

Sexual Consent in a South African Higher Education Sample: An Examination of Differences in Conceptualisation and Communication

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Abstract

South African higher education institutions continue to experience alarmingly high levels of sexual abuse and gender-based violence, underscoring the urgency of understanding how sexual consent is conceptualised and communicated among young adults. Poor understanding of consent is widely linked to sexual exploitation, coercion, manipulation, and abuse. Despite its critical importance, the communicative dimensions of sexual consent in South African higher education remain substantially under-researched. This study aimed to examine how university students at a South African higher education institution conceptualise and communicate sexual consent based on their own sexual encounters. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, with data generated through semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected university students at a historically disadvantaged institution in the Western Cape province. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Participants predominantly relied on non-verbal cues to communicate consent and frequently submitted to expectations set by the individual initiating the encounter. Many participants described sexual experiences that they did not perceive as rape, yet neither fully desired nor explicitly consented to. Explicit verbal consent was uncommon and often viewed as unnecessary or awkward. Significant gendered asymmetries in initiation and compliance were evident, and intoxication frequently created conditions in which meaningful consent was compromised. Participants demonstrated difficulty distinguishing between non-consensual sex and rape, suggesting a concerning gap in consent literacy. The findings point to an urgent need for higher education institutions to embed discussions of consent communication, power, and assertiveness within student orientation and reproductive health programmes and initiatives.

Keywords: consent communication, higher education, non-consensual sex, sexual consent, South Africa.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence among university students constitutes a pressing public health and human rights concern that demands sustained attention from scholars, institutional administrators, and policymakers alike (Perez-Trujillo et al., 2019). Women are

disproportionately affected. Research consistently indicates that at least one in five women experiences some form of sexual violence or assault during their time at tertiary institutions, and sexual violence on campuses occurs at a troublingly high frequency globally (Ajayi et al., 2021). Within the South African context, this problem assumes particular urgency. South Africa registers among the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, with the murder rate of women estimated to be approximately five times the global average. Alarming, at least half of all women who are killed in South Africa die at the hands of an intimate partner (Boonzaier, 2023). Official rape statistics are widely regarded as significant underestimates, due to pervasive underreporting driven by stigma, fear of reprisal, distrust of institutional responses, and structural barriers to justice (Fielding-Miller et al., 2021; Makhaye et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, understanding how young people navigate the communication of sexual consent and where that communication breaks down is a matter of considerable social and scientific importance. While existing South African research in higher education has addressed the prevalence of sexual violence (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018; Oni et al., 2019), the perpetuation of rape culture on campuses (Orth et al., 2020), sexual coercion in relation to hegemonic masculinities (Clowes et al., 2011; Stern et al., 2016), and women's constructions of sexual consent (Beare & Boonzaier, 2020), no study to date has examined how both men and women understand, negotiate, and communicate consent in their own encounters, particularly in contexts of ambiguity, pressure, and unequal power. The bulk of existing research has focused on sexual violence, coercion, and harassment rather than on consent as an active communicative practice. This study responds directly to that gap.

The aim of the study was thus to examine how sexual consent is conceptualised and communicated among students at a South African higher education institution. The objectives were threefold: 1) to understand how participants communicate consent in their own sexual encounters; 2) to explore the factors that enable or inhibit assertive consent communication; and 3) to identify implications for sexual violence prevention and sexuality education on campuses.

2. Research Methods and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design (Lambert & Lambert, 2012; Sandelowski, 2000) situated within an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative description was selected for its capacity to produce a rich, accessible account of participants' experiences and perspectives in their own terms. The interpretivist paradigm foregrounds the subjective meanings that individuals bring to their lived experiences, which is particularly appropriate given the sensitive, contextually embedded nature of sexual consent.

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews. Participants were 20 university students purposively recruited from a higher education institution in the Western Cape province of South Africa through an open invitation to the broader student community. To be eligible, participants were required to be registered

students between the ages of 19 and 29. Interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms and audio-recorded, and, where participants granted permission, video-recorded as well. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using a software transcription programme, after which transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Each interview comprised two stages. The first was a scenarios section, in which participants responded to three researcher-developed vignettes depicting a sexual encounter between two gender-neutral characters (named Tyler and Alex), ranging from clearly consensual to ambiguous to clearly non-consensual. The second stage was a personal-narrative section, in which participants described a sexual encounter from their own recent experience.

Data were analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The author conducted an independent analysis, after which the themes, codes, and supporting data were reviewed, refined, and consolidated through an iterative process of reflection and analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape (Reference No. HS21/5/16). All participants were assured of full confidentiality and anonymity; pseudonyms* are used throughout this paper. Participants were informed that withdrawal carried no consequences at any stage, and all were made aware of the availability of counselling support both immediately following the interview and at a one-week follow-up contact. Only one participant requested a debriefing session, and a trained counsellor was made available.

3. Results

Participant Characteristics

The participant sample comprised 20 university students who voluntarily opted to take part in the study. Fourteen (70%) self-identified as female, while six (30%) self-identified as male. All participants discussed dyadic sexual interactions, and the ratio of participants to partners was 1:1. Of the 20 sexual partners discussed, 75% were identified as male and 25% as female. With regard to sexual orientation, 15% of participants (all female) identified as bisexual, one female participant described herself as queer, one male participant identified as homosexual, and the remaining 75% identified as heterosexual. Apart from one male-male encounter, all other participants described male-female sexual interactions, regardless of their self-identified sexual orientation.

In terms of race and ethnicity,¹ 52% of participants identified as Black African² and 48% as Coloured,³ broadly reflecting the demographic composition of the particular institution from which they were sampled. No White, Indian, or Asian participants opted to take part in the study. As an indication of diversity, seven of South Africa's 11 official languages were represented among the participants, with eight participants being English-speaking, four Xhosa-speaking, three Afrikaans-speaking, three Sotho-speaking, and one each speaking Zulu, Ndebele, and Tsonga. It is noteworthy that interviews were conducted in English, meaning many participants were engaging with a sensitive and nuanced topic in a language that was not their first. At the time of the interviews, all participants were registered at the University of the Western Cape. Twelve (57%) were from the Western Cape province, with the remainder being from Gauteng ($n = 3$), the Eastern Cape ($n = 2$), and one each from Limpopo, Mpumalanga, the Free State, and the Northern Cape.

The types of relationships in which the described encounters took place were diverse, encompassing boyfriends and girlfriends, committed long-term partnerships, friendships, friends-with-benefits arrangements, dating relationships, ex-partner encounters, and casual hookups or one-night stands. Most encounters took place in private residential spaces, primarily a partner's room or home, followed by dormitory rooms, apartments, and, less commonly, in semi-public settings such as cars, hotel rooms, or outdoor areas.

Thematic Findings

In response to the study objectives, the data yielded eight interrelated themes that collectively illuminate how participants understood, communicated, and experienced sexual consent. These themes are presented in a sequence that moves from the communicative practices participants employed, through the internal and external pressures that shaped their responses, to the broader structural and educational factors that contextualised their experiences.

Theme 1: The primacy of non-verbal communication and the persistence of ambiguity

Across the sample, the most consistent finding was that explicit verbal consent was rare and, for many, felt unnecessary, unnatural, or even counterproductive. The dominant mode of communicating consent was non-verbal through physical reciprocation, body language, movement, and the continuation of activity, rather than through verbal agreement. Participants spoke of reading cues, sensing desire, and gauging readiness from how a partner's body moved or responded. While this

¹These categories reflect the racial classification system established during apartheid in South Africa and are retained by Statistics South Africa for the purposes of monitoring equity and redressing historical disadvantage. Racial categories are acknowledged as socially and historically constructed rather than biologically determined.

²Black African refers to indigenous African ethnic groups (such as Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and Tswana peoples).

³Coloured is a distinct cultural identity referring to people of mixed heritage (typically descending from indigenous Khoisan peoples, enslaved persons brought to the Cape, Malay immigrants, and European settlers).

reliance on non-verbal signals reflects common real-world sexual scripts, it creates substantial scope for misinterpretation.

Several participants described scenarios in which ambiguous non-verbal signals were either missed or deliberately disregarded. Kelsey*, a 22-year-old female participant, articulated this ambiguity in her response to the research vignettes: she noted that when one character pulled away from a kiss and paused, this created “a grey area” because “pulling away can mean many things”. She acknowledged that without spoken clarification, it was impossible to determine whether the pause signalled discomfort, hesitation, or merely a moment to catch one’s breath. This observation captures a tension that appeared throughout the data: the same non-verbal behaviour can carry entirely different meanings depending on the observer’s willingness to interpret it charitably or self-servingly.

Participants also highlighted a widely shared perception that asking directly for verbal consent disrupts the “flow” of a sexual encounter and can render the moment awkward or clinical. One participant described explicit verbal consent as feeling like a “passion killer”, a phrase that encapsulates a broader cultural ambivalence about the place of explicit communication in sexual intimacy. This perception did not disappear even when participants intellectually endorsed verbal consent as the ideal standard. Zanele*, a female participant who defined consent as requiring verbal agreement from both parties, nonetheless acknowledged that, in practice, “you just get caught up in the moment and give signs to agree”. The gap between normative ideals and lived practice was consistently evident.

Busisiwe*, reflecting on what constitutes meaningful consent, offered a particularly thoughtful formulation: “If you have to doubt whether or not I want to, then I most probably do not want to. Consent is a clear yes! Not a yes when I’m drunk. A yes when I’m in my sound mind.” Her framing highlights that for her, genuine consent is unambiguous and unimpaired and that its absence is itself meaningful. Yet this standard was rarely operative in how encounters actually unfolded.

Theme 2: Internal pressure and the feeling of being past the point of no return

A notable pattern among female participants in particular was the experience of an internal sense of obligation. They shared a felt expectation that once a certain threshold had been crossed in a sexual encounter, withdrawal was no longer a socially or personally acceptable option. This threshold was variously described as entering a bedroom, undressing, or having engaged in kissing and touching for a period of time. Participants described the logic of this felt obligation using phrases such as “things had already gone so far” and the sense that stopping at that point would be “weird” or unfair to a partner who had been led to believe sex was forthcoming.

This experience was sometimes framed by participants in terms of what they called “false advertising”, the idea that one’s earlier behaviour had implicitly communicated a willingness to have sex that it would now be duplicitous or unkind to retract. Naledi*, a female participant, described finding herself in a situation in which she

went “*along with it*”, not because she actively desired sex but because the alternative (such as stopping, explaining, potentially disappointing or upsetting her partner) felt more uncomfortable than complying. She described the encounter as something that “*just happened*”, a phrase that recurred across the data with striking frequency. It is significant that so many participants used near-identical language to describe experiences they did not fully want, characterising them as events that unfolded rather than choices they made. It points to the operation of what might be understood as a structural passivity: participants became passive objects of an unfolding sequence rather than active agents in their own sexual decisions.

Sifiso*, a female participant, reflected on how, earlier in her life, she had often simply gone along with things out of a fear of saying no: “*Prior to this, I would just go along and be scared to say anything. But recently, it’s just so much different. I feel more safer saying and discussing my boundaries before it actually happens.*” Her account suggests that this kind of passive compliance is not a fixed individual trait but a learned pattern that can, with time and experience, be unlearned. This underscores the value of targeted education and empowerment interventions.

Theme 3: Power dynamics, social reputation, and the fear of saying no

Consent was frequently mediated by power imbalances between participants and their sexual partners, as well as by perceived social consequences of refusal. Several female participants described encounters in which saying no carried risks to the relationship, to their reputation within a shared social circle, or to the emotional well-being of the partner, who might feel rejected or hurt. This meant that compliance was, in a meaningful sense, coerced not through physical force but through the anticipation of social or relational costs.

One female participant described feeling unable to decline a sexual encounter with a male partner who was, in her words, socially “*influential*” and “*prominent*” within their shared social network. She feared that rejection would lead him to speak negatively about her to their mutual friends, threatening her social standing. Her capacity to give or withhold consent was therefore constrained by a power differential that had nothing to do with her own desires but rather with the social consequences of asserting them.

Participants also frequently described a pattern in which their own emotional states and desires were subordinated to the comfort and expectations of their partners. The goal became managing the partner’s feelings, ensuring they were not hurt, rejected, or disappointed. This came at the expense of the participant’s own wishes. This dynamic reflects a deeply gendered pattern of emotional labour in which women bear the burden of managing interpersonal affect in sexual encounters. As Kiara* observed in reflecting on a friend’s experience: “*There was this guy who would buy her things and help out at home, and when they were alone, he wanted sex. She said, ‘What are you doing? We’re friends.’ And he said, ‘I’ve been spoiling you this whole time. Do you think that was for free?’ Not because she wanted to, she consented to it, but she didn’t actually want to. She felt like she*

had to.” Kiara concluded that this constituted rape, observing: “Even putting someone in a position where they feel like they have to... That is rape.”*

Buyanda*, a male participant, disclosed a dynamic in which he described himself as having “smooth-talked” a female partner who was a virgin into continuing after she disclosed her virginity mid-encounter. He acknowledged that this involved a degree of convincing or persuasion, and he reflected openly on the power asymmetry: “*In a relationship, there’s always that person who has more power than the other ... I had the authority.*” While he did not interpret his own behaviour as coercive, his account raises significant questions about the role of persuasion and differential power in sexual encounters that participants themselves may not initially recognise as problematic.

Theme 4: Relationship type as a determinant of consent communication

Participants consistently drew a distinction between how consent was communicated, or failed to be communicated, in established relationships versus casual or new encounters. Within committed relationships or long-term partnerships, participants described greater ease in communicating boundaries, more established mutual knowledge of each other’s preferences and limits, and a stronger sense of emotional safety. Kim*, who had discussed sexual boundaries with her partner in advance and continued to check in with him during their encounter, represented one end of this spectrum: “*Things can change very quickly in a second*”, she noted, explaining why ongoing verbal checking-in mattered even within an established relationship. “*Yes to one thing is not a universal yes,*” she said.

In sharp contrast, casual encounters, such as hookups, one-night stands, and encounters with people who were relatively unknown to the participant, were frequently described as lacking any prior discussion of preferences, boundaries, or protection. Participants often noted that in these contexts, both parties simply proceeded based on assumed mutual interest, with little or no explicit communication. Liam*, a male participant who described a hookup in which consent had been discussed via WhatsApp beforehand, described his encounter as relatively straightforward. This was, however, a relatively unusual account, distinguishable from many other casual encounters in the data precisely because some level of prior communication had occurred.

Zanele reflected on this difference thoughtfully: “*He would understand what I like and what I don’t like and what I feel comfortable with and what I don’t, if we had been together longer. With someone I only met a week ago, those things weren’t discussed.*” This observation captures a broader pattern: the social norms around consent communication appear calibrated to relationship context in ways that leave participants in casual encounters with the least protection and the least clarity precisely when they are most vulnerable.

Theme 5: Gendered roles in initiation and the double standard

A strongly gendered asymmetry in who initiates sexual encounters and how consent is managed was evident throughout the data. Men were widely understood to be the

"natural" initiators of sex, portrayed as reliably ready and desirous, while women were cast in the role of *"gatekeeper"*, expected either to hold firm or to permit the encounter to proceed. This framing positioned female consent as a barrier to be overcome rather than a mutual condition of the encounter, and it naturalised a dynamic in which men initiate and women comply, accommodate, or resist.

Several male participants described persistence strategies, such as returning to a partner after a pause or continuing to initiate after hesitation. They did not interpret these behaviours as coercive, but they may reflect how male sexual initiative can sometimes overlook or downplay female reluctance. Nico*, a male participant, described how he continued to initiate after a pause from his partner: while he framed this in terms of gauging desire, his account illustrates how the social expectation that men should persist can place women in positions of ongoing and repeated refusal or accommodation.

A further gendered asymmetry emerged around the social consequences of female sexual initiative. One participant noted that women who initiate sex risk being labelled or *"slut-shamed"*, a double standard that reinforces women's passive or gatekeeping role and further limits their capacity to act as active, desiring agents in their own sexual encounters. This slut-shaming dynamic was identified not only as a social injustice in itself but as a structural constraint on women's ability to communicate clearly and assertively about their own desires.

Theme 6: The role of intoxication in compromising consent

Alcohol and, to a lesser extent, drugs featured prominently in participants' accounts as factors that complicated, compromised, or entirely undermined the conditions required for meaningful consent. Participants described how intoxication clouded judgment, lowered inhibitions, and created situations in which a *"yes"* could not be understood as a true, freely given agreement. Thandeka* reflected on patterns she had observed in her home community: *"Children have sex under alcohol influence, mostly. You'll find very young girls and children in taverns getting drunk at house parties, and then they have sex."* She attributed the persistently high pregnancy rates at her former high school in part to this dynamic, linking early and often unwanted sexual activity directly to contexts of alcohol use and inadequate sex education.

Kiara's account was particularly striking. She described discovering evidence of a sexual encounter she had no memory of participating in: *"So, how I found out was, when I went to the bathroom, a condom fell out of me."* Her account captures the extreme end of intoxication-related sexual violation. This encounter could not have been consensual, since she had no awareness of it at the time. While her case was not representative of all the encounters described, it illustrates the profound vulnerability that heavy intoxication creates and the particular difficulty that participants who have experienced such encounters face when trying to make sense of what happened to them and whether it constitutes rape.

Busisiwe's definition of consent, cited earlier, explicitly addressed intoxication: consent must be "*a clear yes when I'm in my sound mind and you can see that I'm in my sound mind*", not a yes extracted under conditions of impaired judgment. Yet this standard was not reflected in how many encounters in the data actually unfolded, suggesting a significant gap between what participants understand consent to require and the circumstances under which many of them have experienced it.

Theme 7: Blurred boundaries between non-consensual sex and rape

One of the most theoretically and practically significant findings of this study was the profound difficulty participants experienced in distinguishing between non-consensual sex and rape. For the majority of participants, rape was defined primarily, and sometimes exclusively, in terms of physical force or aggression. An encounter was understood as rape if the perpetrator physically overpowered, threatened, or violently coerced the victim. Encounters in which a person was persuaded, pressured, or worn down into compliance, or in which they simply went along with something they did not want, were frequently not classified as rape, even when they clearly violated the conditions of meaningful consent.

This definitional narrowing had significant consequences. Several participants described experiences that met the criteria for non-consensual sex. Their reluctance had been ignored, their expressed hesitation had been dismissed, or they had complied out of fear of social consequences. The participants were unwilling or unable to name those experiences as rape. The word itself appeared to trigger an implicit test of severity: Had there been violence? Had there been a weapon? Had the perpetrator been a stranger? In the absence of such aggravating features, participants resisted the label, even when the encounter had unambiguously occurred without their genuine consent.

Zanele articulated this blurring directly in response to the question of whether there is a difference between non-consent and rape: "*I would say there is no difference. Because you don't want to be raped, and even when something is non-consensual, you don't want it to happen. I believe that if you don't consent, then it's not something that you want to happen.*" Her answer reflects a more sophisticated understanding, one in which non-consent itself is constitutive of rape, regardless of the presence of physical force. Yet this view was not universally held. Many participants operated with a far narrower definition that created a zone of experience between "*sex I didn't want*" and "*rape*" – a zone where harm occurred but was not acknowledged or identified.

Cheslin*, a male participant, reflected on an encounter with an older male partner who had violated boundaries he had explicitly stated. He described the encounter in these terms: "*I would say it could be considered rape. Because he violated my boundaries. I wasn't at the age where I could vocalise it.*" His account highlights that the inability to name an experience as rape does not diminish the harm that occurred and that the experience of having one's explicit boundaries violated can leave lasting effects even when the victim does not, at the time, have the conceptual tools to identify what happened.

Theme 8: The influence of education, religious background, and cultural context

Participants' accounts of consent were shaped by a range of educational, religious, and cultural factors that both informed and constrained their understanding of sexual agency. Several participants from religious backgrounds described internal conflicts between religious norms around premarital chastity and the sexual realities of campus life. Having made pledges of virginity, they subsequently found themselves in situations in which those pledges were tested, and in some cases violated, in encounters that were not entirely desired.

The limitations of formal sex education were a recurring theme. Participants consistently noted that school-based sexuality education had equipped them with legal definitions of rape (what the law says rape is) but had not provided them with practical tools for navigating the complexities of real-world sexual encounters: how to communicate a boundary clearly, how to read and respond to a partner's cues, how to say no without guilt, or how to recognise when something that is happening is not something they want. Zanele, reflecting on broader norms, noted: *"These conversations are not had enough ... Many young ladies are not sure about consent and just the whole sexual harassment ... they don't know where to draw the line."* Thandeka similarly observed that a significant barrier to young people developing healthy sexual agency was the pervasive reluctance of parents to discuss sex with their children at all, leaving many young people to navigate sexual encounters with little preparation or guidance. As she put it: *"parents are also scared of talking to their children about sex. So, the children just ... they do these things without knowing."*

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how sexual consent is conceptualised and communicated among university students at a South African higher education institution. The findings reveal a complex and troubling picture in which most participants described their sexual encounters as broadly consensual, yet on closer examination, many of those same encounters involved experiences of non-consent. Participants often went along with sexual activity they did not fully want, submitting to social or emotional pressure, or complying out of a fear of the consequences of refusal. Three overarching patterns are particularly significant: the near-universal reliance on non-verbal communication rather than explicit verbal consent; the pervasive gendered asymmetry in sexual initiation and compliance; and the difficulty participants experienced in differentiating between non-consensual encounters and rape.

These findings are consistent with and extend existing research. Studies report on the near-exclusive reliance on non-verbal cues when communicating sexual consent (Beare & Boonzaier, 2020; Edwards et al., 2022). The current study adds important texture by showing that this reliance is not simply a preference. It is also driven by the social perception that verbal consent is a disruption to intimacy that signals mistrust or unnaturalness. This perception is itself a product of deeply embedded sexual scripts that normalise progression without explicit communication and that privilege male initiative and female accommodation.

The finding that instances of non-consensual sex were frequently not reported to authorities or sought professional help aligns closely with Finchilescu and Dugard (2018), who found that gender-based violence on university campuses is rarely formally reported, making accurate prevalence estimation difficult and undermining prevention efforts. The current study illuminates one important reason for this underreporting: participants did not conceptualise what had happened to them as non-consensual, and therefore did not recognise that formal channels of support or redress were available to them or applicable to their experience.

The blurring of the boundary between non-consensual sex and rape in participants' accounts is a striking finding of the study. The narrowing of "*rape*" to physically violent or forcible acts creates a vast grey zone – a zone in which harm is done but not named. That leaves survivors without the conceptual tools to identify their experiences, seek help, or report to authorities. This finding replicates patterns observed in a study by Beare and Boonzaier (2020) and underscores the need for sexuality education that goes beyond legal definitions to address the full spectrum of coercion, pressure, and violation.

The relationship between intoxication and non-consensual sex was particularly salient. The literature consistently identifies alcohol and substance use as key contextual factors in campus sexual violence (Ajayi et al., 2021; Fielding-Miller et al., 2021; Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018; Makhaye et al., 2023). This study confirms that pattern while also adding participant-level detail about how intoxication shapes both the encounter itself and the subsequent capacity to reflect meaningfully on what occurred. In an institution that has a licensed bar on campus, the particular relevance of alcohol to the consent landscape requires direct institutional attention.

The gendered patterns in this study, with men as initiators, women as gatekeepers, and women bearing the burden of refusal and its social costs, are consistent with theoretical accounts of hegemonic masculinity and sexual scripting (the socially learned roles and sequences that structure sexual encounters) (Clowes et al., 2011; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Stern et al., 2016). Importantly, these patterns were articulated not only by female participants describing their own experiences but also, in some cases, by male participants whose accounts of their own behaviour reflected assumptions of male sexual entitlement and of female compliance as an expected response to persuasion. The observation from the broader literature that men are underrepresented in sexual and reproductive health education and programming is relevant here: men should be explicitly and centrally included in consent education, as both potential perpetrators and potential agents of change (Amoo et al., 2022; Strong et al., 2025).

5. Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several actionable directions for higher education institutions and broader policy. First, there is an urgent need for comprehensive, skills-based sexuality education that moves beyond legal definitions of rape to address practical consent communication: how to express a boundary clearly, how to

recognise and respond to a partner's cues, how to prepare for the expectations of one-night stands or hookup encounters, how to say no without guilt, and how to exercise assertiveness under social pressure. This education should be incorporated into student orientation programmes so that all students receive it on entry to the institution. In practice, this could include mandatory interactive workshops during orientation week, peer-facilitated discussion groups, and scenario-based role-play exercises (such as the vignette methodology employed in this study) that invite students to reason through ambiguous situations before they encounter them in real life. Online consent modules, increasingly common at universities in the Global North, should be adapted to reflect the specific cultural, relational, and power dynamics present in South African higher education contexts (Laha, 2025; Navarro Silvera et al., 2026). Importantly, while this study focused on university students, the evidence strongly suggests that education about sexual consent should not wait until the tertiary level. It should begin in school as part of comprehensive sexuality education, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate consent long before they enter higher education environments (UNESCO, 2018).

Second, men must be explicitly and centrally included in consent education and reproductive health programming. The gendered patterns in this study, in which men are consistently positioned as initiators who expect compliance and women as gatekeepers who accommodate male desire, will not shift unless the education and intervention ecosystem directly challenges these scripts with male students. Men should be engaged as potential perpetrators, but also as potential allies in building cultures of respect and explicit consent (Amoo et al., 2022; Strong et al., 2025). Concretely, this might involve bystander intervention programmes that equip male students to challenge peer norms that normalise coercion. It could also include male mentorship and ambassador schemes in which senior students model respectful sexual attitudes. In addition, orientation and reproductive health sessions could incorporate male-specific content that directly identifies and interrogates assumptions about male entitlement and sexual initiative. Research consistently shows that men are more influenced by the perceived norms of their male peers than by general awareness campaigns, and programming should be designed with this in mind (Gwiza & Hendricks, 2025).

Third, the particular role of alcohol and substance use in creating conditions for non-consensual sex demands specific institutional attention. The presence of a licensed bar on the campus studied is especially pertinent, and institutional stakeholders should consider measures to limit alcohol access and to ensure that awareness campaigns about the relationship between intoxication and consent reach students in contexts where alcohol consumption is normalised.

Fourth, accessible, low-barrier reporting and support mechanisms are needed. Given that none of the participants in this study who described non-consensual encounters had reported them or sought professional support (prior to the interview process), the barriers to reporting are evidently high. Clear, confidential, and non-stigmatising pathways to counselling, peer support, and formal reporting should be actively

publicised and made easily accessible to all students (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018; Makhaye et al., 2023). The formalisation of rape culture education across South African higher education has also been called for (Orth et al., 2020) and remains a pressing agenda.

6. Strengths and Limitations

Several strengths of this study merit acknowledgement. The use of a qualitative descriptive design, with rich semi-structured interview data, allowed for a depth of exploration of participants' lived experiences that survey or quantitative approaches could not have achieved. The paper addresses an under-researched area by focusing on consent communication rather than sexual violence only. The inclusion of both male and female participants, as well as participants from diverse racial, linguistic, cultural, and provincial backgrounds, enhances the breadth of the findings within this specific institutional context. The use of researcher-developed vignettes alongside personal narratives provided multiple entry points into participants' understandings of consent and enriched the data considerably.

Readers should, however, bear several possible limitations in mind when interpreting these findings. First, the sample was purposively drawn from a single institution in the Western Cape, which limits generalisability to other higher education institutions, regions, and population groups. The experiences and perspectives of students at other institutions, particularly those in more rural settings, historically advantaged institutions, or with different demographic profiles, may differ substantially. It is important to note, however, that a sample of 20 purposively selected participants is consistent with established norms in qualitative inquiry, where data depth and richness take precedence over sample size (Sandelowski, 2000). The aim of this study was transferability rather than generalisability, and readers are invited to consider the extent to which the findings resonate with or illuminate their own institutional contexts.

Second, the reliance on self-report in a retrospective interview format means that findings are subject to the usual limitations of memory, social desirability, and retrospective re-interpretation. Participants may have described encounters in ways shaped by reflection and hindsight rather than capturing their experience as it occurred. Third, the absence of White, Indian, and Asian participants in the sample, reflecting the demographic profile of the institution rather than any intentional exclusion, means that the experiences of those groups are not represented in the findings. Fourth, although confidentiality was assured and steps taken to create a safe interview environment, the sensitive nature of the topic means that some participants may have chosen not to disclose their most difficult experiences, or may have softened accounts of non-consensual encounters. Fifth, the gender composition of the sample (70% female and 30% male) reflects a meaningful imbalance that warrants acknowledgement. That more women than men volunteered to participate is consistent with broader patterns in sexual health research, where women more readily engage with topics of consent, sexual experience, and interpersonal vulnerability (Strong et al., 2025). This imbalance means that the findings are more richly textured

from a female perspective, and the male experience of consent communication is comparatively underexplored. Future research should specifically target the recruitment of male participants and engage men in greater depth on their understandings of consent, initiation, and compliance. Notably, men's relative reticence to discuss these matters is arguably itself a reflection of the gendered dynamics this paper identifies, making it a phenomenon worthy of investigation in its own right.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a meaningful contribution to an important and underserved area of inquiry within South African higher education research. The findings offer substantive evidence for the need to rethink how consent is discussed, taught, and institutionally supported on South African campuses.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how sexual consent is conceptualised and communicated among students at a South African university. The findings illuminate a landscape characterised by pervasive reliance on non-verbal cues, gendered asymmetries in initiation and compliance, the structuring influence of intoxication, and a troubling inability to identify non-consensual sex as a violation and seek help. Although participants broadly understood consent to require active agreement, the gap between this understanding and their lived experience was consistently wide. Many described sexual encounters they did not fully want, encounters framed as things that “*just happened*”. This points to a passivity that reflects not individual failure but the absence of adequate education, language, and structural support for meaningful consent communication. It would be easy to assume that, in an era of heightened awareness of sexual rights and widespread access to information, young people are equipped to navigate consent assertively. The evidence from this study suggests otherwise. The terrain of sexual consent remains deeply nuanced, shaped by power, gender norms, social consequences, intoxication, and an educational legacy that has privileged legal definitions over practical communication skills. Higher education institutions in South Africa have an obligation and an opportunity to address this through sustained, thoughtful, and inclusive sexuality education that equips students to communicate honestly, listen carefully, and act with genuine respect for the agency and humanity of their partners.

8. Data Availability

Data are available upon request from the author.

9. References

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