both verbal and inferred consent require participants to interpret verbal and nonverbal communication (Shafer, Ortiz, Thompson, & Huemmer, 2017).

The research on sexual consent is fairly limited due to the abundance of research focused on sexual assault (Jozkowsk & Peterson, 2014). Most research explores sexual assault on college campuses in relation to drinking, which is a factor that affects consent, without examining other scenarios where consent can be an issue. In order to understand consent fully, there needs to be an exploration of what consent encompasses. In order to decrease the amount of sexual assaults that occur, society must first understand the reasoning behind why it occurs. I believe that sexual assaults occur because of a lack of understanding of consent.

People receive messages of consent based on the rape myths created in society. Rape myths are “beliefs that are widely and persistently held in society which deny, downplay, or justify nonconsensual sexual acts” (Fisher, 2009, p. 57). These rape myths influence individual beliefs as to what is considered to be consent. There are several different rape myths that society have created to justify sexual assault. According to Ryan (2011), “the rape myths are deeply rooted in history, religion, and media stereotypes” (p. 774). Rape myths include the idea that “no really means yes,” which is also known as token resistance: “victims are promiscuous and that women falsely report rape to protect their reputations or report because they are angry at someone” (Burnett et al., 2009, p. 2). Many rape myths justify the victimization of the victims. Other myths suggest that men can’t



control their urges and that it is some kind of instinctual factor within their nature that make men want to rape (Groth, Burgess, Holmstrom, 1977). Another myth is that rape perpetrators are strangers (CDC, 2011). One of the most popular myths is that wearing revealing clothing, behaving provocatively, or drinking means a victim was asking for it (NCTSN, 2010). This myth plays a prominent role in consent as it is one of the most commonly used reasons to justify why rape occurs, and it is the most common myth researched when it comes to sexual assault. Due to these myths being so deeply entrenched in the culture, “the myths foster a cultural climate where rape is perpetrated and rape victims are subsequently blamed for their victimization” (Ryan, 2011, p. 774).

Based on rape myths, society has also created rape scripts. Rape scripts “are prototypes for how events normally proceed” (Ryan, 2011, p. 775). These rape scripts shape our understandings of rape and often shape our belief as to what “real rape looks like” (Ryan, 2011, p. 776). Although society inaccurately views rape as violence committed by strangers, rape is more often committed by acquaintances. Again, there seems to be a persistent miscommunication and misunderstanding of consent.

### **Study Rationale and Objectives**

Consent has become a regular topic of conversation in the media and popular culture. Most recently, the #MeToo movement has sparked the conversation that has made many women speak out in regards to being sexually assaulted. According to its website (<https://metoomvmt.org>), the movement rose to prominence as a

social media campaign on Twitter in the wake of accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. Accused of using his power and position in Hollywood to victimize several younger actresses, Weinstein stated all sexual activity with the victims was consensual (Noveck, 2017). Similar accusations and claims of consent toppled the careers of Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, Kevin Spacey, and Bill Cosby, as well.

In another recent scandal, Larry Nassar, the Team USA Olympic gymnastics doctor, was convicted of sexually abusing hundreds of girls in his care (Hanna, 2018). The documentary *Breaking Their Silence: Inside the Gymnastics Scandal* featured several victims and their parents discussing how they had given consent to “treatment” by Nassar. Many of the victims did not understand what had happened to them until they got older.

According to Silver & Hovick (2018), “university campuses have long been criticized for both the prevalence of sexual violence and the mishandling of rape cases” (p. 2). One college, in particular, that has come under fire for mishandling several rape cases is Baylor University. This particular scandal hits home for me as my cousin was a victim while attending the university. The scandal involved fraternity members and several members of the Baylor football team (Bonesteel, 2015). According to my cousin, several of the victims reported the crimes to school officials but little was done to help them. Sadly, my cousin reached out to the Title IX coordinator and was offered no support at all. Because I dealt with a personal

experience of sexual assault in high school, I was able to help provide the support she needed to cope with the mental trauma.

What happened to my cousin and me increased my desire to have clear understandings of consent. It became clear that it can happen to anyone and no one is safe. People often feel as though it is sex that makes someone rape when in actuality it is about power and control. Society continues to want to teach individuals how to not get raped when instead they need to teach what constitutes consent. Clear and consistent understandings of consent can help to alleviate the amount of sexual assaults that occur. By understanding the messages that society unknowingly defines as consent, there can be a clear understanding as to how to educate young people in regards to the topic.

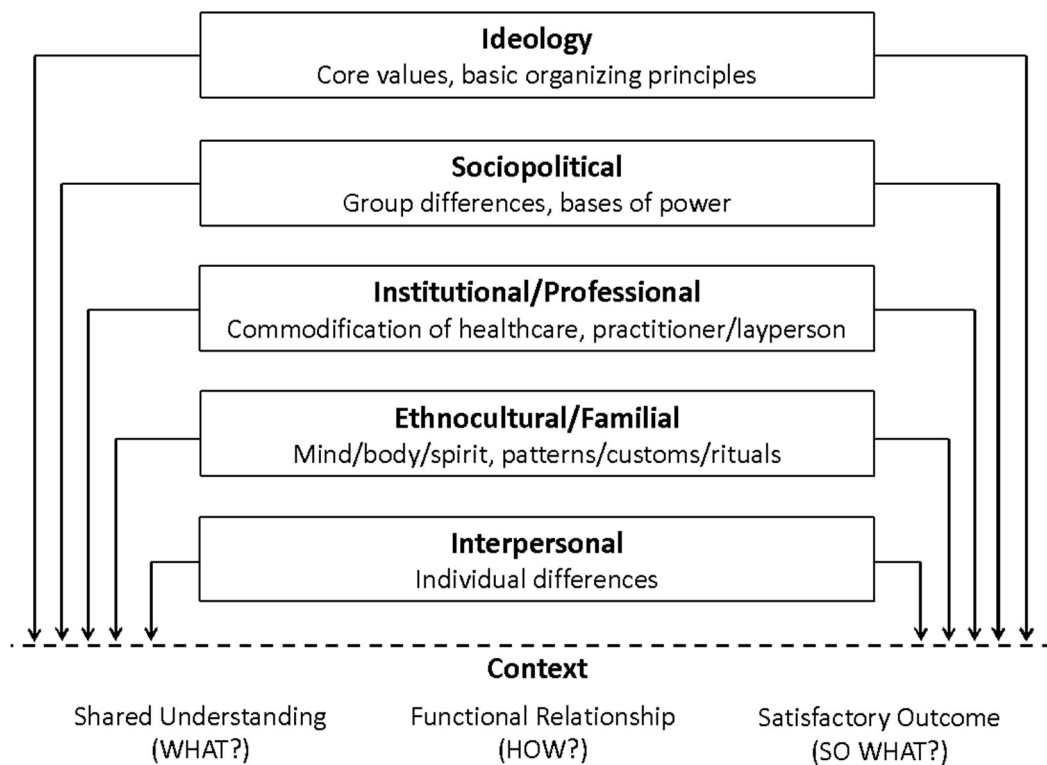
## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Children began learning from the time they are born and continue to learn through adulthood. Society begins teaching children through a number of outlets such as parent, media, friend(s), and teachers (Mcloed, 2011). These outlets can either reinforce or undermine the messages it tries to convey. Once the individual reaches adulthood many of the ideas taught by society are embedded. According to Yamasaki (2016), “personal, cultural, and political complexities operate simultaneously to shape our health beliefs and practices” (p. 16). These differing vantage points comprise a range of assumptions and understandings that then inform people’s interactions with others.

The Culturally Sensitive Model of Communicating Health (Sharf & Kahler, 1996) consists of five complex layers of meaning that participants bring to their relationships and conversations about health and illness (see Figure 1). These layers of meaning operate simultaneously and reciprocally, although one or more may be more salient for some people than others at any given time. Although specifically designed to increase understandings between patients and physicians, the model has particular relevance for individuals attempting to make sense of their conversations about health with anyone, including family, friends, providers, and peers (Yamasaki, 2016). Communication scholars have applied the model in health promotion and health education research with African American women (Kline, 2007), at the US-Mexico borderlands (Ford, Crabtree, & Hubbell, 2009), with

international college students in the U.S. (Cheng, 2004), and in rural Bangladesh (Jamil & Dutta, 2012). For purposes of this study, I've divided discussion of the model's five layers into two overarching layers of meaning: (a) societal, which includes ideological, sociopolitical, and institutional/professional layers; and (b) interpersonal, which includes ethnocultural/familial and interpersonal layers. Both layers contribute to intrapersonal understandings of consent that then inform individual behaviors.



### Societal Layers of Meaning

The *ideological layer of meaning* “comprises the core values, philosophical ‘truths’ and ethical underpinnings of society” (Yamasaki, 2016, p. 16), most of which are promoted or challenged through media. Music, in particular, teaches many

inconsistent messages about consent through both lyrics and videos. According to *Return of the Music Video*, music videos didn't gain popularity until the 1980s with the start of MTV (Music Television) and have changed over time. In some cases, a song's lyrics help to set the tone of the music video in most cases; in other cases, the music video has nothing to do with the lyrics to the song. According to Hovick and Silver (2018), "television has been complicit in perpetuating rape myths, depicting stereotypes of 'typical' rape victims and rapists as well as modeling rape myths in popular television" (p. 7). Popular music often perpetuates these myths and depicts stereotypes in their videos, such as using drugs to have sexual intercourse with female partners, which is not a consensual scenario of rape.

Music videos target adolescents. According to Burgess and Burpo (2012), adolescents spend much of their time watching several types of media a day. Music video exposure shapes young viewers' beliefs about how women and men should look, act, and behave (Burgess & Burpo, 2012). Research shows that the more music video exposure teens have, the more sex role stereotypes they endorse. Rape myths are based on these sexual stereotypes, which influence how adolescents view consent.

The music genre that has received a lot of criticism due to its messages is hip-hop. Hip-hop lyrics more explicitly give negative messages of consent than any other genre; however, other genres also send conflicting messages about consent. Consider pop artist Justin Bieber's song *What Do You Mean*. The lyrics state "what do you mean, when you nod your head yes but you wanna say no. What do you

mean?” In the accompanying video, he knocks on a girl’s apartment, they proceed to engage in sexual activity, and then she seemingly playfully pushes him away. Both the song and the video demonstrate confusion and an air of flippancy regarding consent. Other songs have promoted the use of alcohol and drugs in order to have sexual intercourse, including *Blame It on the Alcohol* by Jamie Foxx and *U.O.E.N.O* by Rico, in which “he put a molly all in her champagne and she ain’t even know it” and that he “took her home and enjoyed that [sex intercourse] she ain’t even know it.” The use of popular music with these types of messaging gives a skewed idea of how to properly gain consent.

Some music lyrics, however, clearly seek consent. *Promiscuous* by Nelly Furtado is about a girl who sleeps around with several men. Within the song there is a dialogue between Nelly Furtado and Timberland in which Nelly Furtado states “you expect me to just let you hit it but will you respect me if you get it?” Timberland responds by saying, “All I can do is try; give me one chance. Where you at do you mind if I come through?” The song positively speaks on consent as they are having a dialogue between one another and he is asking permission to court her to take the relationship to the next level instead of assuming permission and consent.

The *sociopolitical layer of meaning* “encompasses the politics surrounding primary social bases of power such as race, class, age, and gender” (Yamasaki, 2016, p. 17). According to Suarez and Gadalla (2010), “race is considered a powerful variable in social judgements about rape” (p. 2025). Rape is deeply rooted in history and media stereotypes (Ryan, 2011). In Slavery era, many white men raped African

American women because they were seen as property without rights to consent. In current society, punishment for rapist based on race seems to differ drastically. For example a former Stanford student, Brock Turner, was sentenced to six months incarceration and three years' probation for sexual assault of an unconscious female. It has been said in the media that he was given a light sentenced due to his privilege. Another individual by the name of Brian Banks who is an African American was sentenced to six years in prison for rape in which he served five years until the said victim recanted her story. These two stories both show there seems to be somewhat of a disparity with sentencing as there are several stories in the media like Brock Turner and Brian Banks. The disparity could be caused due to a jury not fully understanding consent.

*The institutional/professional layer of meaning* includes school professionals and teachers. School is another important avenue where individuals learn about consent and sexual intercourse. According to Kernsmith & Hernandez- Jozefowicz (2011), "schools have begun to make efforts to educate adolescents and change the attitudes and beliefs that allow rape to occur" (p. 147). The educational system attempts to teach through the use of sex education. Most schools, however, teach about abstinence and not necessarily about "no means no" and how to ensure mutual understanding between both parties when individuals make a choice to have sexual intercourse. According to Kernsmith & Hernandez-Jozefowicz (2011), "when a student believes that school is important and feels a sense of belonging, information obtained is more likely to be remembered and integrated into a



student's knowledge and behavioral base" (p. 149). On the other hand, when a child or adolescent doesn't have a connection with school, s/he seek other avenues for information. Typically, preteens and teenagers often rely on information from their peers as they are more accepted as a "source of information within the peer culture" (Kernsmith & Hernandez-Jozefowicz, 2011, p. 147). Adolescents are more likely to emulate behavior of another peer group whom they value than that of a child who is viewed as "outcast" (Kernsmith & Hernandez-Jozefowicz, 2011, p. 149). Most adolescents in the popular peer group often imitate behaviors they see on television and in the media. These messages often given by these sources are typically rape culture myths and scripts.

### **Interpersonal Layers of Meaning**

The *ethnocultural/familial layer of meaning* "incorporates the cultural traditions, customs, rituals, and values that are often learned through the family" (Yamasaki, 17). The idea of what is socially accepted when it comes to consent starts when a child is in their toddler years when they are learning the most important lessons. According to a *Washington Post* article by Steinberg and Sager (2015), these are the most crucial times to teach a child about rape culture and consent as these are the times they are able to provide them with the most tools they will be able to use throughout their life. It is also important for parents to teach their children self-soothing methods so they are able to accept disappointment as well as teach them that their feelings matter and to not force them to do things they do not want (Steinberg & Sager, 2015). Another important lesson for children to learn is that

they have the right to change their mind; when they are not taught this lesson, they often succumb to peer pressures later in life. Many social learning theorists have asserted rape is a form of aggression learned by three factors: 1) that people are desensitized by sexual violence, 2) that sexual violence equates to sexual pleasure, and 3) that sexual gratification can be gained through aggression (Graham, 1993, p. 19). Galtung's theory of violence indicates that one way "structural violence operates is by making reality opaque so we [society] don't see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent" (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010, pp. 2013–2014). Hypermasculine men tend to believe "women want to be dominated by men and engage in 'token resistance' as a submissive tactic" (Shafer et al., 2017). Token resistance is a belief in a form of sexual miscommunication that may contribute to some men's misunderstanding of consent. Domination often makes the rapist feel in control, which is why the victims must be submissive. Society seems to have a belief that rape is about sexual gratification for the rapist when truly rape is about power and control. Society can take back control by understanding consent. Consent is a freely given agreement between two individuals (Decker & Baroni, 2012). Consent is a simplistic idea that can be learned and taught.

The family is often the first set of people children and adolescents emulate. They are also the first set of people who teach about consent in an indirect way. Most children are taught to hug family and friends but do not realize that by forcing children to do so society is not giving them a choice in regards to physical contact with another. It is in adolescent years during courtship when intimate partner

violence first emerges (Kernsmith & Hernandez-Jozefowicz, 2011). Intimate partner violence encompasses both domestic violence and sexual assault as it is a broader term describing some type of violence against another. According to Sutton and Simons (2014) , “children who grow up in families in which hostility and aggression are likely to either engage in or be exposed to those same types of behaviors in their own relationship” (p. 2). There is a relation between interparental violence and partner violence (Sutton and Simmons, 2014, p. 2). Being that dating occurs in adolescents, it is important to teach children about consent. If the family is not the first to teach about consent, during adolescent years children will then seek out information about sexual intercourse from peers, school, or media. Often, the messages they receive are inaccurate.

The last layer of meaning, the *interpersonal layer of meaning*, “focuses on the dynamics of style, intimacy, emotion, and roles played out in human interaction” (Yamasaki, 2016, p. 17). This layer of meaning considers how an individual communicates with others. In regards to consent, each individual has his or her own meaning of consent which is based upon what was learned from society and key members in the individual’s life (i.e., media, school, and family). Over time, through personal experiences, one’s behaviors and attitudes can change or remain stagnant.

### **Research Questions**

The objective of this study is to identify the major factors that influence differing views of consent. The following research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: How do college-aged participants define consent?

RQ2: What societal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal influences shape these definitions?

RQ3: How do these definitions of consent align with or differ from legal definitions?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

To answer the research questions, I interviewed college students between the ages of 18 and 25. This age range was chosen due to the “overwhelming majority of assaults taking place between the ages of 18 and 24” (Silver & Hovick, 2018, p. 1). Prior research suggests that college campuses both foster date rape culture and support the rape myth culture, thereby increasing risks factors for sexual violence. Thus, participants who are not college students or not between the ages of 18 and 25 were excluded from the study.

#### **Participants**

With approval from the UH IRB Committee, I recruited 17 participants to interview for the study, but I was only able to interview 12 of these individuals. The other five were not interviewed due to time conflicts and/or prior engagements that hindered scheduling. As shown in Table 1, six participants are female, and six participants are male. Of the 12 participants, four are undergraduate students and eight are in graduate school.

Seven of the participants I already knew well: two are my god siblings, one is a coworker’s daughter, one is a former classmate in graduate school, two are friends from high school, and one is a friend from undergrad. The other five participants were recruited via snowball sampling through other participants or from email and Facebook solicitation. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants to protect their identity.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Caleb	Graduate	Male	23
Cassie	Graduate	Female	24
Celeste	Graduate	Female	25
Chastity	Undergraduate	Female	18
Chloe	Undergraduate	Female	18
Chris	Undergraduate	Male	24
Christian	Graduate	Male	25
Claire	Undergraduate	Female	18
Cole	Undergraduate	Male	19
Courtney	Graduate	Female	24
Kendrick	Graduate	Male	25
Kyle	Graduate	Male	24

**Interviews**

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. The shortest interview was 15 minutes, and the longest was 45 minutes. The average interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews occurred in public places, including Starbucks, Pita Pit, and the Valenti computer lab, chosen by the participants for their convenience and comfort. The semi-structured interviews progressed like natural conversations in which I was able to probe for further detail

or explanation as needed. I used an interview guide (see Appendix) comprised of four primary questions with corresponding follow-up questions. I asked participants about three main concepts: sexual harassment, date rape, and consent. The participants were asked to give their personal definitions of sexual harassment, date rape, and consent. They were also asked to consider how the media, parents, friends, and peers have contributed to their personal definitions over time.

With participant permission, I audiotaped and then partially transcribed the interviews, taking care to transcribe verbatim parts of the interview that I felt were most relevant for the aims of this study. In total, the partially transcribed interviews resulted in 12 single-spaced pages.

### **Thematic Analysis**

I coded and qualitatively analyzed the data from the interviews by examining patterns and differences found within and across the transcripts (Tracy, 2013). The coding continued until I refined themes that best describe the patterns and contradictions within the data for better understandings of the ways external and internal factors—namely the media, family, and social relationships—influence college students' personal ideas of consent. Once the patterns were configured, I then made a table of different quotes from the interviews that fit into each category to answer the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The interviews showed that consent means permission and that consent can be given both verbally and nonverbally. I found that certain individuals and media are more prevalent for influencing individual ideas of consent. In this chapter, I describe how the participants described consent and examine how and why certain individuals and media influenced their idea of consent. I will examine the results of my analysis based upon the research questions guiding the study.

#### **RQ1: “Consent Is Permission”**

All the participants seemed to agree that consent is permission and that at least one party has to give a verbal yes in order for the sexual activity to be consensual. They also said that consent can be given nonverbally, as well, but that people have to be able to read their partners’ cues. “Consent is 100% mutual. It has to be communicated explicitly, and it is an ongoing process that can be given verbally or nonverbally,” said Kyle. Chloe’s definition, though similar to Kyle’s, further states that even if the individual says yes it is not consensual when there is drug use. “Consent has to be verbal and agreed upon by both parties, and if you are under the influence you can’t give consent,” she said. Chris stated that “consent means yes and a lack of an answer doesn’t mean consent so it is important that an expressed yes is stated.”

Along with defining consent as verbal, others saw consent as being given nonverbally which Kyle explained as “even though she may say yes there are



nonverbal cues that may say no.” Participants described nonverbal cues as body language. “Over time, consent gets nonverbal if you’re dating because you learn their cues, but it depends on the type of relationship between the two people,” said Christian. Similarly, Caleb stated:

You know there is consent when the person is actively engaging and not pushing away. When trying to engage, I start off kissing and see where my hands can go. If my hands get pushed away, then I will stop, and if someone is hesitant I takes that as a no.

While some participants thought nonverbal cues are important when getting consent, others felt that nonverbal cues could misconstrue the true message.

According to Kendrick:

Body language and nonverbal communication are important, but the cues can be taken the wrong way. I remember a situation with a friend where she was interacting with a guy and he said she was showing him with her eyes that she wanted it. So the question is which body language or gesture do I look at. So it can be misconstrued as far as body language, but if someone tells you no that is different because it was explicit. I do think nonverbal communication does play a part in giving consent, but that depends on the relationship and how close you are. In a marriage or relationship over time, you learn their cues.

In summary, all participants felt that consent must be given verbally and that it must be mutually agreed upon by both parties participating in the sexual act. Most

thought it was important for there to be a verbal yes in order for there to be a clear understanding of consent. There seemed to be some disagreement as to whether consent could be given nonverbally; however, the participants did agree that in an already established relationship consent could be given nonverbally as well.

## **RQ2: Influences Shaping Consent**

The participants described many different sources that influenced their personal definitions of consent. Specifically, they discussed a) mom and personal relationships, b) news outlets, and c) music and television. These influences are explained below.

### ***Mom and Personal Relationships***

Most participants identified their mom as someone who provided them advice or knowledge regarding dealing with the opposite sex. According to Courtney, “at a young age my mom taught me about ‘no means no.’” While Courtney's mother taught her “no means no,” Cole’s mom taught him “yes is yes and no is no.” “My mom has always told me ‘yes is yes’ and ‘no is no’ and there is no ifs, ands, or buts about it,” he said. “You are to always get permission before you proceed.”

While some mothers directly influenced their children’s definitions, other just provided their children with words of wisdom when it comes to handling and dealing with the opposite sex. According to Caleb, “My mom has always told me to be careful with any woman because you never know what they have been through in their past. She told me to always deal with woman with care.” While Caleb’s mom

taught him to handle women with care, Kendrick's mom taught him to be respectful to others. "My mom was always clear as to what is a good and bad touch. I remember her telling me I need permission to enter someone else's space and to respect other people's space," he said. While Kendrick was taught to be mindful of other's space, others were taught to by their mothers to be allies to those who have been sexually assaulted. "My mom has always made it clear that we should listen and support victims of sexual harassment and rape," said Cassie.

Some participants identified other significant individuals who helped them to understand the opposite sex, as well as sexual assault and consent. According to Caleb:

I dated a woman who was raped. I met her two years after she was raped in college. There are certain things that you learn from being with someone who has been raped. Growing up as a young man, you really don't believe that so much of that stuff [rapes] goes on or you don't want to believe that it is going on and you try to ignore it, but when you meet someone that has been affected by rape it definitely changes you. I had to constantly be mindful of how I hugged her, and if she is not paying attention I am not going to grab her. I learned to be mindful of her triggers.

In summary, the results show that the participants' mom is the most important familial member to have an effect on their shared definitions of consent. Based on the results, moms provided important tidbits that have seemed to be instilled in their children's moral compass. Another important relationship noted by

some participants as an important influencer is significant others, including girlfriends and relatives who had been sexually assaulted.

### ***News Outlets***

The news media—both traditional news media and news from social media outlets, specifically Twitter—seem to have a prominent effect on the definition of consent for most of the participants. The participants feel as though they are constantly bombarded with messages from news outlets in the media. Courtney, for example, said that “the media has broadened my idea of consent as far as verbally saying yes. As a younger person, I didn’t require a verbal yes.” She elaborated by saying, “Most recently the #MeToo movement has been in the news and we have been bombarded about what is consent and what is not. The media is definitely affecting the law.” Some participants felt like them being bombarded helped to solidify their definitions. Chloe’s idea of consent “has become stronger due to the media because of the stories within the media.” Along with solidifying her definition, the media has also shown her questionable stories in which “people thought they had given consent but they really didn’t.” Conversely, other participants questioned the news media and the portrayals of consent. According to Celeste, “the media has put figures and things into people’s head and people are running with it.” Like Celeste, Kendrick felt as though “the media has influenced [him] not to buy into their hype. The news is trusted so people feel like they have to believe it.” Though he doesn’t buy into the hype, Kendrick does feel “the news stories have benefited the women and men that were left voiceless.”

Though traditional news media has shown to be influential, social media is another news outlet used by this particular generation being examined. As reported by Kyle, he has “learned more about consent and the complex nature of it through the conversations on social media.” In line with what Kyle stated, Chastity said that “Twitter has had the biggest effect as far as the medium that has influenced my definition of consent.”

To summarize, both traditional news media and social media have had varied effects on the participants’ understandings of consent. Based upon the data, it seems as though media has had a positive effect, but that the participants do seem to question it, as well.

### ***Music and Television***

Based on the participants’ responses, music and television are influential factors; however, they provide negative messages regarding consent. Most participants like Kyle, for example, felt “there are definitely messages in music and film that demonstrate the power structure where males are aggressive and females are submissive.” Similarly, Chloe stated that “music is extremely vulgar towards girls.” According to Kendrick:

Music plays a part into individuals’ idea of consent. What you say and what you don’t say has a profound effect on society. The music is the cornerstone of every society. The individuals see the artists’ carefree life, money and cars and want to emulate them. Rap music especially has been known to objectify women. Rappers are young people’s idols and are teaching them how to

define consent, date rape, and rape incorrectly. Due to the songs having a catchy beat and catchy rhyme, they remember them and act upon those things being said in the music subconsciously.

A prime example in music mentioned by Caleb is “Rick Ross UOENO. It says he threw a molly all in her drank which sounds like rape.” Similarly, Chis stated he felt like “rap implicitly talks about rape and consent in a negative way. Rap gives messages that in order for a girl to like [him] she has to be intoxicated and that they glorify drugs and drug use.”

Another outlet that influences ideas of consent is television. According to Caleb, “sometimes I watch *Law and Order SVU* and feel as though even though they go through the crime and shows that it is wrong, it is still putting the behavior on display. For the guys who are rapists, it's like ammo.” Chastity mentioned the show *Fosters* as equally problematic. She said, “In the show one of the girls gets raped by her foster brother. There are scenes in the show of the rape of her saying no and not being strong enough to fight him off.” Based on the participants’ responses, there are positive and negative implications of showing rape cases on television; however, they all agreed that television provides viewers with an understanding as to what constitutes consent, based on what they consider right or wrong. Therefore, both television and music are two pivotal factors that help to define consent for these participants.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Participants bring several meanings about consent based upon their different relationships. These different layers of meaning help the individuals make sense of the different messages. This study aims to examine which societal and interpersonal layers of meaning have an effect on individuals' personal definition of consent. I will examine what the results mean for both theory and practice as well as examine the difference between the participants definition based upon the legal definition of consent. My findings, although they represent a few individuals' experiences, offer insights in regards to this particular age population.

There were several findings from the results that were interesting. I found that the age of the participants played a huge role as to their understanding of consent. The younger participants seemed to be not as detailed when it came to explaining their idea of consent, which could be due to them just starting adulthood and forming their own definition based on their small amount of life experience. Specifically, the younger men were less forthcoming about their definition of consent than the men who were older and had more life experience. Also, gender seemed to play an interesting role as the male participants seemed to be extremely uncomfortable speaking about consent. I found this to be interesting as even individuals I had a prior relationship with before the study seemed to be uncomfortable regarding the topic.

### **RQ3: Alignment with Legal Definitions of Consent**

Based upon the results, the participants seemed as a whole to define consent as a 100% agreement between two people for a sexual act to take place. To them, consent is mostly verbally but can also encompass nonverbal aspects. However the actual legal definition from the United State Legislature defines consent as “actual words or conduct indicating freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact” (Decker & Baroni, 2012, p. 1088). Both the participants’ idea of consent and the legal definition seem extremely similar. On the surface, it seems the only difference is the word choice, but once analyzed, there are some minor differences. The participants spoke about having an expressed yes in order for the sexual act to be considered consensual, and the legal definition states there must be “actual words” for their to be consent. The participants seemed to agree that consent could be given nonverbally, but that there needed to be a prior relationship established to understand others’ social cues; however, the legal definition states there needs to be “conduct” that indicates an agreement. Thus, based upon the legal definition and the responses, there is a difference that needs to be noted. Also nonverbal communication is “body communication that includes general appearances, facial expressions, posture, the use of personal space, gestures, vocal qualities, and artificial communication” (Beeson, p. 121). Based on a simple Google search, conduct is “the manner in which a person behaves, especially on a particular occasion or in a particular context.” Conduct deals strictly with behaviors solely



while nonverbal communication is more encompassing, including facial expressions and gestures, which do not specifically constitute a person's behavior.

The participants' similar definition of consent to legal definitions does say something in regard to society. First, it says that they fully understand consent. Second, when a situation occurs with the opposite sex, the individuals choose to ignore their personal ideals of consent. Third, this particular age group that drugs and alcohol have a bigger effect on consent than what the participants mentioned as they alter individuals inhibitions. If individuals understand consent, there should be a consistent understanding of rape; however, prior research refutes that as there are several different personal definitions of rape.

### **Salient Layers of Meaning**

Based upon the results, both societal and interpersonal layers of meaning have an effect on consent, with some layers of meaning more salient than others. The first salient layer is ideological. As stated previously, this layer encompass the core values of society, which are often communicated through social media, news, and music. Throughout childhood and continuing to adulthood, individuals continue to spend much of their day on media channels, and the studied age bracket has more access to media than ever before with social media. Along with traditional media and social media, the participants had much to say in regards to music, which they stated seems to provide negative messages about consent. Music also glorifies the submission of woman by drugs and alcohol. Along with music, participants also expressed that television plays a role in perpetuating rape stereotypes. The

participants seemed to provide negative depictions of consent. Though this layer is salient, it is also the layer that gives individuals inaccurate depictions and messages of consent. Media have been known to give inaccurate messages, but the media also have helped to bring about conversations regarding consent and sexual assault. Specifically, media have positively given space to the voices of victims.

The ethnocultural/familial layer of meaning is also salient. As stated, the family is the first set of people children and adolescents emulate but we learn that more specifically the mother plays the most pivotal role in a child's life. The mother is the most salient as they are the first individuals children bond with after birth. Throughout adolescents the mother teaches their daughters how to act as a lady and their sons how to respect woman and their personal space. I think this says a lot about the importance the mother holds in an individual's life in comparison to the father. As only a very few participants mentioned anything in regards to their fathers and when their fathers were mentioned some participants provided positive messages while others stated their fathers taught them to be dominant and aggressive towards the opposite sex. Being that it has been found that there is a profound effect the mother has on her children, it is important for this particular individual to teach her children about consent so they do not seek out information from other inaccurate sources.

Another set of individuals in this layer is friends and other prior relationships. As noted in the results, the conversations with friends regarding consent has a positive effect on the individuals as they too have helped to shape

individuals' personal definitions of consent because the conversations help them to question their prior knowledge. The conversations with these important individuals help them to also see another perspective from that of a peer. Though friends are not the most important individual to help shape individual definitions of consent, these subset of individuals are still important in the formation of consent.

The least salient layer is *the institutional/professional layer of meaning*, which encompasses school. I found that it was interesting that school was not really mentioned in any of the participant interviews as theoretically school is an important teaching tool. Children spend roughly 8 hours a day in school from pre-k to 12th grade, but according to the participants, it plays no role in teaching children and adolescents about consent. If taught correctly, school could be used to affirm the messages of the ethnocultural/familial layer. Because so much time is spent in school, consent needs to be taught in health class to begin the conversation in a healthy manner. Even after high school, one participant mentioned having a required course their 1st semester of college in regards to alcohol and sexual harassment. I feel as though in this required training there needs to be education in regards to sexual assault and consent due to the majority of rapes affecting individuals 18 to 24 years of age.

What the results say in regards to the Culturally Sensitive Model of Communication is that when it comes to the discussion of consent, the participants only drew from two layers of meaning. In theory, there are always a few layers that more salient than the rest, which these findings confirm. The results show that these

keys individuals and forms of media comprising the ethnocultural/familial and ideological layers need to be targeted in regards to messaging in order to affirm and communicate shared understandings of consent.

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## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### OPENING

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I expect it to take approximately 30 minutes. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers, and your comments will be strictly confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin?

#### QUESTIONS

- 1) What do these terms mean to you?
  - Sexual Harassment
  - Date Rape
  - Consent
- 2) Have your personal definitions changed over time? How so? Why?
- 3) How has the media influenced your definition of consent?
  - What news stories come to mind when you think about date rape, harassment, or consent?
  - What entertainment channels (songs,, movies, TV shows) come to mind when you think about date rape, harassment, or consent?
  - What specific words and/or messages do they use?
- 4) How do your parents, friends, and peers contribute to your definition of consent?
  - Describe their expectations and behaviors.
  - In what ways have you adopted their behaviors? Whose?
  - In what ways have you modified or shunned their behaviors? Whose? Why? When?
  - What specific words and/or messages do they use?

#### CLOSING

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Once again, thank you for your time. Please feel free to contact me if you have any question or concerns at a later time.