



Original article

The Role of Hypermasculinity, Token Resistance, Rape Myth, and Assertive Sexual Consent Communication Among College Men


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ABSTRACT

Purpose: A greater understanding of how college men's gendered beliefs and communication styles relate to their sexual consent attitudes and intentions is essential within the shifting context of negative to affirmative consent policies on college campuses. The results of this study can be used to help design more effective sexual consent interventions.

Methods: Three hundred seventy undergraduate college men completed cross-sectional online surveys. Hierarchical multiple regression examined how hypermasculinity, token resistance, rape myth acceptance, and sexual communication assertiveness were associated with consent-related attitudes, intentions, and interpretations.

Results: Bivariate correlations among all variables were significant. In multivariate analyses, sexual communication assertiveness was positively associated with all consent outcomes, and token resistance and rape myth acceptance were negatively associated with some. Hypermasculinity was not a significant factor.

Conclusions: Programs seeking to improve sexual consent communication among college men should reduce destructive beliefs and encourage sexually assertive communication.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

The present study examined how the sexual consent communication attitudes, intentions, and interpretations of college men are associated with sexist and hostile beliefs and healthy sexual communication styles. Results suggest that college men hold healthier consent attitudes and intentions when they also feel comfortable communicating consent in an assertive (not aggressive) style.

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Increased attention on campus sexual assault has prompted many colleges to revise their sexual assault policies and associated prevention and education programming [1], with many schools adopting programs focused on improving students' understanding of sexual consent communication [2,3]. How college men understand sexual consent is of particular interest to prevention scholars and practitioners, because, as a group, men are more likely to perpetrate sexual assault and/or hold rape-supportive attitudes than women [4–7]. Research also indicates that men are more likely to interpret communication signals, such

as caressing or agreement to move to a more private space, as indicative of sexual consent and more likely to initiate sexual activity compared with women [8,9]. Additionally, the atmosphere associated with college, such as college party culture and shared living spaces, may also create unique contexts that increase the importance of studying consent among college men (see Reference 8 for a review of these contexts). Thus, it is important to consider how college men's gendered beliefs and preferred communication styles may play a role in their understanding of sexual consent, which could ultimately impact how and whether they engage in active, affirmative consent with their sexual partners.

First, it is important to note that there is no uniformly accepted definition of sexual consent (see Reference 8 for a review); however, for the purposes of the present study, we focus on explicit verbal consent and inferred consent, which requires an individual to interpret verbal and nonverbal communication. Scholars have noted that consent is understudied compared with sexual assault and that more research is needed to understand how sexual consent is interpreted and practiced [10,11]. One important connection between the previous research on sexual assault and the burgeoning research on sexual consent may be to examine the well-known antecedents of sexual assault within the context of sexual consent communication. Previous research indicates that stronger beliefs about hypermasculinity, token resistance, and rape myths are associated with rape culture, which is defined as a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized because of societal attitudes about gender and sexuality [12,13].

Hypermasculinity is the prototype of an exaggerated masculine performance, such that the “stereotypical man” often performs his gender through hostility, domination of women, and calloused sexual behavior [6]. Hypermasculinity emphasizes the heterosexual conquest of women as an important aspect of performing traditional masculinity [6]. Hypermasculinity can extend beyond the sexual realm, such that hypermasculinity endorses traditional ideas about the need for men to be highly respected and to gain that respect by being aggressive and unfeminine [14]. Hypermasculine men may then misinterpret or ignore sexual communication signals from their female partners, especially when their female partners' wants and signals are in opposition to their own. Hypermasculine men may also rationalize their aggressive behaviors by subscribing to less progressive beliefs about how women communicate sexual consent, such that they believe women want to be dominated by men and engage in “token resistance” as a submissive tactic.

Token resistance is the heteronormative belief that women typically say “no” to sex with a man when they really mean “yes,” and is a form of sexual miscommunication that may contribute to some young men's (mis)understanding of consent [15,16]. Within a culture of hypermasculinity, men may view token resistance by women as a necessary barrier to overcome in sexual interactions, using persistence and coercion with a female partner to obtain a perceived (although potentially unwilling) yes [15]. A stronger belief in women using token resistance is associated with greater misperceptions about sexual consent. For example, in situations where women expressed that they only wanted to kiss, men still believed that these women wanted to engage in sexual intercourse because they agreed to some sexual activity [17,18]. Young men with these types of hostile and sexist beliefs are therefore more likely to subscribe to rape myth beliefs that assign blame to the victims of sexual assault instead of the perpetrators, because they believe or rationalize that the victim

actually “wanted it,” despite not giving clear, willing consent to all sexual activities [19].

Acceptance of rape myth beliefs is the extent to which an individual holds “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” [20]. Rape myths serve to shift responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim [21] and are often related to other hostile attitudes and behaviors toward women that may influence how and whether young men engage in sexual consent communication [19]. A better understanding of the relationship between rape myth acceptance and sexual consent among college men may be especially relevant as a dominant sexual script among college men is that women are responsible for refusing or giving consent [8,22].

Whereas hypermasculinity, token resistance beliefs, and rape myth acceptance have all been shown to be associated with negative sexual attitudes and behaviors, sexual assertiveness, defined as “the ability to develop assertive behaviors in a sexual context,” has been linked to positive sexual attitudes and behaviors, especially in regard to communication among partners [23]. Sexual assertiveness is different from the sexual aggressiveness associated with hypermasculinity described previously. Aggressive communication is concerned with the initiator expressing his or her desires in a way that violates the rights of others in preference for their own desires, whereas assertive communication is focused on expressing desires in a way that is also respectful of the rights and desires of others [24]. Being sexually assertive would therefore include communicating openly about ones' sexual desires and willingness to engage in sexual activity, both of which are important in establishing affirmative, clear consent.

The relationship between hypermasculinity, token resistance beliefs, rape myth acceptance, and sexual communication assertiveness and its association with sexual consent attitudes and intentions may provide important insights into some of the underlying processes that may inform antecedents of sexual violence. The present study also examines the association between those negative predictors of sexual violence, the role of sexual communication assertiveness as an important and understudied aspect of sexual consent, and college men's ability to correctly interpret simple and complex sexual consent situations.

Further understanding about factors contributing to sexual consent communication attitudes, intentions, and interpretations for college men has practical significance by contributing to the strategic design of interventions to reduce campus sexual assault and theoretical significance within the field of sexual communication research. Therefore, the present study was designed around one key research question: How are hypermasculinity, token resistance beliefs, rape myth acceptance, and sexual communication assertiveness associated with consent communication attitudes, intentions, and interpretations?

Methods

Participants and procedures

Participants were 370 undergraduate college men at a public university in the southwestern region of the United States who were recruited through university email listserv announcements. Data for this online survey were collected over three time points in 2014–2015 within two semesters with nine students indicating they may have previously participated; those students were eliminated from the sample. Based on the research

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