Defining Sexual Consent: the Role of Rape Myth Acceptance and Identification of Nonconsensual Sexual Experiences

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The complexities surrounding real-life sexual consent negotiations make it difficult for undergraduate college students to have a clear understanding of how to conceptualize, communicate, and interpret sexual consent. Certain factors may play a role in how individuals understand consent, such as the endorsement of rape myths (e.g., it is not rape if the victim does not fight back), and how individuals identify previous sexual experiences. This study examined how undergraduate college students define sexual consent and the role of rape myth acceptance, nonconsensual sexual experience (NSE) history, and NSE identification. A total of 1081 undergraduates completed online measures of NSE history and rape myth acceptance, then defined "sexual consent" in their own words. Text analysis revealed eight themes of consent definitions: Substances, Sexual Violence, Nonverbal Communication, Freely Given, Ongoing, Comfort, Permission, and Sexual Activity. Multiple linear regression models with gender covariates found that higher rape myth acceptance was significantly associated with less prominent discussion of the Freely Given theme and more prominent discussion of the Permission theme in consent definitions. College students who did not identity their NSEs with sexual violence labels also had significantly higher rates of rape myth acceptance than identifiers. Students with a narrow understanding of what sexual violence entails (i.e., higher rape myth acceptance) may be less likely to understand the nuances of consent, such that it should be "freely given." Targeting rape myth acceptance may be a critical component in the development of sexual violence prevention and consent education programs.

Nonconsensual sexual experiences (NSEs) are a major public health concern on college campuses, given that approximately one in five women experience sexual assault or attempted sexual assault (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017). NSEs have been defined as any form of sexual activity that involves a lack of consent and/or the use of coercion, manipulation, abuse of power, incapacitation, threats, force, and/or violence (Koss et al., 2007). High rates of NSEs have prompted universities to reexamine their sexual assault prevention policies and educational efforts. In response, many colleges and universities have adopted policies focusing on affirmative consent (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). The concept of affirmative consent first appeared in 1990, when students at Antioch College developed a mutual sexual consent policy. This policy required, among other things, that all Antioch students obtain consent from their partners prior to engaging in any sexual contact and before proceeding to the next level of sexual intimacy, unless the sexual activity was mutually initiated (Antioch College, 1990). In 2014, California lawmakers were among the first to pass legislation that established that, for a sexual encounter to be considered consensual, it must be "voluntary, affirmative, conscious, agreement to engage in sexual activity, that it can be revoked at any time, that a previous relationship does not constitute consent, and that coercion or threat of force can also not be used to establish consent" (California Legislative Information, 2014). These policies provided a framework for how to educate students about the importance of communicating sexual consent. Affirmative consent policies, however, fail to elaborate on what counts as consent and how individuals may establish sexual consent (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016).

There are many complexities surrounding sexual consent that affirmative consent policies do not cover. For example, most existing affirmative consent policies specify that a "yes" can be conveyed either verbally or nonverbally. However, they do not specify what nonverbal actions count as a "yes," exactly. Jozkowski et al. (2014) found that college students considered dressing in revealing clothing, consuming alcohol, going home with someone, and flirting as potential nonverbal indicators of sexual consent. Given that these behaviors do not indicate one's agreement to sexual activity, these results suggest that some people hold inaccurate beliefs about the behaviors that indicate consent.

There are also situations where even an explicit, verbal "yes" is not consensual if the person was coerced into agreeing or was in a state, such as intoxication, in which they cannot make an informed decision. There are several instances such as these where negotiating sexual consent between two people is more complicated than a yes or no. Consent is much more nuanced and more research is needed to understand how sexual consent is interpreted and practiced (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). Existing research on how college men and women conceptualize, communicate, and interpret sexual consent is severely lacking (Jozkowski et al., 2014). Further understanding of factors contributing to how young adults define consent will be an important contribution in enhancing interventions to reduce campus sexual violence.

Sexual Consent

Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) defined consent as the "freely given verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity" (p. 259). This definition emphasizes the key dimensions of consent as both inward (voluntary willingness) and outward (communication to another person) manifestations. While this may seem like a straightforward concept, there are many nuanced issues that raise difficult questions. What

counts as giving consent? Are there situations in which it is reasonable to assume someone's consent or situations where even an explicit "yes" should not be interpreted as consent?

Given how convoluted consent can be, it is perhaps not surprising that many college students do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes sexual consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). College students have varied interpretations of what constitutes sexual consent and how and when consent should be communicated (Jozkowski et al., 2014; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). In previous studies in which college students were asked to provide a definition of consent, almost all were able to do so (Beres, 2014; Humphreys, 2004; Jozkowski et al., 2014). Out of context, the students' definitions seemed to be influenced by legal definitions and/or affirmative consent policies, reflecting the idea that consent is mutual agreement made without the impairment of drugs or alcohol. Their abstract definitions, however, did not match their expressions of consent in real-life situations. (Beres, 2014; Jozkowski et al., 2014). In fact, some particpants believed that consent did not apply to their relationships any longer because they did not explicitly request sex from each other (Beres, 2014). Humphreys (2004) found that young adults are divided on the necessity of establishing consent using explicit, verbal communication. Women were more likely than men to stress the importance of consent and preferred a more explicit approach to obtaining it. Individuals without sexual intercourse experience, compared with those with intercourse experience, also expressed more preference toward obtainment of explicit consent (Humphreys, 2004). These findings indicate gender differences in consent negotiation preferences as well as the possibility that sexual experience influences attitudes toward sexual consent.

Several factors, including the type of sexual behavior, relationship status, gender, and context affect the communication of consent (for a review, see Muehlenhard et al., 2016). When

communicating consent, gender norms lead young adults to report ascribing to traditional sexual scripts (i.e., a set of cultural guidelines for appropriate sexual behavior and how to progress in a sexual encounter; Gagnon & Simon, 2009). For instance, Jozkowski and Peterson (2014) found that participants indicated it was the male partner's responsibility to initiate sexual contact and to determine consent from the female partner. This research also indicated that there is a normalization of men initiating sexual activity through aggressive means and reports from male participants of bypassing consent through deception.

There has been a great deal of research examining the communication of sexual consent and factors affecting the communication of consent between young adults (for a review see Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). For example, college students report communicating consent using nonverbal cues more often than verbal cues (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). The use of ambiguous, nonverbal cues to communicate and interpret consent places even well-intentioned individuals at risk for misreading their partners' sexual consent cues. The presence of contextual factors, such as alcohol intoxication, having engaged in previous sexual relationships, and gendered stereotypes may also influence how someone interprets or communicates sexual intent (Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). One major factor in why understanding consent is so complex is tied to the acceptance of myths about what counts as rape or a nonconsensual experience.

Rape Myths

Rape myths were originally defined by Burt (1980) as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Some examples of rape myths that Burt identified include that women 'ask for it,' by the way they dress and act, and can resist a rapist if she truly wants to. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) later described rape myths as generally false

yet widely and persistently held attitudes and beliefs that lead to the denial and justification of male sexual aggression against women. For example, if a perpetrator believes that it is not rape unless the woman has bruises or marks, then they may perceive that it is acceptable to force themself onto women as long as they do not use a high level of physical violence (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). Rape myths commonly serve to shift responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim (Burt 1980). Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) identified several rape myths that are assayed in their established scale, the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS-SF; Payne et al., 1999), that blame the victim for behaving in ways that invite rape. Some examples include dressing in certain ways (e.g., "a woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex."), by being intoxicated (e.g., "if a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting this get out of control"), or by "teasing" men (e.g., "A woman who 'teases' men deserves anything that might happen"). Other myths blame victims for not reacting appropriately during the rape (e.g., "When women are raped, it is often because the way they said 'no' was ambiguous"); (IRMAS-SF; Payne et al., 1999, p. 49-50).

Rape myths that blame the victims of NSEs instead of the perpetrators encourage the idea that victims actually "wanted it," regardless of not having given clear consent to all sexual activities (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Certain rape myths also suggest that women are responsible for giving consent and thus, males have less responsibility to obtain it (Shafer, Ortiz, Thompson, & Huemmer, 2017). Rape myth acceptance was found to be related to less positive attitudes about consent and a lack of perceived behavioral control to engage in sexual consent communication (Kilimnik & Humphreys, 2018). Challenging these ideas is important because rape myth acceptance is a risk factor for sexual violence perpetration (Tharp et al., 2013) due to

the association of rape myths with a lower ability to effectively interpret complex consent scenarios (Shafer et al., 2017). The relationship of rape myth acceptance with misconceptions about how consent should be negotiated has led to the examination of the role rape myths play in how people understand sexual consent and NSEs.

NSE History and Identification

Due to the prevalence of rape myths, many individuals with NSE histories have been exposed to false beliefs and these ideas affect how survivors conceptualize their own experiences. (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004 2011). Peterson and Muehlenhard (2011) found that 55% of rape survivors did not identify their experience with the rape label because their NSEs did not match their script of what rape looks like. For instance, many women did not identify their NSEs as rape because the perpetrator did not match their image of who a perpetrator is, such as when the perpetrator was their boyfriend or an acquaintance. There was also less identification of NSEs as rape if their own behavior prior to the incident (flirting, kissing, drinking, etc.) did not match their script of victim behavior (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). Studies have found that women only identify their NSEs with sexual violence labels if they fit the stereotypical "rape script," such as including elements of force, violence or threats, if they had physically resisted, and if they had not been drinking (Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996; Littleton, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2008; Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013).

LeMaire, Oswald, and Russell (2016) found that greater rape myth acceptance predicts denial of one's own NSEs as sexual violence experiences. For example, rape survivors who did not fight back and also endorsed the rape myth that it is not really rape unless the woman physically resists, were less likely than other survivors to identify their NSE as rape (LeMaire et al., 2016; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). Additionally, women who held the belief that women

who were "sexually teasing" deserved to be raped *and* perceived their own behavior to be sexually teasing were also less likely to identify their NSE as rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). The degree to which an individual accepts rape myths is associated with a lack of identification of one's own NSEs with sexual violence labels such as rape, suggesting misperceptions of how lack of consent is depicted. Indeed, individuals apply their personal scripts of sexual violence to interpret their own sexual experiences, which can lead to high rates of non-identification (Wilson & Miller, 2016). When an individual has a NSE but does not identify their experience with sexual violence labels, they may adjust their sexual scripts to add this particular experience and expand their misconception of what a consensual experience should resemble.

Conclusions

Prior research shows that the meaning and communication of sexual consent is complex. When partners obtain consent to engage in a sexual encounter, their communication often follows a sexual script in which an actual verbalization of consent to sex is largely absent. People's rape myth acceptance and their interpretations of past sexual experiences which make up their sexual scripts, all influence how college students conceptualize consent. Prior research, however, fails to assess the direct relationship rape myth acceptance has on how individuals define sexual consent. There is also no research to our knowledge that explores rape myth acceptance as a mediator of the relationship between consent definitions and the identification of NSEs. The current study will examine how undergraduate students understand sexual consent by assessing their own definitions of consent. Additionally, the study will examine how rape myth acceptance and the identification of NSEs relate to sexual consent definitions.

Methods

Design Overview

Undergraduate students were recruited from an introductory psychology course. Participants completed an online assessment of NSE history and rape myth acceptance, then responded to an open-ended question asking them to define "sexual consent" in their own words. Participants were grouped into those with NSE history who identify with sexual violence labels (e.g., sexual assault, sexual abuse, rape) (identifiers), those with NSE history who do not identify with these labels (non-identifiers), and those with no NSE histories. Groups were based on responses to the Nonconsensual Sexual Experiences Inventory, which measured NSE history and identification (NSEI; Kilimnik, Boyd, Stanton, & Meston, 2018). The two independent variables were NSE history (IV1; 0 = No NSEs, 1 = NSEs) and NSE identification among those with NSE history (IV2; 0 = non-identifiers, 1 = identifiers). The mediating variable was rape myth acceptance, which was measured by the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form (IRMAS-SF; Payne et al., 1999). The primary dependent variables were the definitions of "sexual consent" given in the open-ended question.

The study hypotheses were that (1) greater rape myth acceptance would be associated with more false or narrow definitions of consent (e.g., "saying yes or no"), (2) that identifiers would produce more accurate and realistic consent definitions and have lower rape myth acceptance than non-identifiers and those with no NSEs, and (3) that rape myth acceptance would mediate the relationship between NSE history and identification, and consent definitions.

Participants

Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology course offered at the University of Texas at Austin. The eligibility criteria were that they must be at least 18 years old and able to proficiently read and write in English. Participants consisted of 1116 undergraduate college students of all genders, with ages ranging from 18-41 years. A total of 1081 were retained due to the exclusion of 35 participants for not completing the open-ended response with at least 5 words. An additional 52 participants who provided incorrect answers on attention check items for the IRMAS-SF were excluded from analyses with the IRMAS-SF variable. The sample was primarily heterosexual (80.6%) and consisted of 683 (63.2%) women, 378 (35.0%) men, and 20 (1.9%) nonbinary gender. Just under one third of the participants reported NSE history (n = 341). Of those individuals, 32.6% identified their NSEs with sexual violence labels such as rape, sexual assault, or sexual abuse (n = 111). The complete demographic characteristics for the whole sample are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics

	Whole Sample (N = 1081)
Continuous Variables (Range)	*M (SD)*
Age (18-41)	19.30 (1.75)
Same Sex Attraction (1-5)	4.32 (1.23)
Same Sex Behavior (1-5)	4.40 (1.32)
Categorical Variables	n (%)
Gender	
Women	683 (63.2%)
Men	378 (35.0%)
Nonbinary	20 (1.9%)

Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	871 (80.6)
Bisexual	89 (8.2)
Gay/Lesbian	60 (5.6)
Pansexual	14 (1.3)
Queer	4 (0.4)
Other	43 (4.0)
Relationship Status	
Single	439 (40.6)
Committed Relationship	383 (35.4)
Casually Dating	226 (20.9)
Cohabitating	20 (1.9)
Married	6 (0.6)
Missing	7 (0.6)
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian/White	416 (38.5)
Hispanic/Latin American	264 (24.4)
Asian	225 (20.8)
African American/Black	78 (7.2)
Multiple	65 (6.0)
Middle Eastern	16 (1.5)
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian Native	5 (0.5)
Other	5 (0.5)
Years of University	
First Year	554 (51.2)
Second or Third Year	379 (35.1)
Fourth or Fifth Year	125 (11.6)
Sixth Year and Up	23 (2.1)
NSE History	
No NSEs	740 (68.5)
NSE History	341 (31.5)
Identification	
Yes	111 (32.6)
No	230 (67.4)

Procedures

Participants were invited to partake in an online research study examining how individuals with different sexual experiences (consensual and non-consensual) understand and define sex-related terms. They were asked to sign a consent form informing them of the purpose of the study as well as the risks and benefits involved. Participants were then directed to fill out a

series of surveys on their background information, sexual experiences, and their sexual attitudes and beliefs. Detailed below are the measures used in the order that they appeared to the participants in the online questionnaire. Lastly, they were directed to answer one open-ended question instructing them to define the term "sexual consent" in their own words. At the end of the study, participants were given a debriefing form detailing the study and directing them towards resources such as counseling services, sexual assault crisis centers, and hotlines. They were then compensated with one hour of research participation credit toward their introductory psychology class requirements. All procedures and materials for the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Texas at Austin for research with human subjects.

Materials and Measures

Demographics. Relevant background information was collected through a demographics questionnaire as displayed in Table 1.

Nonconsensual Sexual Experience Inventory. The Nonconsensual Sexual Experience Inventory (NSEI; Kilimnik et al., 2018, see Appendix for full questionnaire) assessed individuals' previous NSEs that occurred in their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Various forms of NSEs (e.g., vaginal and/or anal penetration, oral sex, fondling, etc.) were assessed through behaviorally descriptive items. Participants reported on different characteristics of each of their NSEs as well as their identification of their NSEs with the sexual violence labels: "sexual assault," "rape," or "sexual abuse." This measure was used to divide participants into those with and with out NSE histories, and those who did and did not identify their NSEs with sexual violence labels. Participants who reported NSEs on the NSEI and identified their NSEs with the sexual violence labels were considered identifiers, while those who reported NSEs on

the NSEI but did not identify them with the sexual violence labels were considered non-identifiers. Those who did not report NSEs on the NSEI were deemed to have no NSE history.

Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form. The updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form (IRMAS-SF; Payne et al., 1999, see Appendix for full questionnaire) is a 20 item Likert-type scale that measures general rape myth acceptance. It has items such as "If someone doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape." For each statement, scores range from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), and the scores are summed up across items for each individual. Higher scores reflected a greater acceptance of rape myths. The IRMAS-SF has been found to be a valid and reliable assessment of rape myth endorsement (Payne et al., 1999).

Open-Ended Question on Sexual Consent. There was one open-ended question that instructed participants to describe the term "sexual consent" in their own words (see Appendix). This measured their perceived definitions of sexual consent.

Text Analyses

We applied a quantitative text analysis procedure called the Meaning Extraction Method (MEM; Chung & Pennebaker, 2008) to the definitions of consent given in the open-ended response. The MEM used the Meaning Extraction Helper software to combine participants' texts and then lemmatize all words to their root (e.g., "sexual" becomes "sex"). Each word was assigned a code of 0 if they did not appear in a participant's text or a code of 1 if they did appear. These binary coded word variables went through a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) to assess which words were occurring together in order to get quantitatively derived word categories (i.e., themes). We used exploratory approaches of testing multiple numbers of themes (e.g., extract 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 themes) to see which model was the most appropriate for the data

based on model fit statistics and subjective interpretation of the meaningfulness of the themes. Based on the selected model, each of the themes were named based on the words comprising the theme. Each participant then received a score for a given theme based on the sum of which words (i.e., each word is coded 0 or 1 for their presence or absence in a participant's definition) they used in their definitions. These consent definition theme scores were used as variables in the data analyses. The range of scores and descriptive information for these themes were provided after the MEM was applied to derive the theme variables and have been calculated based off word score summing.

Statistical Analyses

Multiple linear regression models with gender covariates were used to assess the relationships between rape myth acceptance (IRMAS-SF), NSE history, NSE identification, and the each of the sexual consent themes derived from the text analyses procedure. To establish the effects between each of the variables, the mediation pathways were examined independently. First, the paths between our two independent variables and the mediator (a path) were examined, followed by the paths between our mediator and our dependent variables (b paths), and then our independent variables with the dependent variables (c paths). Two linear regressions of rape myth acceptance (mediator) on NSE history (IV1; 0 = No NSEs, 1 = NSEs) and NSE identification (IV2; 0 = non-identifiers, 1 = identifiers) were conducted to examine the a paths. Multiple linear regressions were conducted of consent themes (DVs) on rape myth acceptance to examine the b paths. A series of linear regressions were then conducted regressing the consent themes on NSE history and NSE identification to examine the c paths. Lastly, a Sobel test of mediation significance was conducted to determine the mediating role of rape myth acceptance in the relationship between our independent variables that demonstrated a significant a path

relationship with our mediator and our dependent variables (i.e., to see if rape myth acceptance significantly mediated the relationship between consent defintion themes and both (a) NSE history and (b) NSE identification).

Results

The text analyses revealed eight sexual consent themes in participants' definitions: Substances, Sexual Violence, Nonverbal Communication, Freely Given, Ongoing, Comfort, Permission, and Sexual Activity. A display of example words for each of the themes, as well as example quotes from individuals who had high scores on the themes can be seen in *Table 2*. Additionally, descriptive information for all of the variables are reported in *Table 3*.

Table 2

Descriptive Information for the IRMAS and Eight Consent Themes

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range
IRMAS-SF	1.85	0.72	1 - 5
Substances Theme	0.19	0.69	0 - 4
Sexualized Violence Theme	0.35	0.80	0 - 5
Nonverbal Communication Theme	0.15	0.49	0 - 4
Freely Given Theme	0.37	0.77	0 - 6
Ongoing Theme	0.27	0.70	-1 - 6
Comfort Theme	0.96	1.10	0 - 7
Permission Theme	0.28	1.20	-3 - 3
Sexual Activity Theme	0.34	1.03	-2 - 4

Table 3

Example Words for Each Theme & Quotes from People Who Scored High in the Theme

Themes	Example Words	Quotes from People Who Scored High
Substances	*influence, alcohol, drug*	"when people are in mutual agreement to be sexually involved...without being under the influence of alcohol or drugs" (Man, 21)
Sexualized Violence	*rape, assault, abuse*	"'Yes' is always needed for sexual consent and if sexual consent or agreement is not given then it is considered sexual assault or rape or long term sexual abuse" (Woman, 19)

Nonverbal Communication	*body, language, situation*	"Communicating using words rather than body language is a smart way to ensure that all sexual partners are comfortable with moving forward" (Woman, 18)
Freely Given	*freely, mind*, *coerce*	"Consent needs to be freely given (without pressure or any sort of influence like alcohol)...and it should be enthusiastic" (Nonbinary, 20)
Ongoing	*time*, *stop*, *continue*	"Sexual consent can be revoked at any point in the sexual interaction, and people need to understand that it means they need to stop" (Man, 18)
Comfort	*comfortable*, *aware, partner*	"In the midst of sexual intercourse, both partners must make sure that the other is comfortable with each event that is occurring" (Man, 23)
Permission	*permission, give, agreement*	"Sexual consent means when someone agrees, gives permission, or says "yes" to sexual activity with another persons" (Woman, 20)
Sexual Activity	*activity, engage, oral*	"when two individuals or more consensually engage in sexual activity, physical touch, and intimacy" (Woman, 21)

H1: Rape Myth Acceptance and Consent Themes (b path of mediation)

Multiple regression analyses across the IRMAS-SF scores and the eight themes (b paths) determined that when controlling for gender (0 = women, 1 = men), higher rape myth acceptance was associated with less prominent discussion of the Freely Given theme (β = -0.11, SE = 0.04, p = .002), and more prominent discussion of the Permission theme (β = 0.18, SE = 0.06, p = .001) in consent definitions. Visual representation of the relationships between rape myth acceptance and the Permission and Freely Given themes are depicted in *Figure 1.* Gender was significantly associated with the Permission theme (p = 0.039) and Comfort theme (p = .007),

such that women discussed Permission and Comfort slightly more than men in their consent definitions. No further significant relationships were demonstrated between rape myth acceptance and the remaining consent themes. *Table 4* depicts the full results of the regression analyses.

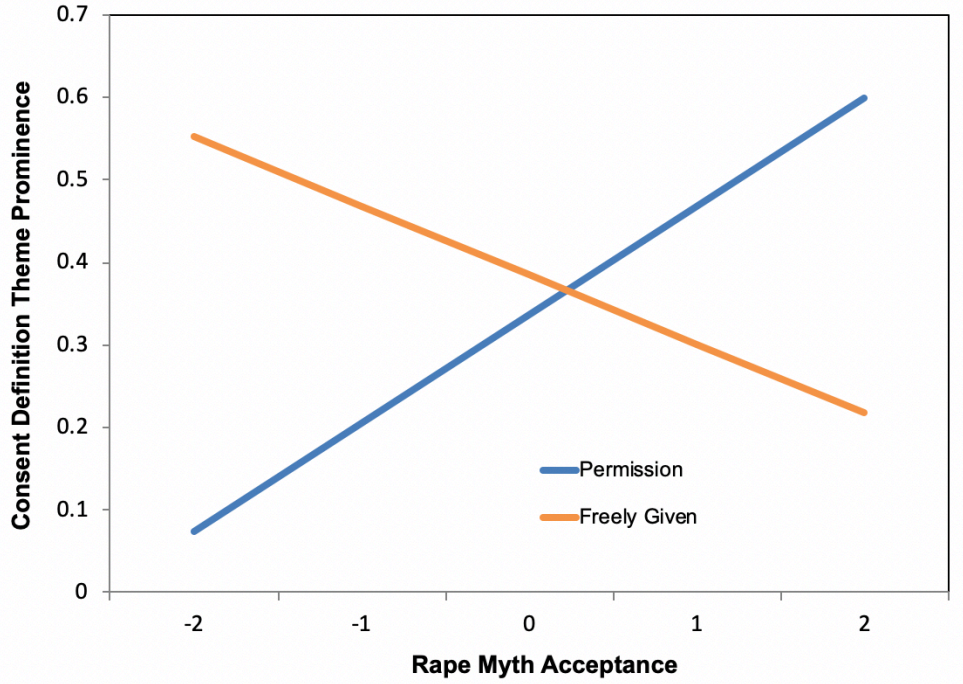

Figure 1. Relationship between rape myth acceptance and the consent themes. Higher rape myth acceptance scores were significantly associated with less prominent discussion of the Freely Given theme ($\beta = -0.11$, SE = 0.04, $p = .002$), and more prominent discussion of the Permission theme ($\beta = 0.18$, SE = 0.06, $p = .001$) in consent definitions after controlling for gender.

H2: Identification and NSE History with Rape Myth Acceptance (a path for mediation) and Consent Definition Themes (c path for mediations)

The regression analyses assessing NSE history and NSE identification as predictors for rape myth acceptance (a paths) determined a significant relationship between identification and rape myth acceptance. Specifically, non-identifiers had higher rape myth acceptance and

identifiers had lower rape myth acceptance ($p = .048$), after controlling for gender which was also significant ($p < 0.001$). There were no significant relationships between NSE history and rape myth acceptance, but gender was found to once again be a significant predictor in the model such that men have significantly higher rape myth acceptance than women ($p < 0.001$).

The c paths in our regression model determined that neither NSE history nor NSE identification had a significant relationship with the eight consent themes. Gender, however, was still significantly associated with the Freely Given ($p = .045$) and Comfort themes ($p < 0.001$) in the model with NSE history status. Full results from the regression analyses are depicted in *Table 4*.

Table 4

Path coefficients for mediation analysis

b paths: IRMAS (mediator) predicting Themes (Outcomes) with Gender Covariate

IV	Outcome	*β*	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
	Substances				
IRMAS		0.006	0.03	0.19	0.848
Gender		-0.007	0.05	-0.15	0.881
	Sexual Violence				
IRMAS		0.034	0.04	0.87	0.385
Gender		0.049	0.06	0.83	0.406
	Nonverbal				
IRMAS		-0.017	0.02	-0.69	0.488
Gender		-0.013	0.04	-0.36	0.719
	Freely Given				
IRMAS		-0.116	0.04	-3.17	0.002
Gender		-0.036	0.06	-0.65	0.514

	Ongoing				
IRMAS		-0.037	0.03	-1.11	0.227
Gender		0.004	0.05	0.08	0.935
	Comfort				
IRMAS		0.012	0.05	0.22	0.823
Gender		-0.215	0.08	-2.72	0.007
	Permission				
IRMAS		0.182	0.06	3.2	0.001
Gender		-0.177	0.09	-2.07	0.039
	Sexual Activity				
IRMAS		-0.062	0.05	-1.25	0.212
Gender		-0.003	0.07	-0.03	0.973

c paths: NSE history and Identification status (2 IVs) predicting Themes (Outcomes) with Gender Covariate

IV	Outcome	*β*	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
	Substances				
NSE Hx		-0.030	0.05	-0.65	0.513
Gender		-0.018	0.04	-0.42	0.677
	Sexual Violence				
NSE Hx		0.060	0.05	1.11	0.269
Gender		0.077	0.05	1.46	0.144
	Nonverbal				
NSE Hx		-0.017	0.03	-0.52	0.607
Gender		-0.030	0.03	-0.91	0.362
	Freely Given				
NSE Hx		0.011	0.05	0.21	0.832
Gender		-0.103	0.05	-2.01	0.045
	Ongoing				
NSE Hx		0.006	0.05	0.12	0.902
Gender		-0.026	0.05	-0.55	0.580
	Comfort				
NSE Hx		-0.085	0.07	-1.14	0.256
Gender		-0.246	0.07	-3.40	< 0.001
	Permission				
NSE Hx		-0.097	0.08	-1.19	0.233

Gender		-0.061	0.08	-0.77	0.440
	Sexual Activity				
NSE Hx		-0.098	0.07	-1.40	0.163
Gender		-0.044	0.07	-0.65	0.514
	Substances				
Identification		-0.127	0.07	-1.72	0.086
Gender		0.045	0.08	0.54	0.593
	Sexual Violence				
Identification		-0.146	0.10	-1.45	0.147
Gender		0.023	0.11	0.21	0.836
	Nonverbal				
Identification		-0.023	0.05	-0.46	0.649
Gender		-0.100	0.05	-1.76	0.079
	Freely Given				
Identification		-0.013	0.10	-0.12	0.901
Gender		-0.127	0.18	-1.09	0.277
	Ongoing				
Identification		0.016	0.09	0.18	0.860
Gender		0.099	0.10	0.97	0.331
	Comfort				
Identification		-0.178	0.13	-1.39	0.164
Gender		-0.193	0.14	-1.33	0.184
	Permission				
Identification		0.005	0.15	0.03	0.974
Gender		0.084	0.17	0.50	0.616
	Sexual Activity				
Identification		-0.143	0.13	-1.09	0.275
Gender		-0.035	0.15	-0.24	0.813

a paths: NSE history and Identification status (2 IVs) predicting IRMAS (Mediator) with Gender Covariate

IV	Outcome	β	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
	IRMAS				
NSE Hx		-0.007	0.05	-0.14	0.888
Gender		0.516	0.05	11.03	< 0.001
	IRMAS				
Ident		-0.167	0.08	-1.99	0.048
Gender		0.452	0.09	4.78	< 0.001

Full Mediation Results with Sobel Test					
	Variable	*β*	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
Outcome	Freely Given				
IV	Identification	-0.016	0.04	-0.40	0.687
Mediator	IRMAS	-0.082	0.07	-1.11	0.267
Covariate	Gender	0.007	0.11	0.06	0.950
Sobel Z = 1.17, p = 0.242					
	Variable	*β*	*SE*	*t* value	*p* value
Outcome	Permission				
IV	Identification	0.017	0.06	0.30	0.764
Mediator	IRMAS	0.089	0.10	0.85	0.397
Covariate	Gender	-0.056	0.15	-0.37	0.711
Sobel Z = -0.92, p = *0.359*					

H3: Mediation Models (Sobel test)

The Sobel test of mediation significance was conducted to assess the relationships between NSE identification and the Freely Given and Permission consent themes with rape myth acceptance as the mediator. The test demonstrated that rape myth acceptance did not significantly mediate the relationship of identification with neither the Freely Given nor Permission theme. Figure 2 depicts a visual representation of the relationships.

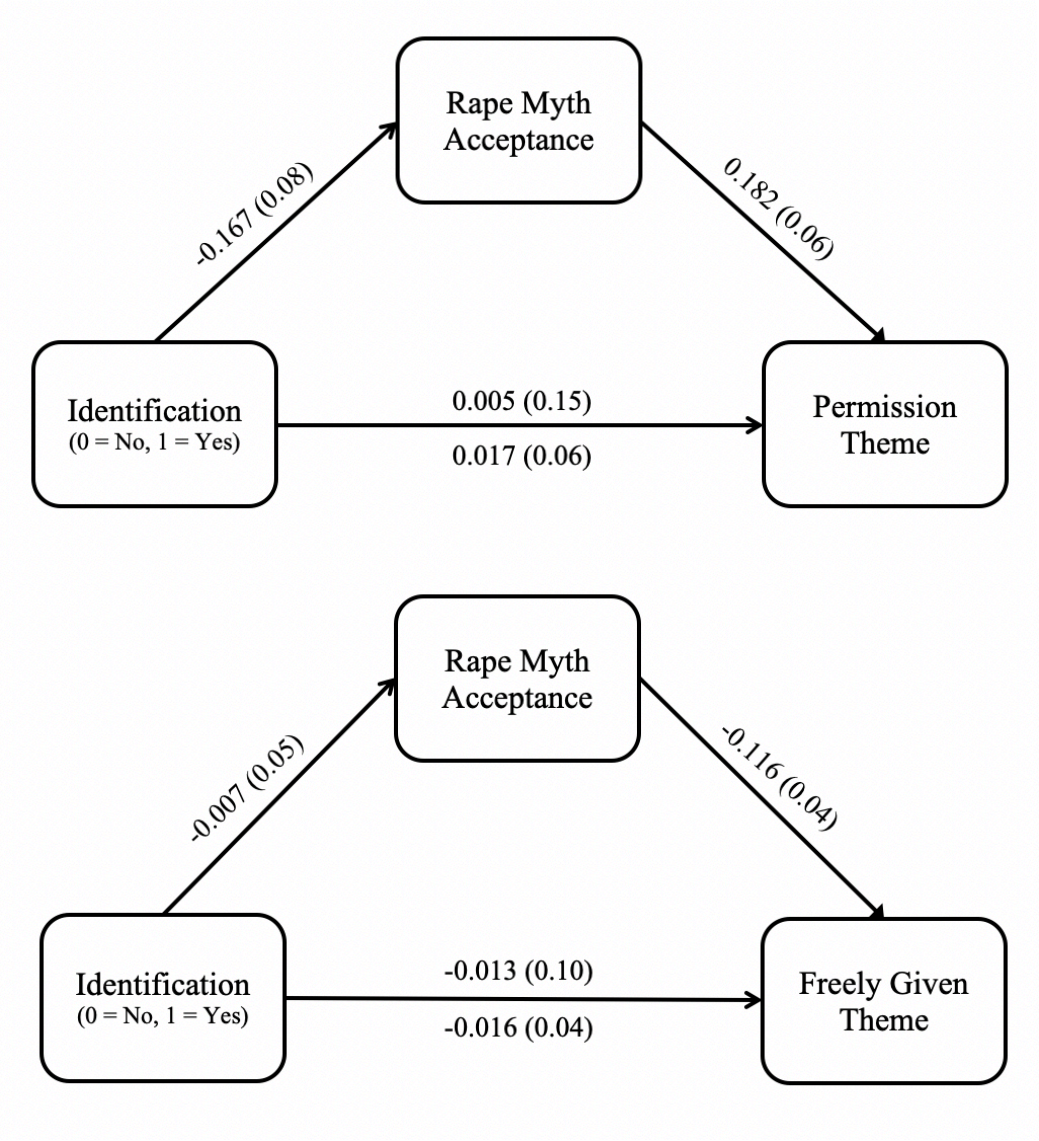

Figure 2. The Sobel test of mediation significance with rape myth acceptance as the mediator of the relationships between NSE identification and the Freely Given and Permission consent themes. The mediation was found to be non-significant.

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine the role of rape myth acceptance, NSE history, and NSE identification on how undergraduate students define sexual consent. Our findings demonstrated that higher rape myth acceptance was significantly associated with less discussion of the Freely Given theme and more discussion of the Permission theme in consent definitions. The positive relationship of rape myth acceptance with the Permission theme can be understood by considering the lack of nuance in the written definitions among participants with the highest Permission scores, (e.g., “sexual consent means when someone agrees, gives permission, or says "yes" to sexual activity with another persons”). These definitions were discrete, black and white, and depict a narrow understanding of consent as a simple verbalization of “yes.” Comparatively, the Freely Given theme captured the more nuanced components of consent, such as the emphasis on avoiding coercion and pressure. In line with our first hypothesis, the results support the rationale that college students with higher rape myth acceptance and a more narrow understanding of what sexual violence entails are less likely to define consent in more nuanced terms such as “Freely Given.” These findings are consistent with previous literature that depicted a significant association between greater endorsement of rape myths and less awareness and discussion of consent (Kilimnik & Humphreys, 2018; Shafer et al., 2017).

The study partially supported our second hypothesis. While rape myth acceptance was not associated with NSE history, participants who identified their NSEs with sexual violence labels had lower rape myth acceptance. This is in line with previous research that has found that higher endorsement of rape myths is associated with less identification with sexual violence labels due to individuals' NSEs not matching their personal scripts of what constitutes rape or sexual assault (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004, 2011).

Although not an aim of the current study, the findings also replicated prior literature that revealed gender differences in rape myth acceptance. Men in our sample had significantly higher rape myth acceptance than women, and women had more nuanced discussions of consent in their definitions than did men. The demonstrated relationships are consistent with previous research that found men to have higher endorsements of stereotypical beliefs about rape and less clear definitions of consent than women (Humphreys, 2004; Jozkowski et al., 2014).

There was a general lack of support for the relationship between NSE identification and the Freely Given and Permission consent themes, and there was no significant mediation of this relationship by rape myth acceptance. However, future research may want to consider the *interactive* role of NSE history and/or NSE identification with rape myth acceptance on consent. Future directions of this research also include replicating this study cross-culturally to examine the conceptualization of consent in non-westernized contexts. It is important to take into account the role that different cultures, religions, and sex education may play into students' understanding of sexual consent and sexual violence. Additionally, considering how these relationships may look differently in individuals of different gender-identities may be helpful. For instance, as men tend to identify their NSEs at lower rates than do women (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2016) and have more stereotypical understandings of sexual violence and consent (Humphreys, 2004; Jozkowski et al., 2014), looking at these variables in these groups separately and in the context of socialized gender theory may provide further insight into needs for program development.

An important limitation of the current study is that we cannot infer participants' definitions and understanding of consent to be directly related to their behavior in real-life sexual consent negotiations. Social desirability could have induced participants to define consent in an

idealized perspective rather than based on their own perspective. The prevalence of the sexual violence and consent in the media of late may also have skewed to individuals provided definitions of consent. Another limitation is that we did not measure participants' exposure to or education in sexual consent. As such, we cannot determine if their definitions of sexual consent and rape myth acceptance scores are an accurate representation of their own understanding of how consent operates in real life, or rather what they know from affirmative consent policy and education, and reflections of the media.

In conclusion, our findings support the rationale that rape myth acceptance plays an important role in how undergraduate students interpret and define sexual consent. Narrow understandings of what sexual violence entails are not only associated with how those with NSE histories may identify and understand their experiences, but also may impact how individuals understand the more nuanced components of sexual consent. These findings provide evidence for the necessity of targeting rape myth acceptance in sexual violence prevention and consent education.

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Appendix

Open-Ended Question

Instructions:
In this next section, you will be shown a term and then asked to define it. Please write, a minimum of three sentences, on how you understand this term and what the term means to you.

In your own words, please describe what the term *sexual consent* means to you.