Blurred Lines: Understanding the Misconceptions Surrounding Sexual Consent on Campus

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Blurred Lines: Understanding the Misconceptions Surrounding Sexual Consent on Campus

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Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

This study focuses on the understanding of sexual consent in college-aged, young adults. Past research has investigated the different layers of consent, including affirmative, internal, and external consent and the role of sexual coercion in non-consensual, assault cases. These aspects of consent are not commonly discussed in high school level sexual education classes (Walsh et al. 2019). States also have differing laws and statutes when it comes to what does and does not constitute sexual consent (Decker & Baroni 2011:1084); these are referred to as the “grey areas” of consent. These elements can make the concept of sexual consent confusing to many, as consent is much more complex than “yes means yes” and “no means no.” This study was conducted using a survey to ask Bridgewater State University students, aged 18 years or older, about their personal understanding of consent. The purpose of the study was to see which aspects of sexual consent are commonly misunderstood by students and which social factors play a role in students’ understanding of consent. After analyzing data, it was apparent that Bridgewater State University students display the most confusion surrounding the topics of intoxication, non-verbal and general external consent, range of consent, and rape defense myths. Additionally, it is clear to see that relationship status, gender identity, and students’ college of their primary major are all social factors that influence students’ understanding of consent. The information gained from this research can be used to better educate students on sexual consent and make Bridgewater State University an overall safer community.

Keywords: affirmative consent, college campus, gender inequality, objectification, sexual assault, sexual coercion, sexual consent
Introduction

“I guess you could say I “consented” by not saying yes and just letting it happen”” (Peterson & Muehlenhard 2007).

“It’s not like I was being forced into anything or that I feel unsafe, but it’s not … good. And I don’t like how I feel afterwards”” (Emba 2022).

“She kept saying, no I don't feel well, I feel sick, and she kept trying to push her hand away... She never said the word “no”... in my head, I was like, yeah, this is still fine”” (Salmin & Bali 2021).

Sexual consent is a topic that most young adults would agree they understand; however, these quotes reveal some blurred lines that appear within the subject. Consent is a confusing topic that far surpasses the commonly used mantra “no means no.” There are many circumstances regarding this subject that vary even when simply crossing a state border, as each state has their own laws and statutes that they follow (Decker & Baroni 2011). These changes make the topic of consent exceedingly difficult for young adults to grasp. Affirmative consent is now becoming the most universal consent law in the U.S., with twenty-eight states (See Appendix A) adopting this protocol (Decker & Baroni 2011). Affirmative consent is a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activities (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014). This seems to be a very black and white way of looking at things; however, there are many grey areas that affirmative consent falls short of. Some common areas of confusion explored throughout the current study are internal versus external consent, non-verbal sex cues, sexual coercion, range of consent, and intoxication. Although there are many societal factors that add to the perplexity of consent, the two most important factors shown throughout this paper are toxic masculinity and objectification. Previous research has been done to showcase the complicated nature of this topic (Armstrong et al. 2006; Decker & Baroni 2011; Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Peterson &
Muehlenhard 2007; Pugh & Becker 2018; Walsh et al. 2019). This study aims to see which aspects of sexual consent are commonly misunderstood by students and which social factors play a role in students’ understanding of consent. The information gained from this research can be used to better educate students on sexual consent and make Bridgewater State University a safer community.

The current study was completed using both quantitative research methods. Specifically, a survey was used to collect data from Bridgewater State University students. The participants of this survey were compiled through convenience sampling techniques. The purpose of the study was to see which aspects of sexual consent, if any, are commonly misunderstood by students and which social factors play a role in students’ understanding of consent. Once data was collected, it was analyzed through the statistical computer program, SPSS. After analyzing the data, the results concluded that Bridgewater State University students display the most confusion surrounding the topics of intoxication, non-verbal and general external consent, range of consent, and rape defense myths. Additionally, the findings revealed that relationship status, gender identity, and students’ college of their primary major are all social factors that influence students’ understanding of consent. This study also gave students a platform to voice their ideas for future consent education.

Literature Review

Modes of Consent

Affirmative consent.

Sexual consent is a loaded topic that many believe is common sense; however, there is more to consent than meets the eye. Many researchers believe that there are several forms of
consent, despite law enforcement only taking external expressions into consideration.

Affirmative consent is the most widely known, and legally accepted form of consent. According to California State Legislator, affirmative consent is defined as “affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity” (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014). This means that one must be actively involved in pursuing sexual advances, with either words or unwavering actions that demonstrate sexual desire. Affirmative consent must also be a continuous process and may be revoked at any point during the carnal acts (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014). Sexual activities that are enacted without affirmative consent, may be considered sexual offenses with or without notable force being used. There are currently twenty-eight states (See Appendix A) that use affirmative consent as an indicator of sexual crimes. These states “permit convictions [of sexual offenses] without a showing of force or incapacity, so long as the victims did not consent to the sexual acts” (Decker & Baroni 2011:1084). Massachusetts is not a state that uses affirmative consent, in fact they are “the only state that requires a showing of forcible compulsion without consideration of the victim’s incapacity to consent” (Decker & Baroni 2011:1086). States like Massachusetts do not accept the notion of non-consent without force.

Bridgewater State University defines consent as “a voluntary agreement demonstrated by words or actions, by a person with sufficient mental capacity to make a conscious choice to do something proposed by another, free of duress” (“BSU Student Handbook 2021-2022” 2021).

There are more aspects to consent than merely “no means no” and “yes means yes”; however, this is mainly the lesson that is taught in high school sexual education courses (Walsh et al. 2019).

Internal consent versus external consent.
There are many layers to sexual consent, one of the most important being internal consent. Internal consent is the internal thought process that influences whether a person wants to engage in sexual relations or not, it is their desire and willingness to participate in sexual activities (Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Peterson & Muehlenhard 2007; Walsh et al. 2019). This is the invisible layer of consent, which is often forgotten about, or misunderstood. Internal consent is also difficult to regulate, because “ultimately, others’ internal states are private and unknowable” (Muehlenhard et al. 2016:462). Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) explain that internal consent may not always match external consent; one may want to engage in sexual advancements, yet not consent externally, or vice versa, one may be willing to proceed with sexual transgressions regardless of desires. This idea of internal consent may also affect the way in which rape is acknowledged. A victim/survivor may have lust for an individual; however, also have reasons for not consenting (e.g., fear of catching a sexually transmitted infection).

Incomprehension of internal consent may lead people to merge wanting and consent, further fueling rape myths, such as “she wanted it” (Peterson & Muehlenhard 2016). However, “[r]ape is about the absence of consent, not the absence of desire” (Peterson & Muehlenhard 2016:85). This is why Muehlenhard et al. (2016) argues that laws and regulations must be focused on the external factors of consent. Walsh et al. (2019) contends that becoming more knowledgeable regarding each aspect of consent can better improve sexual communication among all individuals and help to reduce the high prevalence of rape myths.

External consent is another facet of consent; this is the layer that is mainly discussed during trials and lawsuits. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) argues that external consent can be split into two separate layers, verbal statements and non-verbal physical displays of consent. Unfortunately, laws regarding external sexual consent do not acknowledge social gender
expectations placed on men and women (Pugh & Becker 2018). The idea that men are the ones to pursue sexual advances puts the burden on women to accept or refuse, in turn acting as the gatekeepers of sex (Pugh & Becker 2018). These power dynamics make it easier for men to sexually coerce women, then blame the assault on misunderstanding the victim/survivor’s signals (Pugh & Becker 2018).

Verbal and non-verbal consent.

Verbal consent is explicit. An example would be someone verbally agreeing to participate in sexual activity. This form of external consent is the best legal form of consent since it is the easiest to understand. However, as Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) said, individuals’ external consent does not always match their true desires. In some cases, verbal consent may be persuaded through coercive actions (Armstrong et al. 2006). In cases such as these, although verbal consent has been given, it was not a “voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity” (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014), therefore it does not qualify as affirmative consent.

Verbal consent is less frequently used in comparison to non-verbal consent cues, especially among young adults (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Walsh et al. (2019) describes some common non-verbal cues as increased physical contact, foreplay, reciprocated advances, and no resistance to sexual advancements. The biggest issue with non-verbal consent cues is that they are up for interpretation by the other partner. Different individuals may have different ideas about which cues exhibit consent, as well as how far that consent extends (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Some may believe that having consent to one form of sexual activity automatically extends to all sexual acts, although it does not (McGregor 2005). McGregor (2005:135) compares consent to a surgical procedure, such as getting an appendix removed. Regardless of if the patient consents to getting their appendix taken out, the doctor legally cannot also remove the
patient’s kidney. It is the same principle as sexual consent. A person may feel comfortable consenting to oral sex, but not coitus. Therefore, Muehlenhard et al. (2016) suggests the use of verbal consent, as it is explicit and not up for interpretation. Factors that may contribute to the way someone interprets non-verbal sex cues, include alcohol and/or drug consumption and gender roles (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). The nuances of these two distinct forms of external consent add to the complexity of this subject.

**Sexual Coercion**

Sexual coercion is used to describe the tactical measures that are used, primarily by men, in order to convince someone to agree to participate in sexual intercourse (Pugh & Becker 2018). “Getting women drunk, blocking doors, and controlling transportation,” (Armstrong et al. 2006: 491) as well as pressuring and threatening (Muehlenhard et al. 2016) are some examples of sexually coercive devices. Pugh and Becker (2018:5) found that “78 percent of college women reported experiencing at least one tactic [of sexual coercion/manipulation].” Alcohol and/or drug intoxication is known for lowering inhibitions, which in turn makes individuals more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Perpetrators of sexual assault may attempt to get women drunk to the point of unconsciousness, so there is no resistance to sexual advancements (Armstrong et al. 2006). Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explains that in order to obtain affirmative consent, one cannot be incapacitated by alcohol or drugs. This often leads to confusion while referring to the sexual assault of college-aged students due to the scene of party culture. Drinking is highly prevalent on college campuses, specifically in fraternity houses (Armstrong et al. 2006). There are also “[s]ocial pressures to ‘have fun’” (Armstrong et al. 2006:495). These pressures generally lead to overdrinking which is highly correlated with sexual assault (Armstrong et al. 2006). Men, specifically those in fraternities, control the party scene since they have control over the party
location. They dictate every aspect of the party, from who is allowed in, to what type of alcohol and how much of it is consumed (Armstrong et al. 2006). Women invited to the parties, are expected to not only dress for the occasion, which is often based on misogynistic themes that put men in dominant roles, such as “’Pimps and Hos,’ ... ‘CEO/Secretary Ho,’ ‘School Teacher/Sexy Student,’ and ‘Golf Pro/Tennis Ho’” (Armstrong et al. 2006:489), but they are also expected to be “grateful for men’s hospitality” (Armstrong et al. 2006:490). At parties, college men are typically looking for casual sex, as this is the societal precedent set for men of this age, while women are expected to “let loose and trust their party-mates” (Armstrong et al. 2006:492). These party culture norms give rise to an unequal power dynamic – which allows men to coercively exploit women’s vulnerabilities. This “effective method of extracting non-consensual sex [through coercion] is largely invisible, which makes it difficult for victims to convince anyone – even themselves – that a crime occurred” (Armstrong et al. 2006:492). It is often this pattern, that allows perpetrators to get away with sexual assault while facing minimal, if any consequences at all (Armstrong et al. 2006).

Another form of sexual coercion is continuous verbal pressure. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explains that “women’s refusals – even those that included the word no – were perceived as something to overcome” (471). A college-aged man may ask repeatedly in order to wear his partner down since “he might assume that she will eventually give in, and he might feel justified continuing his advances” (Muehlenhard et al. 2016:460). This fallacious thinking may come from rape myths, such as the man being led on by the woman’s actions. This is increasingly worrisome, as although a woman may be explicit with her verbal display of non-consent, the man may still believe that using coercive devices to extract sex is acceptable (Koralewski & Conger 1992). The argument used most frequently in cases of rape through coercion is that it
was “merely a miscommunication” (Pugh & Becker 2018:9). Their social perception of the experience may be that the intercourse is consensual; however, according to California State Legislator, affirmative consent must be a “voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity” (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014) – which would in turn exclude consent given on the basis of coercion. Pugh and Becker (2018) explain that men can understand a refusal to sex – even non-verbal displays of non-consent, and “it is not that these men do not know what is happening, but they are deliberate in their actions” (9).

Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity is a term used to describe misogynistic traits held by men who want to display their hypermasculinity in order to prove their manhood (Corprew et al. 2014; Harrington 2021; Thompkins-Jones 2017). Hypermasculinity is an excessive showing of masculine traits such as “dominance, power, and control” (Thompkins-Jones 2017:26). A man with toxic masculinity tends to place extreme value over masculine traits and “devalues empathy, the acknowledgement of emotions, and other [feminine] traits” (Thompkins-Jones 2017:26). Corprew et al. (2014) explains that such traits are often linked to sexual aggression and an overall hostility towards women, whom they view as below them. Men who demonstrate traits of toxic masculinity tend to view women as toys and objects whose sole purpose is to pleasure men (Thompkins-Jones 2017). One theory is that toxic masculinity is socialized through the absence of an adequate father figure. Since they do not have anyone showing them how to properly demonstrate healthy masculinity, they “pursue unrealistic images of masculinity and feel a constant need to prove their manhood” (Harrington 2021:347). There is an aspect of status-seeking seen in hypermasculine college-aged men, mainly among those in fraternities (Waterman et al. 2020).
College is often viewed as a place to find yourself and create an identity of your own. It is often the first time young adults are away from their parents and have the responsibility to take care of themselves without established rules. Hunt (2018) explains that “emerging adults construct an identity, or a self, by modeling those around them and integrating the behaviors, attitudes, and values of others into their own personality” (70). This is often the case for college-aged men as they enter the college or university with their own set of beliefs and over time, these values merge with their peers (Hunt 2018). This goes hand-in-hand with the idea that people with like-minded views stick together. For example, Waterman et al. (2020) contends that men who admire traditionally masculine traits are more likely to join fraternities than men who have more progressive attitudes. Fraternity brothers praise the idea of toxic/hypermasculinity and are often viewed as high in prestige at the collegiate level (Waterman et al. 2020). They dominate the party scene (Armstrong et al. 2006), and “appear to control social scripts about women’s behavior, dress, and alcohol consumption” (Waterman et al. 2020:10). Waterman et al. (2020) explains that it can be dangerous for individuals with “ideologies that are hostile to women such as the acceptance of sexual aggression” (3) to have that much social power over their peers. Hypermasculine men, such as those in fraternities, hold a sexual double standard that keep men at a higher status when they complete sexual conquests (Thompkins-Jones 2017), whereas they belittle women that follow suit. Koralewski and Conger (1992) suggest that those who hold higher levels of hypermasculine traits “may have social skill deficits in situations involving women or possibly those involving rejection” (170). Waterman et al. (2020) agrees with this theory and contend that “men who lack the skills to handle negative emotions may use sex and sexual aggression to meet emotional needs” (12). This may explain fraternity members’ high use
of aggression and coercion in sexual situations, and why some may blatantly disregard a woman’s non-consent (Pugh & Becker 2018).

Objectification

Interpersonal objectification.

Objectification is the process in which a person is thought to be a physical body, used to serve others, instead of a human being (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Johnson & Gurung 2011; Kellie et al. 2019; Szymanski et al. 2020). Sexual objectification occurs when individuals are seen as objects that exist solely for sexual gratification (Szymanski et al. 2020). Women are more likely to be victims of sexual objectification and men are more likely to be perpetrators (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997), although women also sexually objectify other women (Johnson & Gurung 2011). “When objectified, women are seen – by both genders – as less competent, less intelligent, and less capable” (Johnson & Gurung 1997: 177). Sexually objectified women are also viewed as having less emotional and moral capacity and are therefore seen to be “less deserving of moral treatment by others” (Kellie et al. 2019: 2). This objectification process has been shown to increase the likelihood of men sexually assaulting and harassing women (Kellie et al. 2019).

Both men and women sexually objectify women, focusing on their bodies, rather than their personal characteristics, in turn dehumanizing them (Kellie et al. 2019). Although this objectification process occurs in both sexes, the reasons have been shown to differ. Kellie et al. (2019) explains that when men objectify women, the intention is likely casual sex; however, when women dehumanize other women, they often view the other woman as competition. Sexual objectification in women is seen to be correlated with openness to casual sex, provocative
clothing choice, perceived competence, and the overall breaking of gender norms (Johnson & Gurung 2011; Kellie et al. 2019).

Women are socially expected to be less promiscuous than men, when this gender norm is broken – sexual objectification increases. Men look at women open to casual sex as having decreased mental and moral capabilities; therefore, men treat them as less human than culturally conservative women (Kellie et al. 2019). This lack of human recognition makes objectified women especially vulnerable to sexually aggressive behavior from men (Kellie et al. 2019). Kellie et al. (2019) suggests that women who dehumanize promiscuity may view women open to casual sex as further promoting the sexual objectification from men, as well as them being a threat to the concept of long-term relationships. This is because there is an increase in opportunity for casual, short-term relationships, which also raises the likelihood of men cheating in committed relationships (Kellie et al. 2019).

Women are also objectified for their outward appearance, including the clothes they wear and their overall attractiveness (Johnson & Gurung 2011; Kellie et al. 2019). Women that wear more revealing and culturally provocative outfits, are more likely to be sexualized than women in traditionally conservative dress (Johnson & Gurung 2011). This thinking stems back to the breaking of societal gender norms, as women are expected to keep their physique private (Johnson & Gurung 2011). Not only are women who wear revealing clothing “seen by both genders as less likeable, less sincere, and less warm” (Johnson & Gurung 2011: 178), they are also viewed as “more likely to use sex as a tool to get what [they want]” (178). Additionally, Kellie et al. (2019) suggests that the more attractive a woman is, the less intelligent she is viewed as. This objectification further dehumanizes women, undermining their achievements and mental capacity based solely on their outward appearance.
Objectified women are viewed as having less mental agency (Kellie et al. 2019) and less overall competence than their male counterparts (Johnson & Gurung 2011). This can also be explained back to gender roles, as men are viewed as intelligent and skillful, whereas women are viewed as nice and sociable (Johnson & Gurung 2011). This gender bias is especially seen in work atmospheres, as women are seen as inferior to men in their competence (Johnson & Gurung 2011). Johnson and Gurung (2011) explain that even when a woman is successful, it is often not acknowledged and instead her success is undercut by the idea that she got there based on luck or that she used sex as a tool to get where she needed to be. This rationale focuses on the woman’s body as a source of success over merit, in turn objectifying her.

Consequences of sexual objectification.

There are many consequences of sexual objectification, ranging from depression and anxiety to safety concerns and self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Koval et al. 2019; Szymanski et al. 2020). The high prevalence of sexual assault and harassment perpetrated by men against women in the U.S. leads to a fear of rape and safety concerns which is further bolstered by everyday experiences of interpersonal sexual objectification (Szymanski et al. 2020). Koval et al. (2019) explains that “the average college-aged woman in the United States or Australia is targeted by sexually objectifying behaviors roughly every one to two days” (886). Consequently, women are highly vigilant of their surroundings and on edge due to the perceived safety risks emphasized by the “disproportionate threat of sexual violence that women experience” (Szymanski et al. 2020: 721). This apprehension has been linked with increased rates of depression and anxiety in college-aged women (Szymanski et al. 2020). Another ramification of interpersonal objectification is “a preoccupation with one’s appearance and sexual worth” known as self-objectification (Koval et al. 2019: 886). Fredrickson and Roberts
(1997) relate self-objectification to a previous psychological theory coined by Charles Cooley, known as the “looking-glass self” (179). This theory stems upon the idea that “an individual’s sense of self is a social construction, reflecting the ways that other people view and treat that individual” (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997: 179). They compare these two ideas because when a person self-objectifies, they internalize the opinions of others that are based on the individual’s outward appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). Self-objectification can cause an increase in anxiety, depression, shame, and self-consciousness (Koval et al. 2019). This self-conscious behavior can be physically expressed through a routine checking of their external appearance, known as body surveillance, which has also been linked to mental health risks such as eating disorders (Szymanski et al. 2020).

**Title IX**

The Office of Equal Opportunity is an office in colleges and universities responsible for preventing systematic discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, etc. The Office of Equal Opportunity is also responsible for enforcing the Title IX Sexual Harassment Policy, a federal policy that “prohibits sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, and retaliation” (“BSU Title IX Policies and Key Terms” 2020) on campus. It is the office responsible for punishing offenders and protecting survivors of sexual assault and harassment. In 2011, the Obama administration set federal guidelines that demanded universities to be strict with their sexual violence regulations or lose federal funding (Fuchs 2021). This included “a ‘preponderance of evidence’ standard (which meant that the accused party was to be found responsible if it was ‘more likely than not that sexual harassment or violence occurred’)” (Fuchs 2021). However, when Donald Trump became president, he changed the guidelines – making it tougher to hold offenders responsible for sexual
assault and harassment (Fuchs 2021). One facet of these new guidelines was mandatory live hearings for defendants, in which cross-examination of survivors would take place (Fuchs 2021). This change in guidelines has made survivors less likely to come forward with their experiences, making college campuses a more dangerous place for female students (Fuchs 2021). Fuchs (2021) explains that the remedy for sexual assault and harassment is not necessarily tougher punishment, but more preventative measures to be taken. One solution Fuchs (2021) recommends is offering more sex-positive sexual education courses that teach students consent and safe sex procedures without the judgement of not following abstinence.

**Methodology**

*Recruitment*

Data was collected from currently enrolled Bridgewater State University students aged 18-years or older through an anonymous online survey. The survey was advertised via flyer, QR code, email, and through the Bridgewater State University community page on the BSU mobile app. The flyer included length of survey, the promise of anonymity, contact information for the researcher, the QR code which brings participants to the survey once scanned with their smartphones, and a disclosure warning. The warning included a brief overview of the sensitive subject matter that would be discussed in the survey. Flyers were posted in residence halls, lecture halls, the library, dining halls, and other student communal areas. See Appendix B for full recruitment flyer details. An email was also sent to faculty members in 35 different departments, requesting them to forward the message to students in their department. The email contained a brief introductory message with a request to follow the survey link provided if the recipient met the following qualifications: 18-years of age or older, currently enrolled BSU student, and had the time (3-5 minutes) available to partake in the study. It also contained the same disclosure
warning as the flyer, researcher contact information, and resources which were listed at the bottom of the page. Lastly, the same message was posted to the community page on the BSU app that was emailed out to students.

Respondents were made aware of the voluntary nature of this study and that no compensation was offered for participation. If students decided to take part in the study, they had to first view a disclosure warning explaining that sensitive topics such as sexual assault and consent would be discussed, and that resources would be provided at the end. View Appendix C for a full list of the resources provided. They were then asked if they would like to continue, students that responded “yes” were directed to the survey questions and students that responded “no” were exited from the survey and free Bridgewater State University resources were provided to them.

Procedure

Before the survey was distributed, it was approved by Bridgewater State University’s Institutional Review Board to ensure that ethical standards were met while using human participants. The survey questions were submitted to the IRB twice, as an amendment was sent in after the initial approval to add additional questions and to clarify existing questions. Respondents that chose to take part in the study were directed to the survey via either QR code or website link.

Once in the survey, participants were able to view the complete inquiry which contained questions on their personal understanding of sexual consent, rape myths, awareness of their partner’s external consent signals, grey area scenarios, consent education, and it concluded with a demographics section. There were three scenarios questions which exhibited the grey areas of
sexual consent in a situational context. Questions were considered “grey areas” if states had differing opinions about the legality of the situation. All questions and scenarios were kept gender neutral for two reasons, to better generalize the study and to help manage internal gender biases. The question regarding consent education asked students to describe what they believed would be the best way to further educate students. There were multiple choice options as well as a write-in text box to allow for open communication in students’ input. Participants had the choice to skip any question(s) that they did not feel comfortable answering. See Appendix D for a copy of the full survey. Once students completed the survey, they pressed the “submit” button which brought them to a webpage with free resources through BSU’s Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center.

Participants

Participants were 247 Bridgewater State University students, who ranged in age from under 18, 18-19, 20-21, 22-24, to 25 or older. Five students that were under 18 were removed from the results due to the age requirements of this study. These five students were not analyzed any further, leaving 242 students. Respondents categorized primarily as women, followed by men, transgender, and non-binary. The majority of participants identified as white, along with Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Asian, with some self-identifying as Hispanic or Latinx, and Bi-racial or Mixed-race. Most respondents identified as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, with some self-identifying as pansexual.

Out of the 242 respondents, most were in committed relationships, followed by individuals not in relationships, and those who did not know what to define their relationship. Some respondents lived on campus, while others commuted. Respondents either attended the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the College of Education and Health Sciences, the
Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics, the Ricciardi College of Business, or the College of Graduate Studies. Most respondents did not play on a BSU athletic team, with only 9 respondents that were members of a BSU athletic team. Most respondents were not involved in only 13 Greek life at BSU, with p Greek life members. Due to the lack of diversity in athletic status and Greek life status, these variables were not explored further.

**Figure X: Table of Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Count (N = 242)</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<td>Transgender</td>
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<td>1.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
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<td>5.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
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<td>20-21</td>
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<td>22-24</td>
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<td>25+</td>
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<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
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<td><strong>Sexuality</strong></td>
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<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s Complicated</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College of Primary Major</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Education and Health Sciences</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricciardi College of Business</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Graduate Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residential Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives on Campus</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athletic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSU Athlete</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a BSU Athlete</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Greek Life Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Life Member</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a Greek Life Member</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to see which aspects of sexual consent, if any, are commonly misunderstood by students. Understanding where the misconceptions are can help in better educating students on consent, in turn making BSU’s campus a safer place. There were three main research questions investigated through this study. The first was: What aspects of consent are commonly misunderstood by students? The second was: What factors play a role in students’ understanding of consent? The third was: How can BSU better educate students on consent? The survey was developed using Qualtrics, an online software that collects data, then analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Responses were first measured using a five-point Likert scale: “Strongly agree,” “Somewhat agree,” “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,” and “Strongly disagree.” For greater ease when analyzing the data, the five-point Likert scale was re-coded to a three-point scale: “Agree,” “Neither agree nor disagree,” “Disagree.” All responses were then re-coded into numbers in SPSS. Crosstabulations were used to show percentages of responses, as well as chi-square values ($\chi^2$) and statistical significance. Data is statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), this means that researchers can be at least 95% confident that there is a relationship between these variables.
Dependent Variables

Survey questions were broken into five sections when being analyzed: Personal Understanding, Rape Myths, Awareness of Partner External Consent Signals, Grey Area Scenarios, and Consent Education. The Personal Understanding category included five multiple choice questions. The Rape Myths category included three multiple-choice questions. The Awareness of Partner External Consent Signals portion had one question which asked students to select all options that applied. The Grey Area Scenarios section contained three subjective, multiple-choice vignettes which detailed different situations, then asked whether the reader would consider the acts consensual or not. Lastly, the Consent Education section contained only one question which asked respondents to describe what they believed would be the best way to further educate students. There were four separate, pre-written, multiple-choice responses that could be chosen from, as well as a type-in text box. This was done to give students a platform to voice their own ideas and concerns regarding sexual consent education.

Independent Variables

The survey also included demographic questions that included: age, race, gender identity, sexuality, major, if they live on campus, athletic team status, Greek life status, and relationship status. Age was measured on a multiple-choice, ordinal scale. Race, gender identity, and sexuality included multiple-choice responses as well as a type-in self-identification option for answers not listed. Major was measured through a type-in response, then coded through SPSS to categorize majors into their respective colleges. If a respondent had more than one major, their primary major would be the one used while analyzing the data. The campus living status, athletic team status, and Greek life status were all measured through multiple-choice “yes” or “no” responses. Relationship status was also measured on a “yes” or “no” scale; however, an “it’s
complicated” response was added to include individuals that were not certain of the label of their relationship.

Findings

Crosstabulations were utilized to compare each demographic: gender identity, sexuality, race, age, relationship status, college of primary major, and residency status run against various survey questions. In these crosstabulations, demographics were used as independent variables and survey questions were used as dependent variables. This was done to see if demographics had any influence over the answers that were received. Due to the lack of diversity in answers, athletic status and Greek life status were not analyzed further. Question 3 was removed from analysis due to confusion in wording among students. The question asked students to select all the ways in which they can demonstrate consent. This was meant to imply positive consent; however, due to the overwhelming number of responses for non-consent answers (eg. pushing away), the data indicates that the question was not received in the intended way. Since this question made up the Awareness of Partner External Consent section, it was removed from the study as well. After running crosstabulations for each of the demographics listed above, it was found that sexuality, race, age, and residency status did not yield any statistically significant results. Therefore, this study cannot establish a relationship between sexuality, race, age, or residency status and personal understanding of consent, rape myths, grey area scenarios, or consent education. The Consent Education section was also analyzed further using a word map.

There were several findings within the study; however, the main takeaway was that although 98.7% of individuals agreed that they understood sexual consent, responses to subsequent questions varied. This finding shows that the concept of sexual consent is blurrier than meets the eye. Specifically, the finding that stuck out most was that individuals whose
primary major falls within the Ricciardi College of Business are more likely to endorse the rape defense myth that most sexual assaults occur due to misunderstandings than other colleges. This is important to acknowledge since other colleges, such as the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Education and Health Sciences, teach courses specific to gender inequality and sexual assault. This further proves the point that consent education is useful in combatting rape myths. Another important finding is that men show more confusion when it comes to understanding their partner’s consent cues and the range of consent than other gender identities. Lastly, it is important to note that those in the “It’s complicated” relationship status are more likely to believe that intoxication does not affect the ability to consent and individuals in relationships are less likely to approve of intoxicated consent than other relationship statuses. This is especially interesting since individuals who are single or in the “It’s complicated” relationship status are more likely to run into a scenario like the one in the vignette (See Figure 3.2) than individuals in committed relationships, yet there is more confusion among these two groups.

*Personal Understanding (PU)*

Questions were categorized based on the themes they explored. The Personal Understanding (PU) section focused on students’ understanding of the overall topic of consent, as well as the different types of sexual consent: affirmative, internal, and external consent. Five questions were found within this category; honing in on definitions and common misconceptions of consent, such as the idea displayed in question 4 that “[c]onsent and desire are the same thing.” This covers the overarching theme that internal and external displays of consent are the same thing, although they are very different, as explained by Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) in the previous literature review section. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explains that non-verbal,
external consent is more commonly used among young adults than verbal consent. Therefore, external consent is drawn upon in two questions of the PU category, question 5 and question 6.

Figure 1.1 shows a crosstabulation of students’ perception of personal knowledge of sexual consent run against relationship status (See Appendix E). This question aimed at gauging students’ confidence of general sexual consent knowledge. 98.7% of participants agreed that they were confident in their understanding of consent. 100% of participants in the relationship category felt confident in their understanding of sexual consent, while 98.2% of single participants and 92.3% of those in the “It’s complicated” category felt confident in their understanding of consent. This shows general agreement among students. The responses to this question were found to be statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.049. This means that the study can claim a relationship between students’ relationship status and their confidence of consent knowledge. Specifically, the findings show that students in committed relationships are more confident in their understanding of sexual consent, whereas those in “complicated” relationships are less confident in their knowledge of consent.

Figure 1.2: Personal Understanding of Internal Consent

Q4: Consent and desire are the same thing.
Figure 1.2 shows a bar graph of students’ personal understanding of internal consent. This question examined students’ understanding of internal consent, as well as perceptions of their bias towards the infamous rape myth “she wanted it,” which implies that if a woman desires sexual activities, regardless of her external signals, she consents. 84.23% of respondents disagreed with this rape myth while only 6.64% agreed and 9.13% neither agreed nor disagreed. This shows an overall understanding of internal consent among students. When crosstabulations were run for this question, they did not yield any statistically significant results. This means that the current study cannot claim a relationship between students’ understanding of internal consent and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.

Figure 1.3: Personal Understanding of External Consent by College of Primary Major

Q5: Consent can be shown through actions, as well as verbally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College of Primary Major</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>College of Humanities and Social Sciences</th>
<th>Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics</th>
<th>Ricciardi College of Business</th>
<th>College of Graduate Studies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College of Education and Health Sciences</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.3 looks at students’ personal understanding of external consent run as a crosstabulation against students’ college of primary major. This question examined whether BSU students believe consent can be given through non-verbal actions or not, which is how the majority of young adults exhibit consent (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). The results for this question were spread more evenly than results from other questions; however, there was still a majority response. 65.4% of BSU students agreed that consent could be shown through actions, as well as verbally, whereas 28.1% of students disagreed and 6.5% neither agreed nor disagreed. 100.0% of students from the College of Graduate Studies agreed, followed by 79.2% of students from the Ricciardi College of Business, 68.1% from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 56.7% from the Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics, and 55.3% from the College of Education and Health Sciences. Out of the colleges, the College of Education and Health Sciences had the most even distribution of responses with 55.3% of students agreeing, 40.4% of students disagreeing, and 4.3% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Inversely, the College of Graduate Studies had the least spread in answers with 100.0% of students agreeing that consent could be shown through actions, as well as verbally. These responses yielded statistically significant results with a p-value of 0.025. This means that the study can claim a relationship between students’ personal understanding of external consent and students’ college of primary major. Specifically, those who attend the College of Graduate Studies have a better understanding of external consent than those that have a primary major in a different college;
however, it is important to acknowledge the lower response rate of graduate students. This question also shows that there is more confusion when it comes to understanding external consent among those who attend the College of Education and Health Sciences. All other colleges show similar response patterns to each other.

**Figure 1.4: Perception of Non-verbal Partner Consent Signals by Gender Identity**

Q6: *It is easy to tell if a partner wants to have sex based on their actions.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Non-verbal Partner Consent Signals (PU)</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n = 57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 15.28$

$p < 0.05$

Figure 1.4 shows a crosstabulation of students’ perception of non-verbal partner consent signals run against gender identity. This was a subjective question aimed at examining how well students understand their partner’s external consent signals, since according to Muelenhard et al. (2016), this is how most college aged individuals consent. 46.4% of respondents disagreed with the claim “[i]t is easy to tell if a partner wants to have sex based on their actions,” finding it difficult to interpret their partners’ external consent signals. Among these individuals, non-binary respondents had the highest rate of disagreement. 75% of non-binary individuals disagreed with the claim, demonstrating confusion regarding their partners’ external consent signals. In
comparison, only 46.7% of women, 40.4% of men, and 33.3% of transgender respondents disagreed. 28.1% of men neither agreed nor disagreed, making up the majority for that category – this shows that men were less decisive when responding to this question than other gender identities. Only 31.6% of men agreed that it was easy to understand partner consent cues, compared to 66.7% of transgender individuals and 41.8% of women. The results of this question were found to be statistically significant with a p-value of 0.018. This means that the current study can confidently claim a relationship between students’ perception of non-verbal partner consent signals and gender identity. Specifically, non-binary individuals were found to have a harder time understanding partner consent cues than other gender identities, followed by men. Although this finding is statistically significant, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that non-binary students had a much lower response rate than men or women, leading to a skew in results.

Figure 1.5: Personal Understanding of Affirmative Consent

Q9: Consent is a conscious and voluntary agreement with another person to participate in sexual activities.
Figure 1.5 displays a bar graph of students’ personal understanding of affirmative consent. This question sought to examine students’ personal understanding of affirmative consent by showing the definition of affirmative consent. Lack of affirmative consent is the legal indicator of sexual crimes in twenty-eight states (See Appendix A) in the U.S. (Decker & Baroni 2011). The majority of respondents (97.08%) agreed with this definition of consent, while only 0.83% disagreed and 2.08% neither agreed nor disagreed. This shows that this definition accurately describes affirmative consent among BSU students. However, when run as a crosstabulation, no statistically significant results appeared. This means that the current study cannot claim a relationship between students’ personal understanding of affirmative consent and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.

Rape Myths (RM)

The Rape Myth (RM) category contains questions pertaining to students’ biases on common rape myths. Three questions are found within this category, focusing on the misconceptions regarding rape myths and rape defenses such as the idea posed in question 8 that, “sexual assault mainly occurs due to misunderstandings.” The myths in this section are disproved in the literature review section of this study through findings made by: Pugh and Becker (2018), Koralewski and Conger (1992), McGregor (2005), and others.

Figure 2.1: Perception of Sexual Entitlement in Situations of Sexual Precedence

Q7: If you have had consensual sex with a partner before, you do not have to ask for consent the next time.
Figure 2.1 displays a bar graph showing students’ perception of sexual entitlement in situations of sexual precedence. The question refers to the common rape myth that those who have had sexual interactions with a partner before, have assumed consent for future interactions. Pugh and Becker (2018) explain that men often use sexual precedence to justify the use of sexually coercive devices and to defend themselves against sexual assault allegations. Most respondents, 90.91%, disagreed with this rape myth. In comparison, only 2.48% of students agreed with the sentiment, while 6.61% chose to neither agree nor disagree. When run as a crosstabulation, no statistically significant results were yielded. This means that this study cannot claim a relationship between students’ perception of sexual entitlement in situations of sexual precedence and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.

**Figure 2.2: Perception of Bias in Rape Defense by College of Primary Major**

Q8: Sexual assault mainly occurs due to misunderstandings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College of Primary Major</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>College of Education and Health Sciences</th>
<th>College of Humanities and Social Sciences</th>
<th>Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics</th>
<th>Ricciardi College of Business</th>
<th>College of Graduate Studies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.1: Perception of Bias in Rape Defense (RM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Bias in Rape Defense (RM)</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n = 46</td>
<td>n = 113</td>
<td>n = 30</td>
<td>n = 24</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td>n = 216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 16.08$

$p < 0.05$

Figure 2.2 shows a crosstabulation of students’ perception of bias in rape defense run against students’ college of primary major. According to Pugh and Becker (2018), the excuse that the assault was just a misunderstanding is the defense used most often in sexual assault cases. This question focused on students’ feelings towards the legitimacy of this rape defense myth. The majority of students did not endorse this myth, with a total of 69% of respondents choosing “Disagree.” 33.3% of students whose primary major was in the Ricciardi College of Business or the College of Graduate Studies agreed with the rape defense myth, while 15.9% of those from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 10.0% of students from the Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics, 2.2% of students from the College of Education and Health Sciences agreed. In total, 80.4% of students from the College of Education and Health Sciences disagreed with the sentiment – making up the largest portion of students that disagreed. In comparison, only 33.3% of students from the College of Graduate Studies and 54.2% of students from the Ricciardi College of Business disagreed with the myth. The largest incongruity within colleges comes from the College of Graduate Studies, with an even number of students selecting each answer. The results of this question were found to be statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.041. Therefore, this study can claim a relationship between students’ perception of bias in rape defense and students’ college of primary major. Specifically, individuals whose primary major falls within the College of Graduate Studies or the Ricciardi College of Business are more likely to endorse the rape defense myth that most sexual assaults occur due to
misunderstandings. It is interesting to look at the relationship between college major and their views on this rape myth, since each of these colleges teach different material. Students in the Ricciardi College of Business are not required to take courses on the topics of gender inequality and consent; therefore, it makes sense that those in this college would be less knowledgeable about the topic.

**Figure 2.3: Perception of Range of Consent by Gender Identity**

Q10: Consent to one form of sexual activity (e.g. oral, penetrative, etc.) automatically extends to all other forms of sexual activities as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Range of Consent (RM)</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree, nor disagree</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n = 58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2 = 13.15 \]

\[ p < 0.05 \]

Figure 2.3 shows a crosstabulation between students’ perception of range of consent and gender identity. This question seeks to find student thoughts on the universality of consent, if they believe consent spans across all sexual activities. McGregor (2005:135) uses the comparison of consent to a surgical procedure, such as getting an appendix removed to disprove this rape myth. Regardless of if the patient consents to getting their appendix taken out, the doctor legally cannot also remove the patient’s kidney. It is the same principle with sexual consent. A person may feel comfortable consenting to oral sex, but not coitus. Consent must be
explicit, as one form of sexual consent does not extend to all sexual activities. Most respondents did not support this rape myth, with 90.3% of students responding “disagree.” 8.3% of non-binary individuals agreed with this myth, while 5.2% of men, 4.2% of women, and 0.0% of transgender individuals agreed. Although non-binary individuals had the highest rate of agreement, 91.7% of non-binary students disagreed. In comparison, 100% of transgender students, 93.3% of women, and only 81.0% of men disagreed. Men disagreed with the rape myth 10.7% less than non-binary individuals disagreed. This is because 13.8% of men neither agreed nor disagreed with this rape myth, showing a general misunderstanding among men that is not reciprocated within the other gender identities, as other gender identities were more decisive in their responses. The results of this question were found to be statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.041. Therefore, this study can claim a relationship between students’ perception of range of consent and gender identity. Specifically, there is more confusion when it comes to range of consent within the non-binary and man identified groups, with less consensus within the man identified group.

Grey Area Scenarios (GAS)

The Grey Area Scenarios (GAS) category focuses on vignettes that constitute sexual assault in certain states of the U.S. and do not in others. These scenario questions were created to help identify where biases may lie within the context of real-life situations. Three themes are covered within the GAS category: the withdrawal of consent mid-intercourse, the effect of intoxication on the ability to consent, and sexual coercion. These topics are each touched upon in the previous literature section.

Figure 3.1 displays a bar graph of students’ perception of the need for continuous consent during sexual intercourse (See Appendix E). This caveat of consent is seen within the definition
of affirmative consent. Affirmative consent must be a voluntary and continuous process which can be revoked at any time (Ed. Code § 67386(a)(1) 2014). 97.93% of respondents concurred that this scenario did not depict a consensual situation, with 2.07% responding that they were not sure; however, 0.0% of respondents claimed that this situation was consensual. This shows a consensus within the thinking of students because even if they are not completely sure, they each know that it is not fully consensual. When run as a crosstabulation, no statistically significant results were yielded. This means that this study cannot claim a relationship between students’ perception of the need for continuous consent during sexual intercourse and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.

Figure 3.2: Perception of Intoxication on Consent by Relationship Status

Q12: Two individuals are flirting at a party. They have both been drinking and decide to go back to Individual A’s dorm room. Individual B is clearly intoxicated (slurring words, stumbling, etc.); however, Individual A is not. They end up engaging in sexual intercourse. Would this be considered consensual sex?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Intoxication on Consent (GAS)</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, they both wanted to have sex.</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, consent cannot be given while intoxicated.</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not sure.</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: n = 117</td>
<td>n = 109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 14.68$

$p < 0.01$

Figure 3.2 depicts a crosstabulation of students’ perception of the role intoxication plays in consent, run against relationship status. This question aimed to check students’ comprehension
of affirmative consent used within a real-life scenario. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explains that to gain affirmative consent, one cannot be incapacitated by drugs or alcohol. Drinking is highly prevalent on college campuses and is known to lower inhibitions (Armstrong et al. 2006). This is why individuals cannot consent to sexual activities whilst under the influence. 90.0% of respondents agreed that consent cannot be given while intoxicated and therefore the situation does not represent a consensual experience. However, only 64.3% of those identified in the “It’s complicated” relationship group responded that the experience was not consensual. In comparison, 94.0% of those in relationships and 89.0% of single respondents reported that the situation was not consensual. Within the “It’s complicated” group, 7.1% of individuals endorsed the idea that intoxicated individuals can still consent to sexual activities versus 4.6% of single respondents and 0.9% of those in relationships. 28.6% of individuals in the “It’s complicated” group demonstrated confusion regarding whether the scenario depicted a consensual encounter or not, whereas only 6.4% of single respondents and 5.1% of individuals in relationships. The results of this question proved statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.005. This means the study can claim a relationship between students’ perception of the role intoxication plays in consent and students’ relationship status with more than 99% confidence. Specifically, the findings suggest that those not sure of their relationship status are more likely to believe that intoxication does not affect the ability to consent and that individuals in relationships are less likely to approve of intoxicated consent than other relationship statuses. It is especially interesting to note this finding since individuals who are single or in the “It’s complicated” relationship status are more likely to run into a scenario like the one in the vignette than individuals in committed relationships, yet there is more confusion among these two groups.

Figure 3.3: Perception of Sexual Coercion on Consent
Q13: A couple has just started dating and are having a sleepover. Partner A verbalizes that they want to have sex, Partner B has an 8AM class and says that they are too tired. Partner A continuously asks, wearing down Partner B until they agree to have sex. Would this be considered consensual sex?

Figure 3.3 shows a bar graph of students’ perception of sexual coercion on consent. In a study by Muehlenhard et al. (2016) it was found that “women’s refusals – even those that included the word no – were perceived as something to overcome” (471). Although, not taking no for an answer would not be consensual in affirmative consent states (See Appendix A), some may believe that as long as the answer ends in a yes, it constitutes consent. This is fallacious thinking and puts added pressure on women, giving them the impression that they cannot say no (Pugh & Becker 2018). 86.78% of respondents agreed that this scenario did not represent consensual experience; however, responses were more varied than in other questions, showing confusion on this topic. In total, 8.26% of students were unsure of the answer, while 4.96% of students said that this experience was consensual, despite depicting a scenario of sexual coercion. When run as a crosstabulation, no statistically significant results were yielded. This means that this study cannot claim a relationship between students’ perception of sexual coercion on consent and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.
Consent Education (CE)

The Consent Education (CE) category contained only one question: “What would be the best way to further educate students on consent?” This question was aimed at gaining student incite on the future of consent education. There were four pre-written answers that could be selected, along with one type-in response, so that students could have a platform to voice their own ideas. The SPARC course is the Sexual and Interpersonal Violence Prevention and Response Training. This is a mandatory training all students must complete upon their first semester at BSU, it aims to teach students about consent and prevent violence. The first response option was to have students take the SPARC training each year they attend BSU. The second option was to have an outreach educator from the Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center visit BSU classes. The third option was to offer more optional courses on the topic of consent for individuals to take. The fourth option was that students did not need any additional consent education. Lastly, individuals had the option to type-in their responses.

Figure 4.1: Ideas for Future Consent Education

Q14: What would be the best way to further educate students on consent?

Figure 4.1 shows a bar graph of students’ ideas for future consent education. 45.00% of individuals selected option two, having an outreach educator from the Sexual Violence
Advocacy and Support Center visit BSU classes. In comparison, 25.83% of respondents chose option three, offer additional optional BSU courses on consent, 14.58% of students chose option one, taking the SPARC training each year, 12.08% of students chose to voice their opinions in the type-in box, and 2.50% of students chose option four, saying that no additional education is needed. When run as a crosstabulation, no statistically significant results were yielded. This means that this study cannot claim a relationship between students’ ideas for future consent education and students’ gender identity, relationship status, or college of primary major.

Figure 4.2: Student Type-in Suggestions for Future Consent Education

Q14: *What would be the best way to further educate students on consent?*

Figure 4.2 shows a word map of student type-in suggestions for future consent education. There were 29 student type-in responses submitted; however, two responses were not appropriate to analyze, thus they were excluded from the study. Out of the 27 responses analyzed, eight categories were created. Responses were designated into categories based on the overarching theme they cover. The eight ideas raised were holding mandatory classes on consent (9), hanging
up educational posters/flyers around campus (4), teaching lessons on consent when young (4), focusing on changing rape culture on campus (3), hosting educational events about consent (2), having tougher punishments for perpetrators of sexual assault (2), all of the pre-written answers (2), and other answers that did not fit within any of the categories (4). Some type-in answers fit into multiple categories.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to understand which areas of sexual consent are misconstrued by Bridgewater State University students and what social factors play a role in students’ understanding of consent. This was done in hopes of better educating students on consent and making BSU’s campus an overall safer place. The findings of this study can establish a statistically significant relationship between relationship status and confidence of knowledge in sexual consent; relationship status and the approval of intoxicated consent; gender identity and the understanding of their partners’ external consent cues; gender identity and perception of range of consent; college of students’ primary major and the understanding of external consent; and college of students’ primary major and the endorsement of rape defense myths.

This study concludes that individuals in relationships are more likely to feel confident in their understanding of consent than single individuals or those who have a “complicated” relationship status. In contrast, individuals in the “it’s complicated” relationship status group had the least amount of confidence in their overall understanding of consent. These statistically significant differences can be seen in Figure 1.1. This means that relationship status is one social factor that affects how well individuals understand consent. Another finding of this study is that individuals in relationships are less likely to believe that consent can be given while intoxicated than other relationship status groups. Comparatively, individuals in the “it’s complicated”
relationship status group were more likely to believe sexual activities done in an inebriated state were acceptable and consensual. These results are displayed in Figure 3.2. This suggests that relationship status affects the perceived ability a person has to consent while intoxicated.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the current study is that non-binary individuals display more confusion in understanding their partners’ non-verbal external consent cues than those in other gender identity groups. Only 8.3% of non-binary respondents agreed that it was easy to understand their partners’ non-verbal external consent cues. Following the non-binary group, 31.6% of respondents in the man identified group agreed that it was easy to understand their partners’ non-verbal external consent cues. These statistically significant results can be found in Figure 1.4. This signifies that gender identity is one social factor that affects how well individuals interpret non-verbal external consent cues. Another conclusion drawn from this study is that man identified, and non-binary respondents showed more confusion about the limitations of the range of consent than other gender identity groups. Specifically, men and non-binary individuals were more likely to agree with or be indifferent to the rape myth that consent to one sexual activity is all encompassing and transposes to other sexual actions as well. These results are located within Figure 2.3. These findings suggest that gender identity influences the likelihood of a person to endorse the rape myth “consent is all encompassing.” Although these results are significant, it is important to note the disparity between gender identity response rates. Since there were inherently less non-binary respondents in the study compared to men and women, each non-binary student had a greater pull when it came to how their response affected the results for the entirety of the group. This caused a skew in the results for the non-binary gender identity group.
Another outcome that can be taken away from this study is that the college in which a student’s primary major falls in, has an effect on students’ understanding of general external consent and endorsement of the rape defense myth, “it was a misunderstanding.” Particularly, students who have a primary major that falls within the College of Graduate Studies show a greater understanding of general external consent than other colleges. Additionally, students who have a primary major that falls within the College of Education and Health Sciences demonstrate more confusion and variability in answers than those in separate colleges. The results from this crosstabulation can be found in Figure 1.3. Furthermore, students whose primary major falls in the College of Graduate Studies or the Ricciardi College of Business are more likely to believe in the rape myth “[s]exual assault mainly occurs due to misunderstandings.” This discovery can be found in Figure 2.2.

The current study also gave students a platform to voice their opinions regarding future consent education. The majority of respondents (45.0%) chose to have an outreach educator from the Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center, followed by others choosing to have BSU offer optional courses on the topic of consent (25.83%), 14.58% of students chose for BSU to employ mandatory SPARC training each year, and 2.50% of students voiced that no additional education was necessary on the topic. Out of the answers submitted, 12.08% of students chose to voice their opinions by using the type-in option for question 14 (See Appendix D). These suggestions were then categorized. The greatest reported idea for consent education reform was for BSU to hold mandatory classes on the topic of consent. The rationale explained in most of these answers was that optional courses would either be ignored or taken by individuals who are non-problematic when it comes to sexual consent. The next popular idea was to hang up educational posters and leaflets around campus to spread awareness. The common rationale
behind this was that if students see the information regularly, their awareness of the topic will increase. Another idea was to teach the notion of consent while children are young, so they are well versed in the concept by the time they become sexually active. Other suggestions included focusing on changing rape culture, hosting educational events to spread awareness about consent, and employing tougher punishments for perpetrators of sexual assault.

The purpose of the study was to see which aspects, if any, of sexual consent are commonly misunderstood by students and which social factors, if any, play a role in students’ overall understanding of consent. After analyzing the data, the findings conclude that relationship status, gender identity, and students’ college of their primary major are all social factors that affect students’ understanding of consent. Specifically, relationship status affects perceived knowledge of consent and the acceptance of intoxication’s role within consent. Gender identity affects how well individuals interpret non-verbal external consent cues and the likelihood to believe that consenting to one sexual action implies consent to all sexual acts. The college in which a student’s primary major falls affects students’ understanding of general external consent and the degree to which a student believes that most sexual assaults occur due to misunderstandings. Furthermore, future education should focus on the topics of intoxication, non-verbal and general external consent, the range of consent, and rape defense myths. To spread awareness on consent, students suggest that BSU should send outreach educators to classes, make consent education courses mandatory for students to take, hang educational posters, teach consent education at a younger age, host educational events on the topic of consent, focus on changing rape culture on campus, and establish tougher punishments for perpetrators of sexual assault. Enacting these educational and preventative measures will help to spread sexual assault
awareness, subsequently making Bridgewater State University an overall safer community for students.

Overall, this study shows that although there is a general agreement that sexual consent is understood by students, there is a lot of variability between answers. This shows a more subjective view of consent among students, where each respondent believes their answer to be correct, despite swaying from societal norms surrounding the topic. This can be seen clearly through the removal of question 3. Although students agreed that they understand sexual consent, when asked to choose how consent can be demonstrated – many chose non-consent responses, such as “pushing away.” This can be taken away as a researcher error, as the question was not received in the intended way; however, the simplicity of the wording suggests that students still have confusions regarding consent. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that consent is complicated and far surpasses “no means no.” There is not enough consensus surrounding how sexual education is taught in the United States nor how it is lawful. There should be an emphasis on sexual consent in sexual education courses, focusing specifically on grey area scenarios and rape myths. There should also be universal consent laws within the U.S. to make it clearer which actions are lawful, and which are not. Through better sexual education surrounding consent, and unanimity of consent laws between states, consent can be transformed from a blurry, abstract concept to a clear, unbiased societal norm.

Limitations

There were multiple limitations to this research study. The largest limitation was the inability to collect enough participants to make the study generalizable. Since there were only 242 respondents, the results cannot be generalized to all Bridgewater State University students or society as a whole. The data was collected via convenience sampling; thus, individuals could
choose if they wanted to volunteer, and all data collected from students 18-years-of-age or older was analyzed. The response rate of the study was considerably less than the population of students from the school. This may have been due to the avoidance of such sensitive subject matter, or a general reluctance to participate. Another limitation was that individuals may not be open to sharing their opinions if they went against the social norm. Preventative steps were taken to avoid this limitation, such as using objective speech to avoid leading answers in a certain direction.

Not only can this study not be generalized to the university or society due to the low response rate, but also due to the lack of variability within demographics. The majority of respondents were heterosexual, white women. This may have skewed the data in a way that a more diverse group of respondents would not have. This skewed data may be representative of the racial, gender, and sexuality make-up of the university itself. As of the Fall 2021 semester, Bridgewater State University’s student body is 74% white, has a female to male ratio of 5:4, and roughly consists of 10% openly LGBTQ+ members (“A Snapshot of BSU” 2021). The demographic composition of the university makes it even more difficult to generalize the data to society as a whole. The geographic location of BSU may also sway responses considering the plurality of Massachusetts voters are democratic (Galvin 2021). Since students may have more liberal leaning ideals, this may cause an issue when generalizing to more conservative leaning states.

Another substantial limitation faced in this study was the removal of question 3 (See Appendix D) and the Awareness of Partner External Consent category. Question 3 asked students to select all of the ways in which they can demonstrate consent. This question was written with the intention of students choosing answers that would indicate a consensual sexual
relation (eg. enthusiastically saying yes, increased physical contact). However, a considerable number of students chose answers that would indicate non-consent (eg. pushing away), showing that the question was not received in the intended way. As a result of this misinterpretation, the question was removed from the study. If the question was interpreted in the way it was originally intended, another layer of consent could have been explored. The Awareness of Partner External Consent category of analysis was created with the intention of seeing which cues would indicate consent to students of BSU. Other questions, besides those in the Grey Area Scenarios section, did not use specifics when discussing consent, which would have been insightful. Consequently, the scope of the study was limited.

Lastly, another limitation that must be addressed is the effect the researcher had on the study. Since the study only contained a single researcher, personal biases may appear regardless of the preventative measures taken. I am a heterosexual, white woman with liberal ideals and a background in sociology. I have taken numerous courses both here at BSU and at my previous college that focus on gender inequalities and sexual assault. Consequently, I am well versed in this subject. If there were more researchers involved in the project, I would have been able to gain a host of perceptions, both in the formulation of the study and the data analysis, that would have made the study more effective. To combat any biases from appearing, an empirical approach was taken when creating survey questions. BSU’s Institutional Review Board approved the wording of my questions to make sure they met objective and ethical guidelines. I did not propose any leading questions nor demonstrate my personal biases in the study.

Future Research

There are several other aspects of consent that were not touched upon in the current study. One concept that would be interesting to explore in the future would be how consent is
displayed throughout television, movies, and other forms of media. This research is relevant to this study, as media helps to shape young adults’ opinions on how consent is shown and what is considered socially acceptable. If a new study was conducted on this topic using quantitative research methods such as a content analysis or by utilizing a survey, the results would likely be notable and thought-provoking.
Appendices

Appendix A

List of Affirmative Consent States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
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<td>Colorado</td>
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Appendix B

Recruitment Information

Recruitment Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!!!

LOOKING FOR CURRENT BSU STUDENTS, WHO ARE 18 OR OLDER, TO PARTICIPATE IN A 3-5 MINUTE ONLINE SURVEY.

THIS SURVEY IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY AND ALL RESPONSES WILL BE ANONYMOUS!

WARNING: THIS SURVEY CONTAINS QUESTIONS REGARDING SENSITIVE TOPICS, SUCH AS SEXUAL ASSAULT AND CONSENT.

THIS RESEARCH IS APPROVED BY BSU'S IRB #2022072

INTERESTED? Please use the QR Codes below or Contact:
Nina Krueger
Departmental Honors in Sociology
n1krueger@student.bridgew.edu

FEEL FREE TO TAKE A QR CODE BELOW!!
Recruitment Email

Dear BSU students,

Are you interested in participating in a quick 5-minute research survey? If so, please click the link below or use the QR Code provided.

The purpose of this survey is to see which aspects of sexual consent are commonly misunderstood by students. Understanding where the misconceptions are can help us better educate students on consent and make our campus a safer place.

By completing this survey, you will be helping a fellow peer finish their capstone thesis.

Qualifications:

- Currently Enrolled BSU Student
- 18 years or older
- Willing to participate in a brief survey (approximately 5-minutes)

https://bridgew.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0Vujx0q2wqhtDro

**WARNING:** This survey contains questions regarding sensitive topics, such as sexual assault and consent. This survey is completely voluntary, and all responses will remain anonymous.

Questions? Please Contact:

Nina Krueger
n1krueger@student.bridgew.edu
Departmental Honors in Sociology
IRB Case #: 2022072

If you are in need of help or support, Bridgewater State University offers free resources through the

**Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center located in Room 102 in Tillinghast Hall.**

https://studentbridgew.sharepoint.com/sites/SVASC

If you would prefer to call, you can reach the office at (508)-531-2048.
Appendix C

SVASC Resources

If you are in need of help or support, Bridgewater State University offers free resources through the

Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center located in Room 102 in Tillinghast Hall.

https://studentbridgew.sharepoint.com/sites/SVASC

If you would prefer to call, you can reach the office at (508)-531-2048.
Appendix D

Qualtrics Survey

Blurred Lines: Understanding the Misconceptions Surrounding Sexual Consent on Campus

Start of Block: DISCLOSURE WARNING

Q1 WARNING: This survey contains questions regarding sensitive topics, such as sexual assault and consent. Would you like to proceed with the survey?

This survey is completely voluntary, and all responses will remain anonymous. Resources will be provided at the end of the survey.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

End of Block: DISCLOSURE WARNING

Start of Block: Consent Questions

Q2 I feel confident in my understanding of consent.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q3 In what ways can you demonstrate consent? (Check all that apply)

- Enthusiastically saying yes
- Changing the subject
- Increased physical contact
- Foreplay
- Laying there motionless
- Reciprocated advances
- Pushing away
- Silence
Q4 Consent and desire are the same thing.
   o Strongly agree
   o Somewhat agree
   o Neither agree nor disagree
   o Somewhat disagree
   o Strongly disagree

Q5 Consent can be shown through actions, as well as verbally.
   o Strongly agree
   o Somewhat agree
   o Neither agree nor disagree
   o Somewhat disagree
   o Strongly disagree

Q6 It is easy to tell if a partner wants to have sex based on their actions.
   o Strongly agree
   o Somewhat agree
   o Neither agree nor disagree
   o Somewhat disagree
   o Strongly disagree

Q7 If you have had consensual sex with a partner before, you do not have to ask for consent the next time.
   o Strongly agree
   o Somewhat agree
   o Neither agree nor disagree
   o Somewhat disagree
   o Strongly disagree

Q8 Sexual assault mainly occurs due to misunderstandings.
   o Strongly agree
   o Somewhat agree
   o Neither agree nor disagree
   o Somewhat disagree
Q9 Consent is a conscious and voluntary agreement with another person to participate in sexual activities.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q10 Consent to one form of sexual activity (eg. oral, penetrative, etc.) automatically extends to all other forms of sexual activities as well.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q11 A couple is engaging in consensual sex. Halfway through, Partner A decides they no longer wish to have sex, but regardless, Partner B continues. Is this still considered consensual sex?

- Yes, consent was given at the beginning.
- No, consent must be a continuous process.
- I am not sure.

Q12 Two individuals are flirting at a party. They have both been drinking and decide to go back to Individual A's dorm room. Individual B is clearly intoxicated (slurring words, stumbling, etc.); however, Individual A is not. They end up engaging in sexual intercourse. Would this be considered consensual sex?

- Yes, they both wanted to have sex.
- No, consent cannot be given while intoxicated.
- I am not sure.

Q13 A couple has just started dating and are having a sleepover. Partner A verbalizes that they want to have sex, Partner B has an 8AM class and says that they are too tired.
Partner A continuously asks, wearing down Partner B until they agree to have sex. Would this be considered consensual sex?

- Yes, Partner B said yes.
- No, the response was not enthusiastic.
- I am not sure.

Q14 What would be the best way to further educate students on consent?

- Taking the SPARC course every year
- Have the outreach educator visit BSU classes and present information
- Offer more BSU classes on the topic of consent
- We do not need further education
- Other ________________________________

End of Block: Consent Questions

Start of Block: Demographics

Q15 How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18-19
- 20-21
- 22-24
- 25+

Q16 What is your race?

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Not listed ________________________________

Q17 What is your gender identity?

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Non-binary
Q18 What sexuality do you identify yourself with?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Not listed _____________________________
- Prefer not to say

Q19 What is your major?

__________________________________________

Q20 Do you currently live on campus?

- Yes
- No

Q21 Are you on a BSU athletic team?

- Yes
- No

Q22 Are you involved in Greek life?

- Yes
- No

Q23 Are you currently in a committed relationship?

- Yes
- No
- It's complicated

End of Block: Demographics
Appendix E

Figure 1.1: Perception of Knowledge of Sexual Consent by Relationship Status

Q2: I feel confident in my understanding of consent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Knowledge of Sexual Consent (PU)</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>It’s Complicated</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>98.2%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
<td>98.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 9.56
p < 0.05

Figure 3.1: Perception of Need for Continuous Consent

Q11: A couple is engaging in consensual sex. Halfway through, Partner A decides they no longer wish to have sex, but regardless, Partner B continues. Is this still considered consensual sex?
REFERENCES


Emba, Christine. 2022. “Consent is Not Enough. We Need a New Sexual Ethic.” The Washington Post. Retrieved April 17, 2022, from


https://doi.org/10.3390/bs8080069


