

SEXUAL CONSENT: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS, PRACTICES, AND  
EDUCATION AMONG TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

By:

ERICA JOY FAVOR

THESIS

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Supervising Committee:

Kelly Bergstrand, Committee Chair

David Ardit

Heather Jacobson

## ABSTRACT

# Sexual Consent: Conceptualizations, Practices, and Education Among Texas High School Students

Erica Joy Favor

University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

### Supervising Professors:

Kelly Bergstrand

David Arditi

Heather Jacobson

This study investigates high school students' understanding of sexual consent and healthy relationships. While many studies have investigated practices, concepts, and definitions of consent among college-aged students, this research focuses on adolescents. How do teenagers define consent? With the rise of the #metoo movement, has awareness of consent and its practice changed? This qualitative study interviewed fifteen high school students in Texas, ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old. The results of this study are clear: high school students participate in hookup culture despite a lack of education and curriculum of consent practices. This research also sheds light on social media's role in educating teenagers about consent and healthy relationships.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to all the survivors of sexual abuse, assault, and violence. I believe you.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Amazon futuristic original series *Upload* begins episode two with the main actress making out with a casual fling. Asking “Did you bring protection?” to her partner, they both reveal condom-sized foil square pouches. After opening the pouches, peeling off the adhesive, and sticking small cameras to their chests, each makes eye contact with the other’s camera and declares, “I consent to this.” They then enjoy consensual lovemaking with small talk after. Then he leaves. She takes off the video device and goes about her evening.

What may be surprising is that this technology exists, and it was created to combat sexual assaults on college campuses by recording consent before any sexual act (Harris 2018). A few of these apps were released in 2014 and would only be viewed if charges were pressed against a student (Harris 2018). This technology is aimed at curing an endemic problem: one in five women and one in six men on college campuses will be a victim of sexual assault (Wade 2017: 204). Consent is what separates healthy sexual activities from assault (Klement et al. 2017:130). The issues around obtaining evidence of sexual consent could be cured with this technology. However, research revealed that even video consent can be the result of coercion (Harris 2018; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Video evidence of sexual consent or non-consent is what investigators look for to prove the guilt of the perpetrator. But for victim-survivors<sup>1</sup> it is nearly impossible to obtain.

Consent is the answer to “rape culture” (Burt 1980). Rape culture is the idea that society normalizes rape because of gender roles and sexuality (Burt 1980). Burt (1980:218) explained how “acceptance of interpersonal violence refers to the notion that force and coercion are

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<sup>1</sup> The term victim-survivor is used by Professor Meenaskshi Gigi Durham to “balance the recognition of survivors’ spirit and strength with the real pain and injury of sexual violence more clearly conveyed by ‘victim’” (Durham 2021: 13).

legitimate ways to gain compliance and specifically that they are legitimate in intimate and sexual relationships.” Consent for sexual activity may not be practiced in our culture because of sex-role stereotyping or the idea that gender roles dictate who should communicate their consent, and the idea that men dominate and have power in heterosexual relationships (Burt 1980; England and Ronen 2013). Consent is at the root of transforming culture from a rape culture to a sex positive culture.

Armstrong et al. (2018) reviewed the *American Journal of Sociology*, *The Annual Review of Sociology*, and the *American Sociological Review* and found only thirteen articles from 1975-2017 that involved sexual violence. They concluded that there was a need for sociology to create space in the field for sexual violence research (Armstrong et al. 2018). Sexual violence is both a cause and consequence of inequality, not only based on gender, but also race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, ability status, citizenship status, and nationality (Armstrong et al. 2018:100). Their journal reviews shed light on the lack of sociology research on sexual violence and its brethren, sexual consent. While #metoo directed the attention of societies and academia towards people's experiences with sexual violence, investigation into adolescent consent still lags. What little research exists is dominated by college student interviews and surveys (Javidi et al. 2020; Jozkowski et al. 2017). When it comes to high school-aged students, the research is scarce.

Adolescents often lack tools to resist peer pressure when engaging in risky behavior, such as alcohol and drug use and sexual behavior and practices (Fisher 2009; Salvy et al. 2014:94). According to the Centers of Disease Control’s 2019 *National Youth Risk Survey*, 29% of students use alcohol, 36% use marijuana, 14% use other drugs, while 38% self-reported having sexual intercourse and 21% reported having sexual intercourse after using drugs or alcohol. Adolescents are unquestionably taking part in risky behaviors due to social norms and perceived expectations

(Fisher 2009; Salvy et al. 2014). While navigating adolescence, teenagers may be exposed to situations without the proper skills to communicate their desires. For example, Mann (2016) found that sexual agency is often absent from adolescent girls' sexual experiences. Prevention programs teach the nonverbal and verbal skills needed for students to understand and communicate their desires when it comes to substance abuse (Botvin and Griffin 2007). However, the tools may not be present when negotiating risky sexual behavior among adolescents. Students have access to social media and can view social movements and news at any time. As awareness of campus sexual assaults rise and colleges take on more preventative measures such as seminars, policies, and consent scripts, these efforts could impact students before they even enter college (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999).

College campuses are filled with students who question what gaining consent means (Jozkowski et al. 2014; Muehlenhard et al. 1992). Jozkowski et al. (2014) believes there is a lack of academic research discussing definitions and conceptualizations of consent. As students continue to question what consent means, academic literature discussing and creating definitions of the term is lacking. Sociology could greatly benefit by taking a critical look at the culture and socialization of all gender identities with regards to consent and sexual assault. Students come of sexual age in their adolescence, and with a social movement centered on rape culture and exposing predators, sociologists rooted in feminist work could turn their attention to what adolescents' perceptions are of their cultural practices around sexuality and relationships to understand how early students deal with hookup and rape culture.

Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the following questions: how do high school students conceptualize, communicate, define, and learn about sexual consent? How does gender identity impact who initiates verbal and nonverbal consent conversations or responses to the



initiations? I will also investigate how students define or conceptualize consent in different relationships, such as casual or committed relationships, and when alcohol is involved. Did the #metoo movement impact high school students and their awareness of consent? I am curious if the #metoo movement affects consent practices and expectations by each gender. I will also look at whether social media perpetuates rape culture or deconstructs it among adolescents today, in the #metoo era.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since consent is rooted in the answer to deconstructing rape culture, I will first review rape culture and the sociological relevance in this research. Then, I will explain the importance of the #metoo movement and the history of sexual consent in research and how it has come to be defined and taught in Texas. Lastly, I set up the gaps in the literature and how my project could help further the cultural explanation of consent through sociology.

### *Rape Culture*

Rape culture is the societal acceptance and norms around gender roles, the power imbalance of men and women in sexual relationships which perpetuate sexual violence and male sexual aggression, and the compliancy of people in our culture (Armstrong and Hamilton 2006; Buchwald et al. 2005; Burt 1980; Durham 2021; England and Ronen 2013). The term came to be in the 1970s as feminist scholars linked sexual violence to a product of patriarchal power (Durham 2021; Russo 2001). Early rape culture research finds that to end rape culture, our society needs to perpetuate the idea that “sex is [a] mutually undertaken, freely chosen, fully conscious interaction” (Burt 1980:229). The research found that our culture is rooted in men enacting their masculinity over women in dominating ways (Durham 2021; England and Ronen 2013). They looked further at how men are defined by their masculinity and their need to prove

their own masculinity to their social groups, even at the expense of violence toward women, especially for those men who do not have power through financial or social capital (England and Ronen 2013). It is important to note that societal norms embedded in rape culture are centered around a male-female binary; however, this does not encompass the sexual violence experienced by the range of gender identities and sexualities in society today (Durham 2021).

Men hold power in society around public spaces where women can be harassed and verbally or physically assaulted (Armstrong et al. 2012; Miller 2008). Men may use their gender inequality to prove their masculinity or to prioritize men's sexual needs over women's pleasure (Armstrong et al. 2012). There are also societal expectations that allow men more freedom in sexual behaviors while women are expected to act like they are refraining from sexual activity (Fisher 2009). Traditional heterosexual sexual scripts build on the belief that "men are responsible for initiating sexual encounters whereas women are responsible for restricting the level of sexual activity" (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999:259). If culture socializes men to behave around the idea that sex is a part of masculinity and something they are responsible to pursue, but women are sexual objects, this puts pressure on women to be the gatekeepers of sex (England and Ronen 2013; Garcia et al. 2012; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Research on hookup culture finds similar conclusions (Armstrong et al. 2012; Garcia et al. 2012, Wade 2021).

Hooking up means casual sex, sexual relations with no intent of a romantic relationship (Wade 2017:185). Hooking up is further defined as "involving sexual activity, ranging from kissing to intercourse, outside of an exclusive relationship" (Armstrong et al. 2012:435). In the past 60 years, our society has shifted to a more casual hookup culture (Armstrong et al. 2012; Bogle 2008; England and Bearak 2014; Garcia et al. 2012). Casual sex has been labeled "hook up culture" and has academia researching the structure, gender roles, and concerns or benefits of

this culture (England and Bearak 2014). Lisa Wade (2017:20) found in her research of college students, that hook up culture is like a fog in society, even when the rates of casual sex and “hookups” are declining there is no escaping the culture. Wade studied first year college students and concluded that hookup culture impacted them greatly because they were away from their parents for the first time, believed that casual sex is expected of them, and were exposed to binge drinking or the belief that everyone was drinking and hooking up (Wade 2017:20).

In a hookup culture, it is more accepted for men than women to participate, and for women who engage in casual sex to face social sanctions such as labels of “slut” by both genders (Bogle 2008; England and Bearak 2014). Hooking up is the new norm on most colleges, and it seems to be most harmful towards women (Bogle 2008, England and Bearak 2014; Wade 2017:16). Though it is harmful towards women, it can expose all students to emotional trauma and physical assaults (Wade 2017:69). While women feel the harm and dissatisfaction with hookup culture, research shows that both men and women prefer more meaningful ways to connect, but the culture has manifested its norms and expectations in college students (Wade 2017:245). With this behavior around casual sex becoming a social norm, consent negotiation takes place in different sexual scripts typically rooted in traditional gender norms (Beres 2004; Garcia et al. 2012; Simon and Gagnon 1986).

Hookup culture, unfortunately, perpetuates rape myths among college campuses, even after the #metoo movement (Reling et al. 2018). Rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists in creating a climate hostile to rape victims” (Burt 1980:217; Durham 2021). Rape myths can take the form of “only bad girls get raped, survivors lie about being raped, rape is perpetrated by a male stranger and involved the use of a weapon” (Durham 2021:7-8). A study found that 64% of female college freshmen reported

hookups following alcohol use (Fielder and Carey 2010). Flack et al. (2007) found that 77.8% of college students engaging in hookups had unwanted sex in the context of a hookup. When hookups are happening in the context of alcohol use, students need to be aware of experiences where unwanted sex occurs.

Rape and sexual assault are problems on college campuses, and the numbers continue to reflect that issue (Dougherty 2015:224). It has been estimated that around 15 to 38% of women in the United States experience a sexual assault or rape during their lifetime with a higher chance of experiencing it between 18-24 (Fisher et al. 2000; Groggel et al. 2021; Jozkowski et al. 2014; Sinozich and Langton 2014). Sexual violence encapsulates many crimes, and it is severely underreported, ranging from 5 to 25% of the actual number of incidents (Durham 2021; Morgan and Oudekerk 2019; World Health Organization 2012). The thousands of allegations of sexual assault on college campuses have paved the way for research in many fields to take a deeper look at rape culture, hookup culture, or “uncommitted sexual encounters,” consent and alcohol use in young adults (Garcia et al. 2012). Research has sought to prove that communication is the root of the consent process, verbally or nonverbal, claiming that improving communication is a “step to decrease sexual assault” (Jozkowski et al. 2014:906). However, research also has shown that miscommunication as a cause for rape is an unlikely explanation (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) also found that the idea that both genders’ direct refusal of sexual activity is unambiguous and easily understood further the idea that when verbally nonconsenting, misunderstandings do not typically take place.

Sexual scripts, gender socialization, and hookup culture are all the roots of how both genders consent and the idea that consent is interpreted differently by each other (Bogle 2008; Doolittle 2021; England and Ronen 2013). Research has indicated that men were more likely

than women to perceive certain behaviors as being sexual in their intent (Metts and Spitzberg 1996). Research in the areas of consent proves that college students do not have a universal definition of consent that is widely accepted by all students to ensure continuity in experiences and gender differences in understanding when verbal and nonverbal consent occur (Baldwin-White 2019:18; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999; Metts and Spitzberg 1996). Understanding how college students perceive sex and alcohol has been studied and is important, but those ideas and practices could start much earlier than the age of 18. Many college males feel it will ruin their chance of having sex if they must stop and ask for consent (Baldwin-White 2019:17). If college students have a hard time understanding how to ask for consent before anything physical happens, how can we expect teens to do the same?

### *#MeToo*

The #metoo movement came about after Harvey Weinstein was outed on his patterned attacks on up-and-coming actresses, film crew, and staff (Farrow 2017; Fine 2019). However, the hashtag that brought thousands of women together was coined by Tarana Burke. Back in 2006, she began her nonprofit “me too.” which advocated preventing sexual harassment, assault, and abuse against Black and minority women in her community (Burke 2021; Johnson and Hawbaker 2018; Saguy and Reese 2021). Her work continued through the years, and she found that every time she shared her story, other women would share the simple two-word response: me too. Burke (2021) explains that her work is rooted in creating an environment of “empowerment through empathy” and compassion to give survivors a place to be heard (Burke 2021:8).

Both social media and social movements can affect understandings of consent. The importance of the 21st-century social media movements gives greater ownership to those who

claim to be part of such a large movement. These platforms also create a space for the speed at which information is moved for people to mobilize (Durham 2021; Fine 2019). This is not limited to only women; social media has proven to be a platform for people everywhere to share their experiences of being victimized and surviving horrible sexual violence (Durham 2021). This has created a large community and political awakening to what is happening to people around the world: rich, poor, gay, straight, famous, and your everyday average person. However, #metoo was largely focused on White women and their voices being heard (Burke 2021; Saguy and Rees 2021). Tarana Burke is even quoted stating “This can't grow unless it's intersectional” (Cooney 2017:1). Other hashtags and movements arose such as #timesup, #notallmen, and others that shed truth to the reality men and women are faced with every day in American society. Online activism gives voices to victim-survivors and people supporting the exposure of rape culture while pushing for political and social change (Durham 2021:85).

Modern social movements can come alive with just one tweet or a simple hashtag that generates discussions worldwide. Because #metoo was shared through social media, specifically Twitter, there was truly no leader associated with the movement who could communicate what it was for, much like Black Lives Matter (Caren et al. 2020). Twitter is the most studied social media platform for social movements and political communication (Fine 2019). The media movement of #metoo captured adolescents' attention and increased their awareness of ideas such as affirmative consent, sexual assault, and sexual coercion (Kunst et al. 2018). Research proves that adolescents' access to the internet and social media platforms creates opportunity for learning, discussion, and political engagement (Boulianne 2015; Earl et al. 2017; Kahne et al. 2013; Xenos et al. 2014). Maher and Earl (2019) found that adolescents have information-consumption practices that shape their political activism and knowledge through conversation

and content sharing on social media. Their study concluded that youth use social media posts to learn about sociopolitical issues and engage with social activism. Adolescents spend a lot of time on social media, consuming various content and learning about social issues and engaging with online activism (Maher and Earl 2019).

### *Consent*

Consent continues to change through the social context and history of our country (Harris 2018). The trials of Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein further shed light on the issue defining sexual consent. During the first minutes of deliberation, the jurors of both cases asked the judges for the definition of consent, and the replies were, “Use your common sense” (Puente et al. 2018; Short 2018). Within each sexual assault, rape, or sexual harassment case, consent is at the root of the issue (Beres 2007, 2014). With the grey area of what defines consent, adding variables such as alcohol can be fueling further ambiguity into what society believes consent means.

What exactly defines the word consent? If we are ethical humans, what does our “common sense” say about consent with sexual activity? Is it merely agreement? The idea of consent can be an example of “spontaneous sociology,” or the adoption of the commonsense meanings of concepts without critically reflecting on the cultural, historical, and social forces that produced those meanings (Beres 2007:95; Bourdieu et al. 1991). Consent regarding sexual activity is defined as, “to engage in sexual activity as the freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness. This definition conceptualizes consent as both a mental act and a physical act and takes context into account by requiring that consent be expressed freely” (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999:259). This definition considers consent as both a mental and a physical activity while considering the context of a circumstance of different relationships and activities (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Moving to a more fluid definition

of consent, “Consent is an active, ongoing collaboration for mutual benefits involved that leads to an ethics of heightened responsibility and accountability from the consequences of one's actions” (Bauer 2014). Many definitions around consent are found in academia and the law. “The consensus between scholarly, popular, and legal understandings of consent is that consent is some form of agreement to participate in sexual activity” (Beres 2014:374). This general definition leaves out the continuous and freely given portions mentioned earlier. Beres (2014) also consolidated those three definitions before the #metoo movement; future research could question if the social definition has changed since the culture around sexual assault prevention grew from 2017 and on.

Some are advocating for a legal definition of consent. For example, consent as “freely given, knowledgeable, and informed agreement,” is the combination of the Model Penal Code, General Data Protection Rights, and the Nuremberg Code that Joyce M. Short (2018) put together to create the hashtag #FGKIA to push lawmakers to adopt this definition when it comes to sexual assault (Bevitt 2020; Miller 2017; Nuremberg Trials 1946-1949). Other definitions include three types of agreement that can take place in sexual conduct: assent, acquiescence, and consent (Short 2018). Here, assent means agreement on its face, but lacking informed knowledge. Acquiescence means agreeing reluctantly or without protest or agreeing silently (Merriam-Webster 2004).

Studies have focused on different aspects of consent. Nonverbal consent has been researched by Groggel et al. (2021); in this study college students read vignettes and interpreted if nonverbal consent was given by both parties. They concluded that college students know they should use explicit consent when sexual acts are on the table; however, they most often use implicit consent practices and mostly use nonverbal consent behaviors (Beres 2004; Groggel et



al. 2021). However, other research has studied how women have explicitly stated non-consent and found that voicing refusal impacted their post-traumatic stress disorder greatly because they felt helpless when the attack still occurred even after voicing their desires to not continue (Cook and Messman-Moore 2017).

A recent study of college men by Bedera (2021) found that college men defined consent as being that of affirmative consent. Affirmative consent is popular term coined back in the 1990s (Harris 2018). Affirmative consent means “voluntary, mutual agreement among all participants to engage in sexual activity” (Javidi et al. 2020; Willis and Jozkowski 2018). This would be verbally or nonverbally gaining a yes before sexual activity (Harris 2018). However, a few participants from Bedera’s (2021) study were more comfortable with the idea that nonconsent would be stated during the activity if the woman is uncomfortable, leaving the responsibility of verbally communicating consent to the woman or the potential victim. Ultimately, her study found that male college students could conceptualize affirmative consent, but in practice did not seek it 100% with their partners (Bedera 2021). In some studies men focused more on the physical cue of non-consent, and when it occurs, then stop the events from taking place (Bedera 2021; Jozkowski et al. 2014). Affirmative consent understanding for high school students and adolescents could solidify healthy patterns while they are in their exploratory phase which could lead to better communication strategies for young adulthood (Miller 2017).

Other studies on consent looking at gender roles in which men are sexual initiators and women are expected to constrain their sexuality, find that consent conversations are difficult because women who enthusiastically state “yes” can seem sexually promiscuous in society (Jozkowski et al. 2017; Simon and Gagnon 1986). Equality in the gender roles can empower women to be active in their sexual experiences (Perrone-McGovern et al. 2014). This can

facilitate open conversations to take place about what sexual acts will occur between participants. Relationships may seem to be a safe place where consent communication can be practiced. However, unwanted consensual sex thrives in committed relationships. Earlier research indicates that women acquiesce to sexual activity with their partners to avoid a source of conflict (Conroy et al. 2015).

Affirmative consent gives direction as to what needs to be given before any acts can occur. It needs to be an explicit “yes,” forcing the initiator to ask or get affirmative consent and taking the pressure off the victim-survivor to prove non-consent (Delamater 2015:605; Javidi et al. 2020). Affirmative consent could create a culture of positive consent framework of mutual pleasure and concern for all parties involved in the sexual act as well as defining consent for legal matters (Javidi et al. 2020). “Consent is Sexy” (CIS) is a campaign that uses sex-positive images and messages to push the idea that both parties need to agree before sexual acts (Hovick and Silver 2019). CIS is a response to sexual violence and is used in prevention programs to create awareness at college campuses (Hovick and Silver 2019). CIS’ research shows that 64% of surveyed students noticed the sex-positive campaign and even remembered the slogan (Hovick and Silver 2019).

There are some issues with this framework that research has identified when simplifying affirmative consent. Feminist groups and organizations have used mantras like “Yes means Yes” and “No means No.” However, research proves that these terms exploit the term consent, making it seem like a simple yes or no, even though consent politics are more complicated than what is communicated moments before sexual encounters (Harris 2018). Harris (2018) goes on to explain from a communications lens how complicated consent can be when using short phrases

like “Yes means Yes” and “No means No.” The short phrases relegate the concept of consent to be very simple, which it is not:

The myth that communication can be unambiguous gives rapists an out, and when feminists assert the simplicity of consent, we maintain that myth. But if, as communication scholars argue, human interaction is always fraught and complex, then simplicity is impossible. By labeling the first communication myth when it appears in both feminist and rape-supportive arguments, feminists and allies can discard the notion that the absence of ambiguity is a precursor for basic human decency (i.e. not raping people). Getting rid of this idea can create more space for arguments about the politics of consent (Harris 2018:164).

Obtaining affirmative consent does not contextualize the situation for all those involved.

If someone is under duress or acquiesces and verbalizes a “yes,” the problem is not the verbal consent, it is the coercion (Harris 2018). There are many activist groups and researchers who want verbal affirmative consent added to collegiate codes of conduct (Dougherty 2015:225).

Research has examined how genders communicate consent differently, which creates a need for more concrete ways to communicate affirmative consent (Jozkowski et al. 2014). Though there are arguments that affirmative consent is not enough, it still changes the culture to a consent-seeking culture where men and women must seek consent rather than waiting for resistance to sexual advances (Delamater 2015; Goldstein 2020).

Research has shed light on many experiences that are associated with consent, not just affirmative consent. How people obtain consent and how people respond when put in situations is prominently studied. Social workers Jamie Wasserman and Karie McGuire (2021) have researched what they term “unwanted sexual consent.” They created three levels of sexual trauma. Level one is no consent: sexual assault; level two is unwanted consent: sex without desire. They also observed that women and men engage in sexual behavior despite not wanting to do so. This phenomenon was earlier identified as “consensual unwanted sex” or “sexual compliance” (Beres 2004; Sprecher et al. 1994; Walker 1997). The third level is wanted consent:

agreement between two parties engaging in sexual activity, actively agreed upon, freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific (Wasserman and McGuire 2021). Research has proven that consent is more than just a “yes” on the surface; it is a “negotiation of social expectations, a way of expressing a social identity, or of fitting into a certain social world” (Beres 2007:99). Coercion of any kind can bring a “yes” despite the party meaning “no.” From 1997-2022, although the terms have changed, the experiences remain. Concrete names could help people identify what they experience in the future. Another form of unwanted sexual experience is termed sexual coercion. Sexual coercion often occurs within the context of serious, long-term dating relationships and involves women eventually giving in to their boyfriends’ advances even though they are not in the mood (Harned 2005).

### *Intoxication and Consent*

Sexual coercion can also take place when the victim is not in the correct state of mind or is intoxicated and simply unable to consent. Further complicating the meaning of consent is mind altering substances. There are issues with peoples’ understanding of consent when it comes to being “able-minded” or “under the influence.” Research by Jozkowski et al. (2017) shows that college culture believes that if a woman is drinking at a college party, she is looking for sex. General assumptions in culture around alcohol consumption and sexual activity can cloud consent practices. Though the federal government made efforts to clarify that alcohol consumption does not make a sexual assault the victim-survivor’s fault, alcohol and sexual experiences are intertwined (Herbenick 2019:144; Not Alone 2014; Wade 2017). President Obama created a task force to combat college campus sexual assault through the creation of surveys, prevention methods, and improvement ideas colleges could use to help victim-survivors on their campuses (Not Alone 2014). In 2014, the National Survey of Sexual Health and

Behavior reported that one in six US adults say they or their partner used alcohol in connection with their most recent sexual event (Herbenick et al. 2019:144). The connection between alcohol use and sexual events is still integrated in our collegiate culture (Herbenick et al. 2019).

Herbenick et al. (2019:148) found that drunk sex is often consensual for both parties; however, 6.9% of men and 14.1% of women while in college, reported someone had vaginal, anal, or oral sex with them while they were too drunk or high to consent. The research around alcohol, sex, and consent tries to explain how college administrators can help students navigate informed conversations around the topics. Herbenick et al. (2019), also found that there was reduced pleasure around drunk sex, yet students continue to participate in such behavior (Garcia et al. 2012). College students may not believe that alcohol consumption reduces cognitive function, preventing decision-making capabilities in sexual activity (Baldwin-White 2019:4).

When it comes to the law defining consent in relation to sexual assault, in Texas, consent means “assent in fact, whether express or apparent” (Texas Code Ann. § 1.07.11). Looking at Appendix A, you can see how Texas defines sexual assault while using what is considered as non-consent (Texas Code Ann. §22.011(b)). Texas requires victims to prove they did not consent. The lack of a legal definition, much less a national legal definition, means there is no expectation of affirmative consent before the sexual activity or assault. Though it may seem like common knowledge, the law plays a role when mind altering substances are involved when looking for proof of consent. Alcohol or drug use impacts the ability to consent legally. When looking at the consent laws with regards to alcohol or drugs, four states do not address intoxicants when describing sexual assault and consent (RAINN 2021). Eighteen states and Washington D.C. use terms to describe the state of mind of the victim with drugs or alcohol as nonconsensual *only* when the victim is involuntarily intoxicated or drugged by the perpetrator

(RAINN 2021). Three states address both claims of the victim being intoxicated willingly and under the perpetrator, while twenty-two states explicitly state that alcohol or drugs alter the victim's ability to consent (RAINN 2021). The nation is not uniform in the law when consent and alcohol are involved.

College students have a mixed understanding of consent and alcohol; this could also be the case for high school students. High school students often lack the skills to refuse peer pressure when alcohol and drugs are being consumed (Salvy et al. 2014), and many prevention programs overtly teach verbal and nonverbal skills that adolescents can use to communicate their desires around drug and alcohol use (Botvin and Griffin 2007). Drug and alcohol prevention techniques could cross over to the sexual health/healthy relationship curriculum when surrounded by the idea to consent (Righi et al. 2019). Previous studies concluded that alcohol played a role in college-aged victim-survivors' unwanted sexual experiences (Harned 2005). With further research into alcohol use and understanding of consent, researchers can understand how high school-aged students define consent when alcohol and drugs are consumed.

### *Education and Consent*

Each state has its prerogative on what information goes to its students. Sociologists continue to research and provide data on the effectiveness of proper sexual health education (Beres 2014). How students come to understand consent starts with their own understanding of their sexual experiences, health, and education. Preliminary research shows that Americans have been sexually active as teenagers for most of American history (Furstenberg 2010:5). The CDC's *National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* reported a decline in the percentage of high school students having sex from 46% in 2009 to 38% in 2019. Lindberg et al. (2021:2) studied sexual behavior and contraceptive use and found that more than half of adolescents have engaged

in at least one sexual behavior studied (anal, oral, penial/vaginal penetration). They found that in the past, rates of all sexual behaviors were stable, but for the years 2015-2019, have been declining for both genders. In the last ten years, sexual activities remain a norm, despite declining (Lindberg et al. 2021). Adolescents are sexually active (experienced in having sexual intercourse), and some are without the tools to communicate consent (Kann et al 2018:62). National data shows that in 2018, 15% of girls and 4% of boys have experienced sexual violence (kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to) (Kann et al. 2018:21). Experiences of early sexual violence are correlated to sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (RAINN 2021).

The state of Texas does not require schools to teach sex education. Districts who offer to teach it focus on the practice of abstinence, and require parents opt into the class for their students (Waller 2020). More recently, they are expanding sex education to communicate forms of birth control, but overall pushing for abstinence (Waller 2020). Texas educational standards have yet to produce a curriculum on sexual assault or consent. In studying the Texas Education Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards from kindergarten to high school, I found that consent was mentioned zero times while the only mention of sexual assault was called "acquaintance rape" (TEKS 111.5; Texas Education Agency 2022). Sexual health education, abstinence-only, or Comprehensive Sex Education, is the vessel for students to learn about their sexuality and bodily autonomy. Research found that the desired outcome of educated adolescence on reproductive knowledge would be to create a healthy informed public with adequate knowledge about their choices for their bodies as well as preventative education (Beres 2014). To teach Comprehensive Sex Education, politicians need to see results. Somers and Surmann (2005:51)

discussed the effectiveness of topics as well as sources of information such as peers, parents, school, etc., found that earlier introduction to topics as well as a Comprehensive Sex Education is effective in healthy results for those students throughout their lives.

### *Case Studies*

Research on high school students and consent is rare. Two research studies currently examine high school students and consent in this post #metoo era (Javidi 2020; Righi et al. 2019). The researchers are in the field of public health looking into consent. Righi et al. (2019) took a qualitative approach, interviewing 29 adolescents. This study found that adolescents did not define consent as a continued and ongoing process. If they consented one time, one or both parties believe that they continually consent (Righi et al. 2019:11). In their study, they also found that girls would have to be the ones to initiate the communication around non-consent and if communication was absent, it was understood that it was consensual (Righi et al. 2019:13). Overall, Righi et al. (2019) conclude that within the definition of consent, all the teens interviewed defined affirmative consent; however, in practice, nonverbal consent was practiced. They also note that perceptions of consent are established in the early years of sexual exploration which could be a better place for preventive measures than college campuses (Righi et al. 2019).

Javidi et al. (2020) conducted a large-scale quantitative study of 226 students between the ages of 15-18 on the ideas around affirmative consent (Javidi et al. 2020). They found that 21.2% of students reported sexual assault experiences. What this study concluded was that both genders of students indicated positive attitudes about affirmative consent when their beliefs in egalitarian gender roles were strong (Javidi et al. 2020). The study also presents the urgency for future studies on high school students. High school could be one way to systematically expose students to information about healthy habits such as affirmative consent in the health curriculum for the



prevention of sexual assault (Javidi et al. 2020:1106). Both case studies lack information on how high school students define consent when it involves being under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

The literature is greatly lacking where people learn consent and what it means to high school students and educators. Further research around consent and non-consent can inform educators on sexual violence (Beres 2007:160). Much of the research focuses on college students' experiences and ideas; however, high school students are at an age exploring sexuality much earlier than college. Scholarship would benefit from research that investigates what younger students believe about consent or where they begin to develop their understanding of consent.

## METHODS

In-depth interviews were the best method for conducting my research because they allowed me to investigate participants' experiences and thoughts about consent and education. I interviewed fifteen high school students living in Texas who were attending various public Texas high schools. Participants came from North, South, and Eastern Texas. To ensure anonymity, I have given all participants pseudonyms and use Table 1 to show demographic information to protect the sensitive population in this study.

<b>Table 1. Descriptive Traits of Participants</b>		
<b>Age</b>	<b>Participants %</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
15	33%	(5/15)
16	33%	(5/15)
17	20%	(3/15)
18	13.3%	(2/15)
<b>Sex assigned at birth</b>		
Male	46.7%	(7/15)
Female	53%	(8/15)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	33%	(5/15)
Male	47%	(7/15)
Gender Fluid	20%	(3/15)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Heterosexual	67%	(10/15)
Bisexual	13%	(2/15)
Pansexual	6.7%	(1/15)
<b>Relationship experience</b>		
Have not had a relationship	20%	(3/15)
Have been in a relationship	80%	(12/15)
<b>Race</b>		
Black	40%	(6/15)
White	27%	(4/15)
Hispanic	13%	(2/15)
Hispanic and White	6.7%	(1/15)
Black and White	6.7%	(1/15)
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Single	87%	(13/15)
In a relationship	13%	(2/15)

All participants were between fifteen and eighteen years old. Seven were males and eight were assigned female at birth. Regarding gender, five identified as women, seven as men, and three as gender fluid. Eleven of the students identified as heterosexual, one identified as bisexual, one participant identified as three (pansexual, asexual, and bisexual), and one did not ascribe to a particular sexual orientation. Thirteen of the students were single and two of them were in a relationship at the time of the interview. Six of the participants identified as Black, four as White, two as Hispanic, one as Black and White, and one as both Hispanic and White. Because the participants were mostly minors, my participants were not explicitly asked about their various levels of sexual experience but only their relationship status and if they have had a relationship before. Even though I did not ask about their level of sexual experiences some participants did share that information throughout the interview process.

I found my participants through a snowball sampling method, in which I used my social connections to reach out to parents of teenagers and asked for further referrals. Because thirteen of the participants were minors, I was also in contact with their parents to obtain consent and set up interviews. I conducted most interviews through Zoom and two of them via phone call because of technology issues. The in-depth interviews lasted between sixteen minutes and fifty-six minutes, with the average length around thirty-three and a half minutes. I began with the demographic information, which also helped to create rapport with the participant.

The nature of this study is sensitive and covers material which led to some conversations which may have been uncomfortable for my participants. The interview and environment I created with the participants was shaped by my prior knowledge of working with high school students as a sociology teacher. I tried to create a comfortable environment so they could offer their experiences and ideas around the content. I allowed them to use their discretion if they

wanted their cameras off for the interview, so around half of them were never seen by me. The COVID-19 era allowed students to become familiar with online video calls and virtual teaching. This created access to students all over Texas for me to interview and allowed them to be comfortable talking through the online platform.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide located in Appendix B and C. I asked basic questions about their time in high school, participation in school clubs and activities, and the specific location of their school. I continued into their beliefs about healthy relationships, consent, and ended the interview asking them about the #metoo movement and how much they share social movement content on social media.

The analysis was derived from the experiences and ideas that were presented to me in the interviews. To best transcribe the interviews, I used transcription software. Once I transcribed all the interviews, I started coding. I used the flexible coding method that Deterding and Waters (2018) described. For example, I started with reading and creating general codes for the first three interviews using my questions from my interview guide. I created the descriptive codes that I would use as the basis of all my coding for the interviews. The next step I did in my coding was to open the interview transcript, the audio, and a memo word document. I started to apply the descriptive codes using track changes and comments in Microsoft Word. As I read and listened, themes started to spring up through the similarities in the participants answers. I simultaneously add the themes to my coding list. To create these themes, I followed principles of grounded theory allowing for the data to present the major themes to me as I read and coded rather than focusing on my hypothesis or questions (Glasser and Strauss 1967). Once I had a finalized set of codes, I then applied themes to all my interview transcripts.

## RESULTS

For a quick look at the results, Appendix D has a data table with the themes, percentages, and the number of participants who communicated the themes.

### *Consent as a Verbal "Yes" or Permission*

When asking the students to explain what sexual consent means to them, 93% of the participants gave a definition that would align with affirmative consent. More specifically, eight participants explicitly used the phrasing a “Verbal Yes.” Five participants explained that it was the process of getting permission from someone else to do something sexually. While one participant, Joseph, age 16, explained that it was both acquiring their permission and a verbal "yes." Hugo, age 17, and a senior at a northern Texas high school explained that consent is being fully aware and in control of yourself. Hugo shared his thoughts, “Someone verbally stating ‘yes’ to a certain request by somebody else. It's a...definite ‘yes.’ It's being clearly said.” Ryan who is 18, took his definition further and shared his experiences asking for consent every time he and his girlfriend are intimate: “Yes. Every sexual time. I'm very clear. Can we do this? Are you okay with this?” Ryan described explicitly asking each time to make sure that his girlfriend is comfortable participating in their sexual relations.

Some participants described the definition of consent as gaining someone else's permission. One person would ask in a way that the other would have to respond with their agreement to engage in the sexual activity. This was not specifically looking for a "yes", but more the idea that permission needs to be granted. Madeline, a 15 year old, who described recently ending her relationship with a boyfriend who did not listen to her boundaries, explains her ideas around consent:

Consent is like someone's permission to touch your body or like anything involving [your body]. I feel like consent is like letting the person know...It's like a pact, like a promise to me. Because whenever I'm giving you my consent, you have to make sure that you know that I have that consent. And sometimes I feel like it's the most important thing ever...It's someone saying...that you can. You have permission to do something to them.

93% of the participants, understood and practiced consent being a verbal “yes” or gaining permission from their partner to engage in sexual activities. Though, for the 80% who had been in relationships before, they made it clear that they at least talked about boundaries once, and then they did not have to ask again, “they knew what was about to happen.” When asking how they knew, student respondents said they could tell with body language.

Hugo: Their body language. I would look at their body language and also if they're clearly saying a “yes” or a “no” to certain things, just like how... I could basically read their body language and that tells you the whole everything you need to know  
Erica: what are some examples of actual body language that people do?  
Hugo: if someone feels comfortable, they're not scared, they're not looking around. They're just like comfortable in general with you.

When trying to get Hugo to explain what he meant by body language, he described a vague definition of social cues.

### *Consent Should Be Communicated by Both Partners*

When trying to understand the sexual scripts between partners, the students shared information with me about who is responsible for communicating the verbal "yes." Because most participants who identified as heterosexual or bisexual, but having been in heteronormative relationships, this allowed for further reflection on gender roles in the sexual scripts. Seven of the participants believed that consent should be granted by both partners. The stories some participants shared with me showed that the woman tends to be the one who brings up or gives consent. Aaliyah, 16, shares her insight:

I think both genders should be able to bring that up, and it shouldn't be something that's kept in the dark... 'cause you don't know how the other person is feeling. You can't read nobody's mind. So, I feel like both genders should be bringing that up... bringing that conversation up so that when it happens, they're not awkward and weird around each other. So... I feel like both genders should be able to openly have that conversation.

However, many participants also emphasized the importance of woman offering consent; for example, Hugo said, "I see it's usually the girl for the most part, since they're the ones who usually have to consent. But, I mean, they're usually the ones who talk about it, I guess." From Hugo's experience with dating or casual encounters he explained that girls usually are the ones that need to give their consent. Other participants agree with Hugo's thinking that women are the ones who should giving the verbal "yes" or "no," and the men are the ones typically asking. Some participants explained that boys play dumb or act stupid, so they do not have to take responsibility for not gaining consent. Chloe, 15, gives her opinion when asked who talks about consent more; "Females?! We are like smart and boys, they are so ignorant. They know they'd be the main problem. They'd be the main ones doing stuff without consent, but they still going to play dumb. We'll bring it up and they'll feel attacked or something." From a verbal "yes," to gaining permission, the interviewees feel that the responsibility lay in the words and actions from the women.

### *Consent Under the Influence*

Providing consent and ideas around consent while under the influence of drugs and alcohol is a topic of debate in both the legal system as well the general population. The participants in this study overwhelmingly concluded that being under the influence of alcohol and drugs led to people not being able to give consent. Deja, 16, explained the idea clearly:

Getting a mutual yes out of somebody for me...consent. You can't manipulate them into giving you a yes. You can't make them give you a yes. And umm, when it just comes to consent, it has to be mutual. Both of you have to be in the right mindset. You can't talk to them when they're high or drunk or none of that because that's not consent. Even if they say yes, they're under the influence. They're not in the right mindset to make those decisions.

Many participants believed that drug and alcohol played a factor in accusations of assault or rape. They shared their beliefs about how it is important to make sure your partner is not under the influence. They also mentioned that alcohol and drug use is very common among their peers, without openly saying they participate in that atmosphere as well. Raymond, a 16 year old junior at a southern Texas high school described his views on alcohol and sex and a situation where he was at a party with his friends and stopped a guy from a "possible situation" with a drunk girl.

It's very sketchy. If someone is intoxicated and someone's high or someone's going through where they're not fully there, like 100% clear and can make a decision for themselves. I mean, if they can't drive a car, they can barely stand up, they definitely can't answer you with a complete full answer. I mean, I've seen instances where girls at parties have kind of like...they've been like not abused isn't the word, but they've been tried to be taken control over, you know what I mean? They're in spot of vulnerability. And the dude's like, 'oh, you want to come over to my house?' And it's like, no, that's not okay. And I've interacted [interrupted] instances where people have just had to stop that.

He then described that he has seen his friends or classmates use alcohol to get girls to sleep with them. Raymond explains, "But sometimes people are in down bad situations, and...they are at parties, and they see someone like that...and I think most guys understand that. It's like. No." The point he is making is that some students are so desperate or "down bad" that they use alcohol consumption and parties to bait potential partners into sleeping with them. Throughout the interview, Raymond continued to use the terms "having morals," or "I'm a good guy," to reiterate there is a moral question when participating in risky teen behavior around sex and alcohol.



## *Learning About Consent: Social Media*

Thirteen out of fifteen participants named TikTok and Instagram as the major platforms where they have learned the rules of consent. Jacob, a 17 year old senior with no experience in a committed relationship explained how he knew what consent was because of a video he saw directly on TikTok called “ConsenTea,” which compares asking someone for sex the same way we ask someone if they would like a cup of tea. He mentioned that the video made an easy comparison, which allowed him to remember and learn more about what he believes consent means.

When it comes to consent on social media, many participants explained how the short videos were informative or exposed people’s experiences with sexual assault or rape. A freshman at a large north Texas high school, Xavier, age 15, explained how students use Instagram to share their personal stories, but the more informative content is shared through TikTok from random people:

Xavier: I've seen a little bit of both. Most of the time it's more informative, but then sometimes there's, like, people sharing their stories and then there's sometimes people, like I've seen people at [large high school] be exposed for sexual assault on Instagram.

Erica: Like a girl is saying what a guy did?

Xavier: Yeah. And then like on TikTok, it's not so much like, personal stories...most of the time it's like basically saying what's okay and what's not okay. Sometimes it may come off a little aggressive, but honestly, sometimes I feel like that's necessary.

From snippets and clips of exposing people for what they have done to others, to informational videos explaining what consent is and how it is defined, there is also a dark side to the social media content around consent. Participants shared that educational material as well as some “dark stuff” was shared on their social media. Examples on how to gaslight women into

sex, images disrespecting people, and rape joke memes, were a few things that participants stated they have seen on the internet. Ryan, 18 years old, was very forthcoming with what he has seen in the past. He explained, “I see bad stuff, like people not giving consent. It's like videos of people being bad if that makes sense.” The participants were all very open about what they see and what they repost when it comes to consent or content around healthy relationships. When it came to inquiring about how active they are on social media around reposting content related to consent, 100% of the women or nonbinary students were open to resharing about consent on their social media platforms. They could recall times where they had shared posts in the past. The men said they see posts about consent but stick to reposting or resharing content around sports or jokes.

In the interview protocol, I asked about the #metoo movement; specifically, if they had heard of it and where they had seen the hashtag or the social movement. When asked, the students needed more follow up information from me to remember or recall what the movement was. When further prompting participants about their knowledge of the #metoo movement and social movements around consent, the answers were rooted in a basic understanding of what happened and what it means. Two students had no idea what the #metoo movement was, one student had heard about it but could not explain it back, and the other twelve students knew a little about #metoo from social media, documentaries, or books. Social media was the overwhelming mode of information for the #metoo movement for the students. However, they shared that the movement was rooted in Twitter, R Kelley, or what they watched from Netflix's documentary Athlete A. They did not mention that their school's curriculum is addressing the #metoo movement. Most of the participants are learning about consent, healthy relationships, and the #metoo movement through social media, media, and outside of school sources.

## *Learning About Consent: School*

The participants in this study expressed a lack of direct education about healthy relationships and consent in middle or elementary school. What they described as early introductions to healthy relationships or consent was rooted in the anatomy talk in elementary school or making sure people do not touch you inappropriately. As they described their middle school experiences, some remembered an extra class where staff from the district would come in and share with them about dating practices. When asked about what they learned from school, most participants said directly that they did not learn anything in high school.

Some of the participants recalled a time when they were in certain classes and the ideas of consent, rape, or healthy relationships were more organically brought up by the teacher or other classmates. For example, Darius an 18 year old, recounts a time when it came up in class:

It was my fashion design class, because we have a teacher named Ms. Milton, and one of our students was going through, like a relationship problem. They were talking it out and stuff, and she given us all types of different scenarios...That's where I heard it from..... It's kind of weird because it's probably like three or four boys in that class rest of them girls. So, they were talking about it, it was just weird.

Darius felt that it was weird the girls in the class were comfortable bringing up this conversation in a fashion class. Darius recalled this story as his only memory of someone bringing up consent in this way.

The other avenue in which the participants discussed these ideas was by finding trusted adults in classes, clubs, or sports teams to open up to. The participants who are actively involved in their school either on sports teams or clubs described times when their coaches brought up important “sensitive” topics like healthy relationships or consent. Other students described teachers they could go to for this information as “chill” and who cover topics in class that are

more “for the ‘real world’.” Aaliyah, a 16 year old, described her school hosting events for Teen Dating Violence Awareness [celebrated nationally the month of February], by producing outside materials for students to read:

They post posters in the bathroom, I’ve seen them when I go in, they’re by the dryers. They’re on the back of stalls by the sinks. So, I see them actually trying. They post posters, but we don’t have the whole program where people talk to us and stuff like that.

A few participants shared anecdotes of how the school handled sexual assault accusations. Deja, 16 years old, shared her story of a senior spreading rumors about false sexual activity between them, and the school told her because it was not on school property they would not intervene. Deja showed that she was still upset, explaining that even though the event happened a few years ago, it bothered her how the administration responded. Alex, a 15 year old, who communicated reluctance to me at the beginning of the study because of her lack of interest in relationships and sex in general, went onto describe a recent event that took place at her school. She had strong feelings about how the principal’s negligence is sending a greater message to students.

Alex: I have a story. A few months ago, there was a rumor that these two kids snuck out to the parking garage and one of the kids was sexually assaulted and they looked into it, but something that I don't think that should have been said was said. The principal said that he thought that it probably didn't happen even though they don't have much evidence one way or the other. He said that it probably didn't happen, and I know that was just to like...make the students calm down, but I still feel like that was kind of shitty because it's not certain if it did or didn't. And he was just saying that it didn't.

Erica: Why did he feel the need to say that?

Alex: I don't know.

Erica: Okay. So what does that message send to you?

Alex: It's just fucked up.

The students in general had ideas on who they could all talk to at school but made it very clear that they are not offered classes or structured engagement with the topic of consent and healthy relationships.

### *Hookup Culture: Casual Relations*

The most noteworthy finding in this study was how the participants described the nature of relationships that are happening as high school students. Twelve out of my fifteen participants had at one point in the interview process explained hookup culture and how they themselves, their friends, or classmates are actively participating in it. When asked to explain how students participate in dating and relationships, the actual phrase *hookup culture* was directly mentioned by a few students. Zoe, a 17 year old from a north Texas high school, who declared at the beginning of the interview that she is very interested in this topic and does all that she can to spread awareness to other students, took it a step further to describe what was happening at her school:

Okay, hookup culture from at least what I see is the idea that you can hook up with someone, do, like, sexual acts of any kind, and then not have it be of any feelings or relationships. You can meet up, do that, and then separate ways, and it's just something you did, it doesn't matter.

Hookup culture to the students was also described as a casual talking stage where they can be intimate and experience anything from kissing to sex. At this point, some have classified that they do not talk to others during this stage, and for other students, they are “talking” to many partners at one time.

Erica: Are you guys being intimate in that talking stage?

Aaliyah: Yeah.

Erica: Okay, so without defining your relationship, you're still being intimate?

Aaliyah: Yes.

Casual intimate relationships were talked about throughout the interview either by participants explicitly stating they have engaged in them, or that this is a common dating practice in high school. Participants communicated the idea that dating in high school is for experimenting, learning, and exploring. Madeline, a 15 year old, was very open about her past sexual and relationship experiences; she said, “Yeah, I had, like, one true boyfriend and then the others were like one night stand things. It was women.”

Not only do the participants describe the casual practice of a one night stand, when asked about where students are meeting potential partners a surprising answer came forward. “Friendship apps” were commonly brought up to describe either talking to potential partners, or using apps like Udo, Instagram, or Snapchat to find people who you may have an interest in spending time with. Aaliyah, also mentioned how students turn to hooking up casually because of social media perpetuating the idea of friends with benefits or to have fuck buddies:

[talking about what boys at her school post on social media] Quotes! Oh, my God, the quotes. That's the biggest thing ever I see all the time. The quotes. It's like people post stuff on Twitter. That's where they be getting it from. Twitter, Facebook, but whoever, they'll screenshot it and they'll put it on Instagram, it's kind of just spreads from there. And the quote will read "F a relationship...we FB's and dip." And just whatever. And they'll be like, they'll post that, and they'll be like, yeah, that's what I'm going to start doing. Okay. So, I think a lot of it is social media.

Social media posts left Aaliyah with the idea that a casual relationship is what the boys in her grade want, perpetuating the idea of hookup culture. Aaliyah shared more stories about her friend who broke up with her boyfriend but continued to “do stuff” with him and act like she was fine with a casual fling.

## DISCUSSION

Participants offered insight into how they conceptualize consent, how social media informs their views on consent, the ways school staff address healthy relationships, and the perpetuation of hookup culture that is practiced in their high schools. Overwhelmingly, the students agreed that they need to have a verbal, uncoerced, mutual "yes" to continue into a sexual relationship. Participants expressed the importance that consent should be given by both people engaging in the sexual activity, while a few mentioned only one person needed to verbalize consent. There was also an emphasis on the role of females in getting consent and sharing information on consent. For example, males admitted to posting on social media about sports or jokes, while the females and gender fluid participants in my study were deliberately posting about consent as well as sharing information around who is communicating their consent; this may connect with larger societal expectations that women are the ones responsible for bringing up consent and making decisions around it.

Participants agreed that mind altering substances change consent, specifically alcohol. When alcohol is consumed, the participants felt there was a blurriness around what defines consent and how it is communicated. When questioning their ideas around consent and alcohol consumption, adolescents seem to be aware that it can inhibit people from fully consenting to sexual acts. Using alcohol to engage in sexual behavior or to gain access to potential partners is also practiced in this age group.

When it comes to education, there was an overwhelming sense of a lack of information from their schools. Instead, students took to social media to learn more about healthy relationships and consent. Thirteen out of the fifteen explicitly stated that social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram, was the number one resource to learn about consent. Social

media is a source of information on a lot of topics and parents grapple with what information their children have access to. There is an assumption that #metoo movement was impactful at all levels of society. However, the students overwhelmingly could not identify the importance of the movement and the changes that society made because of the #metoo movement. They only saw random posts or people perpetuating the hashtag: #metoo.

In Texas there is no law requiring the teaching of sex education, and if schools do, it must be rooted in practicing abstinence, so parents expect that schools will present that type of information. When it comes to social media, there is no regulatory body guiding the content that is shared, which as mentioned above can sometimes get “dark” or even perpetuate “rape jokes.” Students are viewing content around consent, and their parents may be uninformed as to what their children are consuming. Students shared stories about teachers or trusted adults in their lives who use their positions as leaders in the schools to bring up relationships, if students ask or if they see the need. It seems that teachers and schools must create space outside of the regular curriculum and sometimes outside of classes. Unfortunately, this study also sheds light on how schools mishandle situations around assault or rape, and that is how students perceive the messages adults are sending to them.

A core finding from this study is that hookup culture is found in almost all the participants’ lives. Using dating and relationships to explore sexuality, remain non-committal, and engage in sex without a relationship came up in all the interviews. Hookup culture is prevailing earlier than research is indicating, and with a lack of education around safe and healthy practices, this could lead to unforeseen consequences.



## *Limitations*

There are a few limitations to this study. This study was rooted in sensitive material regarding consent and sexual activities. In each interview, I told participants/interviewees that I was a mandatory reporter. In making them aware that I will have to report any information that was harmful to themselves or someone else, I could have made participants hold back from sharing anecdotes or experiences. Because they were minors and I am a mandatory reporter, I did not ask the participants directly their level of sexual experience. In the preliminary stages of recruiting, when asking parents if I could interview their child about the topic consent, I had a few parents concerned about questions regarding sexual activity, and I decided to not ask explicitly. That question could have brought more depth to the interview and provided more concrete information regarding their actual experience and not what they think they would do. In retrospect, I should have asked about their sexual experience level to make this research richer.

Additionally, I identify as a woman; some participants may not have felt comfortable discussing the ideas around consent with a woman and that could be limiting to my study. Social desirability is another limitation in this study. There were multiple times where I reminded the participants that I was not looking for a specific answer. I felt that a few participants wanted to please me and give me what they knew would be a moral answer to a few questions. I clarified and reiterated during the interview to a few participants because I could sense that they were trying to find the “right answer,” rather than what they believed or practiced. The snowball sampling method may be a limitation here as well. The small sample size I interviewed may have had social network effects with selection on similar traits for a few participants. With a small pool of participants that could impact the phenomena reported here. There were a few participants who knew I contacted them through their parents which could have also impacted

their forwardness with information, either thinking I knew their parents or would tell their parents their answers, even if I expressed that this study is confidential. The full scope of perspectives may be missed in this study because those with less socially acceptable ideas may not want to take part in a study of this nature.

Future studies could expand the methodology to include aspects of participant journaling, or other means to track what students practiced. They could also focus on students from different age ranges, and different school settings such as homeschooling, private, and public schools.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides important information on how high school students are conceptualizing consent, learning about consent on social media, and taking part in hookup culture. This research reinforces what Jozkowski et al. (2014) found among college aged students' definitions and conceptualization of consent. High school age students know how to explain consent and the importance of verbal consent. Almost all studies about consent are on college students and this research demonstrates the importance of looking at consent earlier in adolescence. Further, Texas is an interesting case study because of its statewide lack of sex education and the emphasis on abstinence. Students are not required to attend the classes on healthy relationships and abstinence plus programs, and students are suffering the costs. This research shows that while teachers and coaches try to fill the gap in formal curriculum, students are left to learn these vital concepts about healthy relationships on their own, often turning to social media to do so.

Most students believe both partners in a relationship must give mutual, verbal, non-coerced, affirmative consent which is in line with findings from existing research (Bedera 2021, Dougherty 2015; Harris 2018, Javidi et al. 2020; Jozkowski et al. 2014; Righi et al. 2019; Willis and Jozkowski 2018). However, this research also shows that high school students have a conceptual idea and definition of consent that mirrors other studies on consent at the college level, but no further avenue to learn more about the topic. The students are left to bring up the topic on their own to trusted adults or teachers in their lives. This means that the students first must be comfortable enough to share or ask questions with the teacher to even open the conversation. Many students in Texas might not even feel comfortable bringing up their questions or experiences around consent, leaving them in the dark.

The interviews also reveal that social media is a vital platform for knowledge about consent and healthy relationships for adolescents today. Relying on various internet platforms to teach the children of Texas what they are not getting from their schools or parents could prove detrimental. The lack of prevention educational programs leaves students to self-study; this is a huge gap in their education that they are supplementing with social media. Students in Texas are not receiving comprehensive sexual education related to healthy relationships and consent. Instead, they inform themselves through social media to find out just what consent means and how to apply it in their sexual relationships. The internet and social media websites are unregulated, unfiltered platforms where information is spread and reposted. Students could be accessing information that creates unhealthy relationship practices as much as it helps them understand healthy relationship practices. Future studies could conduct a content analysis of TikTok and Instagram to confirm the content around consent that the participants mentioned (Armstrong et al. 2018). Social media social movements like #metoo have not trickled down an

awareness to our high school aged students. Participants linked the movement to something on the internet that only relates to famous people or athletes, leaving the everyday people to deal with the lack of attention. The students expressed a lack of change in their lives when it came to the #metoo movement.

Research rooted in hookup and rape culture is overwhelmingly focused on college aged people. As Lisa Wade concluded (2017) hookup culture is here, and we can embrace the consensual casual sex encounters as well as try to stop the risk of sexual violence. This leaves a gap in our research where we could be studying hookup culture in younger students. Hookup culture is practiced among high school students, and in Texas they lack education around safe and healthy practices, which could lead to unforeseen consequences. Hookup culture is starting earlier than the research is indicating, which leaves room for consent education to begin much earlier than college. High school students are having casual sex and need to learn about healthy consent practices earlier. We need more studies discussing hookup culture and practices for young adults.

Alcohol complicates consent. Consent laws find it difficult to define consent when mind altering substances are consumed. High school students have a hard time dealing with peer pressure when it comes to drugs and alcohol, and there may be a lack of understanding of the laws or even the correct response to sexual advances when substances are consumed, which could leave a generation without a greater understanding of the law. Participants stated that students use alcohol to get potential partners to sleep with them, emphasizing the need for preventative education around alcohol and sex for high school students.

With a case study of high schools in Texas, this research revealed some of the drawbacks of no sex education when it comes to adolescents and consent. Participants overwhelmingly felt that schools did not provide information on healthy relationships and consent. Students deserve comprehensive sex education tailored to the cultural practices of the youth today (Lindberg et al. 2021). To rectify this, parent groups could request that the curriculum move from abstinence only education to comprehensive sex education in proactive, preventative measures rooted in consent. Schools could spend time creating awareness events and messages that promote sex positive and consent explanations to their students. Schools could also train faculty and staff on how to respond to situations regarding consent between students. Parents should be informed on what their students are consuming and should create more open conversations with their children around healthy relationships and consent practices. The future of consent work needs to be a catalyst for change in our schools, families, and society.

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## APPENDIX A. TEXAS LAW CODE

Under Texas law, sexual assault "without the consent" of the other person arises when:

- (1) the actor compels the other person to submit or participate by the use of physical force, violence, or coercion;
  - (2) the actor compels the other person to submit or participate by threatening to use force or violence against the other person or to cause harm to the other person, and the other person believes that the actor has the present ability to execute the threat;
  - (3) the other person has not consented and the actor knows the other person is unconscious or physically unable to resist;
  - (4) the actor knows that as a result of mental disease or defect the other person is at the time of the sexual assault incapable either of appraising the nature of the act or of resisting it;
  - (5) the other person has not consented and the actor knows the other person is unaware that the sexual assault is occurring;
  - (6) the actor has intentionally impaired the other person's power to appraise or control the other person's conduct by administering any substance without the other person's knowledge;
  - (7) the actor compels the other person to submit or participate by threatening to use force or violence against any person, and the other person believes that the actor has the ability to execute the threat;
  - (8) the actor is a public servant who coerces the other person to submit or participate;
  - (9) the actor is a mental health services provider or a health care services provider who causes the other person, who is a patient or former patient of the actor, to submit or participate by exploiting the other person's emotional dependency on the actor;
  - (10) the actor is a clergyman who causes the other person to submit or participate by exploiting the other person's emotional dependency on the clergyman in the clergyman's professional character as spiritual adviser;
  - (11) the actor is an employee of a facility where the other person is a resident, unless the employee and resident are formally or informally married to each other under the Texas Family Code; or
  - (12) the actor is a health care services provider who, in the course of performing an assisted reproduction procedure on the other person, uses human reproductive material from a donor knowing that the other person has not expressly consented to the use of material from that donor.
- Texas Code Ann. §22.011(b).

## APPENDIX B. DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

ADVISEMENT TO STUDENTS: Understand that if you disclose any information to me that includes someone hurting you, hurting yourself, or someone else, I am required to report it.

Throughout this interview, please speak in general terms, and try not to use people's names.

Interview Questions Students:

1. Can you share your ideas about what dating or having a relationship in high school looks like?
  - a. Can you describe the dating practices that most students engage in at your school?
  - b. Where do couples hang out? How do you meet the people you are interested in?
2. Can you share with me a little about yourself and your sexuality and gender identity?
3. Are you currently in a relationship? Serious or casual?
  - i. *Serious meaning you both have exclusively defined your relation and/or casual meaning that you may be friends that partake in sexual activity without defining a relationship.*
  - a. If so, can you tell me how it is going, how long have you been together?
    - i. How did you meet?
  - b. If not, can you tell me about your last relationship?
    - i. Length?
  - c. If you have never been in a relationship, could you explain why?
4. Describe for me what a healthy relationship is to you.
5. Can you explain to me what consent means when it comes to sex or sexual activities?
6. Can you describe how you learned about sexual consent?
  - a. What classes? Your parents? Friends? Media? Internet?
    - i. Can you share with me a specific memory of a conversation you had around defining what consent means?
  - b. How did you react to learning about consent?
    - i. Was it uncomfortable? What would have made it less awkward?
  - c. What do you think could be a better way to learn about consent?
    - i. Required school classes? Materials for parents? Etc.
7. Thinking back in your relationships or friendships, how comfortable are you at voicing your boundaries?
  - a. Are you comfortable speaking up about what you are okay or not okay with when it comes to beginning sexual activity with someone?
  - b. In what ways have you made your partner feel comfortable to share their feelings and boundaries with you? Can you explain some examples?
  - c. If this conversation does not happen, why do you think that is?
    - i. How do you feel when you have not communicated those boundaries?
8. From what you have experienced in relationships, friendships, or what you have learned from friends, who initiates the consent conversation?
  - a. Do you feel comfortable starting the conversation around consent?

- i. Can you share an example of how you would initiate this conversation?
- ii. Is it awkward to stop and ask for consent or boundaries?
- b. In your opinion, which gender is responsible for leading the conversation and/or voicing if they consent or not? Why?
- c. Do you think gender roles are changing? If so, how?

(IF NO CONVERSATION AROUND CONSENT)

- c. If you have never had a conversation around consent, can you explain some nonverbal cues that you give or see from your partner that shows they or you agree?
9. In your experience what gives you the idea that your partner is consenting or not?
    - a. Body language and nonverbal cues?
      - i. How do you show that you are giving consent? Examples or stories
      - ii. How do you show refusal to give consent? Examples or stories
  10. What is your opinion regarding sexual consent, when alcohol, drugs, or mind altering substances are consumed by one person or both?
    - a. How did you come to these beliefs when substances are involved?
    - b. Thinking about your high school in general, do you think other students feel the same way as you about consent when alcohol is involved?
  11. Can you describe for me the beliefs or ideas your classmates have around sexual consent?
  12. Can you describe how your school sends messages about healthy relationships, consent, or topics around dating?
    - a. What classes do they specifically address these issues?
    - b. Are their clubs or programs they put on? Have you attended any? What was it like?
  13. In what ways have your schools addressed gender roles or stereotypes?
  14. When I say the term #metoo, what comes to mind for you?  
(If they do not know what it is with that title, explain the Twitter movement, women's marches, Cosby, Weinstein, etc.?)
    - a. What do you think the high school students know about the #metoo movement?
    - b. Where have you learned about the #metoo movement?
    - c. Have you participated in the movement in the last few years?
      - i. Social media posts? Rallies or protests?
    - d. Have you experienced anything where you believe the #metoo movement opened your eyes to other topics?
  15. Is there any other information you want me to know about your ideas around consent and healthy relationships for high school students?
  16. Is there anything else I can learn from your perspective on consent?

APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Q1 What is your birth date?

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Q2 Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these?

- Yes (1)
- None of these (2)

Q3 Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q5 What is your relationship status?

- Single
- In a long term relationship
- In a casual relationship
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q6 Do you identify as...

Heterosexual

Homosexual

Bisexual

Asexual

Pansexual

Transsexual

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q7 Do you have friends or classmates that would be willing to meet with me?

Name:

Contact info:



APPENDIX D. RESULTS TABLE

<b>Table 2. Results and Percentages of Participants' Answers.</b>		
<b>Results</b>	<b>Percentages</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Affirmative consent	93%	(14/15)
<i>Consent as a verbal "yes"</i>	47%	(7/15)
<i>Consent as permission</i>	33%	(5/15)
<i>Consent as "yes" and permission</i>	13%	(2/15)
<b>Consent communication</b>		
Consent should be communicated by both partners	46%	(7/15)
Consent by women	46%	(7/15)
<b>Consent under the influence</b>		
Cannot gain consent when under the influence	87% no cannot consent when drunk	(13/15)
<b>Learning about consent</b>		
Learning about consent: social media	87% TikTok, Instagram, Youtube or Reddit	(13/15)
Learning about consent: school	80% did not learn about it in high school	(12/15)
	13% had a teacher talk about it in a class	(2/15)
<b>#metoo Movement</b>		
knowledge of #metoo movement	80% yes	(12/15)
	20% no	(3/15)
<b>Hookup culture</b>		
Hookup culture: casual relations	80% said they themselves, their friends, or classmates participate in casual sex and hookup culture	(12/15)
Note: Percentage refers to the percent of interviewees who mentioned this theme at least once in the interview.		