

PERCEPTIONS OF CONSENT AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE EFFECTS OF PERPETRATOR, TARGET, AND PERCEIVER GENDER

 Frank Kotey*

 Maureen C. Kenny**

 Jasmin Hernandez***

Abstract

Sexual assault is prevalent on college campuses, undermining student safety and success. About 1 in 4 female and 1 in 14 male undergraduates experience sexual violence (Cantor et al. 2019). Misunderstandings of sexual consent, especially involving coercion, may correlate with these rates. This online survey (n=565) examined participants' perceptions of 10 coercion scenarios, focusing on the interaction between participant gender and perpetrator-victim gender combinations. Ordinal logistic regression revealed significant gender differences, with men being less likely than women to identify specific scenarios as nonconsensual. Findings highlight the need for targeted consent education and accountability policies.

Keywords: Trauma, college sexual violence, consent, sexual assault.

Resumo

Percepções sobre consentimento entre estudantes universitários/as: os efeitos do gênero do/a autor/a, da vítima e do/a perpetrador/a

O abuso sexual é comum nos *campi* universitários, afetando a segurança e o sucesso das/os estudantes. Estima-se que uma em cada quatro mulheres e um em cada catorze homens vivenciem violência sexual (Cantor et al. 2019). A falta de compreensão do consentimento, especialmente em casos de coerção, pode explicar essas taxas. Este estudo *online* (n=565) avaliou as percepções de 10 cenários, levando em conta o sexo das/os participantes, vítimas e agressores/as. A regressão logística ordinal revelou disparidades significativas: os homens foram menos propensos a reconhecer situações não consensuais.

* Florida International University (FIU), Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Postal address: 11200 SW 8th Street, Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Email: Fkote001@fiu.edu

** Florida International University (FIU), Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Postal address: 11200 SW 8th Street, DM 234, Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Email: kennym@fiu.edu

*** Florida International University (FIU), Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Postal address: 11200 SW 8th Street, Miami, Florida 33199, United States.
Email: Jhern711@fiu.edu

Os resultados reforçam a necessidade de educação sobre consentimento e de políticas de responsabilização.

Palavras-chave: Trauma, violência sexual na universidade, consentimento, agressão sexual.

Résumé

Perceptions du consentement chez les étudiants de niveau collégial : les effets du sexe de l'agresseur, de la cible et du percepteur

Les agressions sexuelles sont fréquentes sur les campus, compromettant la sécurité et la réussite des étudiants. Environ une étudiante sur quatre et un étudiant sur quatorze subissent des violences sexuelles (Cantor et al. 2019). Le manque de compréhension du consentement, notamment en cas de coercition, contribue à ces taux. Cette étude en ligne (n = 565) a évalué les perceptions de 10 scénarios en fonction du sexe des participants, qu'ils soient victimes ou agresseurs. Une régression logistique ordinale révèle que les hommes reconnaissent moins souvent certaines situations non consensuelles. Ces résultats soulignent la nécessité d'éduquer au consentement et de mettre en place des politiques de responsabilisation.

Mots-clés : Trauma, violence sexuelle au collège, consentement, agression sexuelle.

1. Introduction

Campus sexual assault (CSA) remains the most prevalent campus crime in the U.S. (NCES 2022). Despite extensive prevention efforts, rates have continued to rise (ACHA 2023). Approximately 13% of students experience rape or sexual assault, with women affected at significantly higher rates than men (Cantor et al. 2020; Steele et al. 2024). Reported rates range from 4% to 30%, partly due to varying definitions and measurement tools for CSA (Fedina et al. 2018). Broader definitions tend to yield higher prevalence estimates.

A key factor in CSA is misunderstanding consent and coercion. Acts involving submission through pressure, intimidation, or manipulation are often unrecognized as assault (Stallone 2021). Survivors may rationalize coercion as consent, reinforcing cycles of sexual violence. Traditional consent education emphasizing “no means no” contrasts with affirmative consent (“yes means yes”) models that stress active agreement (Beres 2020; Savoie et al. 2023). Misunderstanding these dynamics can heighten survivor guilt and confusion (Gómez 2021; Orchowski et al. 2022).

Sexual coercion – verbal pressure, intimidation, or substance use to obtain compliance – undermines autonomy (Garner et al. 2017; Goltz 2020). When coercion is included, prevalence rates of unwanted sexual contact exceed 30% for women (Fedina et al. 2018). Men remain more likely to engage in coercive behaviors (Fernández-Fuertes et al. 2018), and racial disparities persist, with Black students reporting higher coercion rates (Morales & Raghavan 2024). Normalized coercion threatens the integrity of consent and perpetuates gendered power dynamics (Eaton & Matamala 2014; Katz et al. 2017).

1.2. Definitions of Consent

This study follows Planned Parenthood's (2024) FRIES model: Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic, and Specific. Consent must be voluntary, can be withdrawn, and requires full information, desire, and clarity about each act (DVSN 2022). Individuals must have the cognitive and emotional capacity to consent, unaffected by intoxication or coercion. Affirmative consent ("yes means yes") promotes explicit agreement and mutual respect (Sandoz et al. 2021). However, persistent cultural beliefs equating male persistence with masculinity hinder understanding (Eaton & Matamala 2014).

1.3. Consent Among College Students

Despite educational campaigns (Coker et al. 2015; Freire et al. 2018), many students misunderstand consent (Anyadike-Danese et al. 2024). Gender norms influence interpretation – men may view women's refusals as "token resistance," while women use indirect refusals to avoid stigma (Oware et al. 2023; Prieto & Moyano 2024). Such ambiguity can lead to unwanted sexual encounters.

Students also fail to recognize that coercion, intoxication, or manipulation invalidate consent (Pugh & Becker 2018). Verbal coercion remains widespread (Garrido-Macías et al. 2022), blurring the line between agreement and pressure. Gender further shapes these perceptions, with men often downplaying coercion or viewing it as normative.

1.4. Perceiver Gender and Perceptions of Consent

Research is mixed on gender differences in understanding consent. Some studies show men are less likely than women to recognize consent boundaries (Jozkowski et al. 2014; Wegner & Abbey 2016), while others find minimal gender differences (Willis & Smith 2022). Women tend to prioritize verbal confirmation, whereas men rely on nonverbal cues. Gender also affects perceptions of blame – male observers judge female victims more harshly when they appear "promiscuous" or fail to resist (Klettke et al. 2018). These differences underscore the gendered nature of consent interpretation (Baldwin-White 2019).

1.5. Actor Gender and Perceptions of Consent

Perceptions also vary by the genders of the victim and perpetrator. Men are more likely to misinterpret friendliness as sexual interest (Wegner & Abbey 2016).

Female perpetrators are often perceived as less culpable or even excused due to gender stereotypes (Walfield 2018; Bagasra et al. 2023). Conversely, male perpetrators are viewed as more responsible for misconduct (Gavin & Scott 2016). These double standards obscure recognition of male victimization (Stephens & Eaton 2014).

1.6. Present Study

This study explored perceptions of sexual scenarios among college students at a Hispanic-serving institution, examining the influence of perceiver, perpetrator, and victim gender. It was hypothesized that scenarios involving female perpetrators or same-gender pairs would be rated as more consensual, ethical, and legal than male-perpetrated ones, and that male participants would display more permissive attitudes.

2. Methods

2.2. Participants

Undergraduate students (n=565) aged 18+ from a South Florida university participated for one extra credit point. Surveys were distributed via SONA; 42 of 607 students did not consent.

2.3. Procedures

After IRB approval (IRB#24-0042), participants completed a 40-minute Qualtrics survey. Only those who agreed to informed consent were included.

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Demographics

Participants were asked a series of questions to obtain information about their age (numerical entry), gender (man, woman, non-binary, prefer not to say, or other), ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic), and race (white, black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or other).

2.4.2. Scenarios

A single Qualtrics survey was developed to assess participants' perceptions of sexual scenarios in terms of consent, legality, and ethicality. The instru-

ment consisted of 10 vignettes (see Table 1) adapted from Willis and Jozkowski (2022), Methodist University Sexual Misconduct materials (n.d.), and the Facing History & Ourselves program (2020), supplemented with examples derived from the researcher's experience in victim advocacy. Each vignette depicted a plausible sexual interaction between two individuals in a college context and was designed to reflect one or more of the five core principles of consent: freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific.

Participants were randomly assigned one of five gender pairings for each scenario: male perpetrator/female victim, female perpetrator/male victim, male perpetrator/male victim, female perpetrator/female victim, or ambiguous perpetrator/victim identities. The ten scenarios included nonconsensual pornography ("NCP"), non-specific consent ("specific"), sexual coercion ("sex"), alcohol-related consent, non-enthusiastic consent ("enthusiastic"), groping ("grope"), substance use ("substance"), coerced kissing ("kiss"), reversible consent ("reversible"), and a consensual interaction ("consensual") as a control condition.

Scenario content varied to capture different dimensions of consent violations. For example, the NCP vignette depicted consensual sex that was nonconsensually recorded; the specific scenario illustrated agreement to kissing but not to oral sex; and the sexual coercion vignette involved pressure to engage in first-time intercourse. Other vignettes depicted silent consent under intoxication, withdrawal of consent, coercive kissing, and unwanted sexual contact. The consensual vignette involved mutual, voluntary participation.

Following each scenario, participants evaluated the interaction by selecting all applicable descriptors from six options: consensual, ethical, legal, nonconsensual, unethical, or illegal. These responses provided measures of participants' perceptions of the nature and boundaries of sexual consent across diverse contexts.

Table 1
Examples of Sexual Consent Scenarios Provided to Participants

Nonconsensual Porn	XXX and YYY are in a new sexual relationship. Things are going very well and XXX is particularly impressed with YYY's performance in bed. XXX has been bragging to friends about YYY and wants to provide evidence. So, XXX hides a video camera in the bedroom and video records them having sex. YYY is unaware of the camera.
Specific	XXX and YYY meet at a party and start talking. They hit it off immediately and find a quiet corner to make out in. Over the course of the evening, YYY consumes much more alcohol than XXX does and has slurred speech and a hard time standing up. XXX recognizes that YYY is drunk but likes that they are being playful and flirtatious. XXX suggests that they go back to XXX's residence hall room. YYY agrees but has to be physically steadied as they leave the party. When they get back to XXX's place, YYY flops on XXX's bed with closed eyes. XXX offers YYY oral sex. YYY mumbles something that XXX can't understand but seems to cooperate as XXX undresses YYY. So, XXX proceeds to perform oral sex on YYY.

Sex	YYY and XXX have been dating for about a year. Although they have engaged in some sexual touching, they have never engaged in sexual intercourse. One night, as they are cuddling, XXX decides that they have waited long enough and starts pressuring YYY to have sex. XXX tells YYY that, if they loved each other, they would have sex. XXX then threatens to break up with YYY if they don't have sex. YYY verbally expresses hesitance to have sex but then goes silent. They have sex.
Alcohol	YYY and XXX are friends. They go out drinking and dancing at a club, they both get drunk. While at the club, XXX begins to grope YYY heavily. YYY is too drunk to notice or resist. Eventually, XXX takes YYY home and they have sex. The next morning, YYY does not remember that they had sex.
Enthusiastic	XXX and YYY are engaging in a sexual encounter. XXX begins to intensify the level of contact and moves quickly from touching and kissing to sexual stimulation with a hand. YYY responds by pulling away slightly, moving XXX's hands and saying, "Hey, hold on; I'm not sure." XXX cooperates briefly but then intensifies the contact once more. YYY inches backwards and then becomes still. They have sex.
Grope	XXX and YYY meet at a party. They spend the evening dancing and getting to know each other. XXX convinces YYY to come up to XXX's room. While in XXX's room, XXX uses every line XXX can think of to convince YYY to have sex, at first YYY adamantly refuses. XXX keeps at YYY, and begins to question YYY's interest, and accuses YYY of being "a prude." Finally, it seems to XXX that YYY's resolve is weakening, and XXX convinces YYY to touch XXX's genitals.
Substance	XXX and YYY are friends. They spend the evening watching movies and smoking marijuana; it is YYY's first time smoking. In the middle of the movie, XXX begins to grope YYY heavily. YYY is high and does not seem to react or resist. Eventually, XXX initiates sex with YYY.
Kiss	XXX has liked YYY for ages. XXX sees YYY in an art studio after class and decides to enter the room. When XXX enters, XXX realizes that YYY is alone. YYY moves to leave the room, but XXX blocks the door and says, "I'll let you pass, if you kiss me". XXX moves forward to try to kiss YYY, but YYY pushes XXX away and leaves.
Reversible	XXX and YYY are dating. YYY is uncertain about whether they should have sex, but XXX is persuasive and finally obtains YYY's voluntary agreement. As they engage in sex, YYY says "wait – stop – that hurts." XXX nonetheless continues for several more minutes, ignoring YYY.
Consensual	YYY and XXX have been talking to each other and dating for several weeks without any sexual contact. They meet at a bar and share drinks. After a couple of drinks, XXX gains the confidence to ask YYY to come over to watch a movie. YYY agrees and they go to XXX's apartment. At the apartment, XXX begins to touch YYY's thigh. YYY tenses up initially, surprised, and then relaxes to the touch. They begin to kiss, and they have sex.

Source: Compiled by Jasmin Hernandez.

3. Results

Participants’ mean age was 22.77 (SD=5.42). Most identified as women (84%) and Hispanic (73%). Regression analyses found no significant effects of perpetrator/victim gender on perceptions. However, t-tests revealed significant gender-based differences for five scenarios: groping, reversible consent, nonconsensual pornography, sexual coercion, and substance use. Men rated these scenarios as more consensual than women did (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2
Independent Samples Test for Perceptions by Scenario (n = 558)

	Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means	
	F	Sig.	t	df
Grope	15.348	<.001	3.681	556
Reversible	17.760	<.001	3.948	556
Nonconsensual Porn	7.137	.008	1.599	556
Specific	.902	.343	-.792	556
Sex	5.967	.015	1.382	556
Consensual	3.340	.068	2.075	556
Alcohol	.570	.451	-.282	556
Enthusiastic	1.730	.189	1.241	556
Substance	4.825	.028	.686	556
Kiss	.051	.822	-1.328	556
Note. Equal variances assumed.				

Source: Compiled by Frank Kotey.

Table 3
Post-Hoc Analysis of Differences in Scenarios by Gender (n = 558)

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cohen’s d
Grope	Men	82	-1.28	1.550	1.205
	Women	476	-1.81	1.136	
Reversible	Men	82	-1.79	1.293	1.045
	Women	476	-2.29	.996	
Nonconsensual Porn	Men	82	-2.56	.890	.769
	Women	476	-2.71	.746	

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cohen's d
Sex	Men	82	-1.70	1.183	1.057
	Women	476	-1.87	1.034	
Substance	Men	82	-1.84	1.470	1.318
	Women	476	-1.95	1.290	

Source: Compiled by Frank Kotey.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of sexual consent among young adults, focusing on factors such as gender, scenario type, and the genders of both perpetrator and victim. Contrary to expectations, results did not yield significant findings based on perpetrator or victim gender. Social roles may help explain this. Society expects women to be nurturing and empathetic; when they commit sexual violence, it is seen as a deeper violation of norms, provoking moral outrage (Depraetere et al. 2021). Because female-perpetrated assault is less common and less discussed, such cases attract heightened scrutiny and disbelief (Stephens & Eaton 2014). Yet research also shows more lenient perceptions and punishments for female perpetrators (Moore & Miller-Perrin 2021; Socia et al. 2019), and survivors of female-perpetrated assault remain under-researched (Munroe & Shumway 2020). Abuse by males is generally perceived as more severe (Wilson & Smirles 2020).

Participant gender also influenced perceptions. Men often use enticement in relationships (Fornicola & Peterson 2022), which may explain why they rated coercive or reversible scenarios as more consensual. Traditional norms often teach men to minimize the seriousness of assault, particularly in ambiguous situations (Depraetere et al. 2021). Cultural scripts may normalize persistence, and many men internalize entitlement to sexual access, especially in relationships (Pella & McClung 2024; Trottier et al. 2024). Misunderstandings about withdrawing consent, limited education, and media depictions focused on physical force further obscure recognition of coercion or psychological manipulation (Anderson et al. 2022; Elmore et al. 2020; Aubrey et al. 2023).

Cognitive dissonance may also play a role (Wong et al. 2022). Men who have engaged in or witnessed similar behaviors may minimize their severity to avoid dissonance. Women may also underrecognize coercive scenarios to reconcile conflicting beliefs about perpetrators or societal narratives (Baldwin-White 2021). Normative social influence is another factor: students may conform to social norms that downplay certain acts, particularly in relationships or when women are perpetrators (Lim 2022).

Social desirability and gender norms also shape perceptions. Masculine ideals glorifying dominance and conquest can pressure individuals to condone coercive behaviors (Depraetere et al. 2021). Traditional norms promoting passivity in women can discourage resistance or reporting, reinforcing acceptance of such behaviors. Social role theory suggests that gendered expectations shape attitudes and perceptions (Li et al. 2021). Women, socialized to prioritize harmony and avoid conflict, may hesitate to label behaviors as assault. Similarly, widespread exposure to nonconsensual pornography can desensitize individuals and trivialize its harm.

Overall, these findings suggest that deeply ingrained gender norms, social expectations, and cognitive mechanisms may explain the absence of significant differences. They also highlight the need for comprehensive consent education, media literacy, and gender-sensitive prevention strategies that address subtle forms of coercion and reshape harmful social narratives.

5. Limitations

Each scenario needed to be analyzed individually and could not be directly compared due to major differences, such as the length and nature of the relationship. This study examined how men and women responded to each scenario separately, and group size may have influenced results. Future studies could make controlled changes to the scenarios to allow for direct comparisons, thereby controlling for variables like relationship length and type.

A potential explanation for the lack of significant findings related to perpetrator and victim gender may lie in the limited survey structure. Participants were asked to classify each scenario as consensual, legal, ethical, nonconsensual, illegal, or unethical. While this dichotomous format is a novel approach, it inherently restricts participant responses and prevents deeper exploration of nuanced perceptions. Limited response options may have reduced variability and obscured meaningful differences. Future research could use a 5- or 7-point Likert scale to increase variability and enhance the ability to detect significant effects.

Additionally, the survey questions may not have fully captured nuanced attitudes, such as those related to gender roles, which strongly influence consent perceptions. Conducting the study online also introduces limitations, including sampling bias, self-selection bias, lack of environmental control, reduced response quality, and validity concerns. Although names were used to signal gender, the absence of pronouns may have weakened gender representation. Future studies could incorporate explicit pronouns or stronger gender indicators to enhance clarity and examine how gender cues shape perceptions. Refining measurement tools to better capture gender dynamics and attitudes could yield deeper insights into how gender roles influence consent judgments.

Finally, the study did not collect information on participants' sexual orientation, which could be a meaningful factor in shaping consent perceptions. The analysis was limited to men and women due to the small number of participants identifying in other categories. Exploring differences among sexual minorities could reveal important risk factors and patterns in consent perceptions (Basile et al. 2021).

6. Future Directions

Despite the lack of significant findings, this study underscores the complexity of sexual consent perceptions and the need for continued research. The sample size was adequate to detect key effects, especially among Hispanic college students, offering insights into an underexplored group. This work contributes to a growing field by examining consent perceptions within specific sociocultural contexts. Future research should include more nuanced variables, such as cultural beliefs, and examine how victim and perpetrator race or participants' personal experiences with sexual assault influence perceptions.

Longitudinal studies could assess how consent education shapes perceptions over time and across relationships. Evidence shows that comprehensive education reduces nonconsensual scenarios, highlighting the importance of exploring its long-term effects (MacDougall et al. 2020).

While this study did not find significant results, it identified scenarios posing the highest assault risks in heteronormative college settings. Gender-based differences in perception could guide targeted consent education and prevention efforts. Future research should use more diverse samples (including men, racial minorities, and sexual minorities), improved measures, and varied methodologies to gain deeper insights.

To reduce sexual violence, interventions should challenge harmful gender norms and promote comprehensive, victim-centered consent education. Re-examining gender roles and their influence on perceptions is vital. Scenarios involving male victims and female perpetrators may be perceived as consensual, leading to underrecognition and perpetuating assault rates. Understanding minority victimization and its link to consent perceptions could improve help-seeking pathways (Harris & Linder 2017; Decker et al. 2019).

Finally, educating men as potential perpetrators to adopt more empathetic approaches to identifying and verifying consent could foster healthier, more respectful sexual interactions (Bonar et al. 2020). Through targeted education, cultural change, and systemic support, society can move toward universally understood and respected consent.

Authors' contributions:

FK: Conceptualization; formal analysis; research; methodology; software; validation; writing of original draft; review & editing.

MCK: Conceptualization; validation; writing – review & editing.

JH: Validation.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Frank Kotey, M.S., is a doctoral student in the Applied Social Cultural Psychology program at Florida International University. He earned his B.S. in Psychology with a concentration in Child Psychology from the University of North Florida and his M.S. in Counselor Education (Clinical Mental Health Counseling) from FIU. A licensed mental health counselor, he has provided therapy to children, adolescents, and adults. His research explores intergenerational trauma among men of color and its impact on relationships.

Maureen C. Kenny, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology and Associate Chair of Academic Personnel at Florida International University. A licensed psychologist and Nationally Certified Counselor, she is an international expert on child maltreatment, sexual abuse prevention, and mandatory reporting laws. Dr. Kenny has published over 100 peer-reviewed articles, 18 book chapters, and three books, and has received multiple awards for teaching, research, and mentoring.

Jasmin Hernandez acquired her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Florida International University in 2025. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Liberty University, focusing on becoming a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. She is most passionate about researching and

understanding the development of mental health disorders among children and adolescents, especially within marginalized communities.

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