



Sexual Consent on Television: Differing Portrayal Effects on Adolescent Viewers

Cassandra Alexopoulos¹ · Drew P. Cingel²

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Abstract

We conducted two studies to examine the portrayal of sexual consent and refusal in adolescent-directed programming and the effects of viewing this content on adolescents. In a quantitative content analysis, nonverbal consent cues were more prevalent than verbal consent cues. The presence of consent cues did not significantly differ by character gender, relationship status, or sexual behavior. Using a three-way between-subjects experiment, we examined the influence of exposure to media depictions of verbal sexual consent on adolescents' intentions to seek verbal sexual consent ($n = 402$, 61.4% girls, ages 12–18, $M = 15.8$, $SD = 2.1$). Exposure to verbal consent positively influenced intentions to seek verbal consent via increased positive attitudes toward women. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Keywords Sexual consent · Adolescents · Sexual scripts · Theory of planned behavior · Attitudes toward women

Introduction

Sexual coercion and assault are prevalent topics in the United States' national discourse, and much of the discussion centers on raising young men and women to both understand and practice sexual consent (e.g., Willis et al., 2019). This focus on sexual consent education is particularly important to consider in the context of adolescent development, as during this period individuals undergo physical and mental changes that directly influence their sexual health, sexual attitudes, and sexual practices (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Awareness of sexual consent communication has increased over the past decade, such as during the Obama Administration (e.g., Wilson, 2017), and has continued to grow as a function of social campaigns such as #metoo. However, a recent study found that among adolescents aged 15–19 years old, both men and women reported committing and experiencing sexual coercion (Fernandez-Fuertes et al., 2018), and male and female students have reported experiencing some form of physical or sexual dating violence within the last year (Vagi et al., 2015).

Although consuming television and streaming content is a common activity among adolescents (Lauricella et al., 2016), it is not clear how television content portrays sexual consent, or the effects of such exposure on adolescent viewers. This gap occurs despite research that a variety of media, including television, have been shown to influence adolescents' sexuality (Bleakley et al., 2008), and adolescents report turning to media to learn sexual information in some cases more often than to parents and educators (Bleakley et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to examine how television, an important socializing tool in the lives of children and adolescents (Ward, 2003), influences sexual attitudes and intentions, particularly in the area of consent.

Thus, we present two studies. The first study used a quantitative content analysis to examine the frequency of sexual consent and refusal in television series popular among adolescents in the USA. We examined how these portrayals varied as a function of characters' gender, relationship status, and sexual behavior. Using an experimental design and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), in Study 2 we built on the findings from the content analysis by testing whether exposure to television narratives featuring verbal sexual consent indirectly promoted adolescents' intentions to seek verbal sexual consent in their own lives (ages 12–18; $N = 402$) via their attitudes toward consent, perceived behavioral control, perceived norms regarding consent, and attitudes toward women. Together, these studies build knowledge in this

✉ Cassandra Alexopoulos
c.alexopoulos@umb.edu

¹ Communication Department, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125, USA

² Human Development and Media Lab, Department of Communication, University of California, Davis, CA, USA

area, as the content analysis describes how sexual consent is communicated and portrayed in contemporary adolescent-directed media and the experiment demonstrates the potential effects of exposure to this content on adolescents' intentions to seek verbal consent via shifts in attitudes, norms, perceived behavioral control, and attitudes toward women.

Defining Sexual Consent

In a recent study, researchers defined sexual consent as “one's voluntary, sober, and conscious willingness to engage in a particular sexual behavior with a particular person within a particular context” (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019, p. 1723). Affirmative consent standards require clear verbal consent cues (e.g., a verbal request and a verbal response). However, because there are situations in which one's verbal consent is not consistent with their internal willingness (e.g., when being coerced or pressured, or when being deceived), we maintain that the combination of verbal and nonverbal consent cues provides the sexual initiator with the most information on whether their partner agrees to engage in sexual activity. The current study thus operationalizes consent from two perspectives: a consent request, which is employed by the initiator, and the gatekeeper's granting (e.g., “Yes” or pulling partner in closely) or refusal (e.g., “No” or pushing partner away) of the request. Similar to the process by which one grants consent to a sexual partner, refusals can be communicated verbally or nonverbally, and directly or indirectly (Jozkowski et al., 2014a, 2014b). Research by Marcantonio et al. (2018) suggests that because refusal can be communicated using myriad strategies, initiators should attend to both verbal and nonverbal cues that indicate a lack of desire or willingness to engage in sexual activity.

These definitions of consent come with an important caveat. Traditional gender role stereotypes allow for the conceptualization of sexual violence as a normal or natural part of heterosexual sex because it is believed that men are sex-driven and governed by overwhelming urges toward sex (Messerschmidt, 1986; Sanday, 2015). Sexual assault may also occur through instances of sexual coercion, such as making persistent sexual advances, posing threats to the relationship, or interpreting consent via the absence of a refusal (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Sexual coercion allows boys and men to engage in sexual assault but feel as though they did not commit rape by physical force (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Thus, the present set of studies aimed to explore the depiction and effects of sexual consent in adolescent-directed television on adolescents' intentions to seek verbal sexual consent. While this is but one aspect that can serve to curb sexual violence, it can bring adolescents closer to a clear

standard of affirmative consent in an effort to stigmatize all forms of sexual assault.

Teaching Consent to Adolescents

Previous research on sexual consent communication has relied heavily on college student samples and employed non-experimental methods (e.g., Darden et al., 2019; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). Recent research, however, has begun to consider sexual consent in the context of adolescence (ages 13–18; Javidi et al., 2020; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020; Righi et al., 2021). Adolescence is a developmental stage worthy of attention in this context for two reasons. First, adolescence constitutes an important period for developing an understanding of what a healthy, nonviolent sexual relationship looks like (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). The behaviors enacted in a relational or sexual context in emerging and young adulthood are learned, at least to some extent, during adolescence (e.g., Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). Second, adolescence is the stage during which individuals often experience their first partnered sexual encounter. Therefore, adolescents may rely on what they see in the media to guide their behavior, especially in the absence of previous sexual experience. Studies have demonstrated that media is as popular as teachers, parents, and peers as a source of sexual information among adolescents, and adolescents identify television and movies as the most informative media to learn about sex (Bleakley et al., 2009).

Adolescents have generally positive attitudes about affirmative sexual consent, but those attitudes may vary as a function of gender and gender role beliefs (Javidi et al., 2020). For example, in a qualitative analysis, Righi et al. (2021) found that while adolescents defined sexual consent as being verbal in nature, they also believed that women conveyed consent through nonverbal means during a sexual encounter. Thus, while there is some evidence regarding adolescents' attitudes toward and perceptions about sexual consent, less is known about the antecedents of these attitudes. Further, these findings point toward the potential for adolescents to hold differing attitudes and perceptions toward verbal and nonverbal sexual consent.

The current research demonstrates that parents' self-efficacy and sexual beliefs (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020) and school-based sexuality education (Borges et al., 2008) serve as important socializing agents in adolescents' attitudes and beliefs surrounding sexual consent. Given that a large body of work also suggests that the mass media can serve as a key sexual socializer among adolescents (Ward, 2003), however, it is important to understand the scripts that adolescents may acquire from viewing sexual media content as these influence the socialization process.

Sexual Script Theory

Sexual script theory suggests that individuals learn about various behaviors from scripts, which are programs of action rooted in cultural norms (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Scripts can be constructed in the context of our social environment, including the mass media, and provide a heuristic model for viewers to decide how they should and should not behave (Wright, 2011). Previous research has unveiled several scripts related to sexual consent communication. One such script is that explicit verbal sexual consent is not “natural” (Willis et al., 2020a, 2020b, p. 53). Young adults have reported believing that communicating about sex is awkward and that social norms dictate that people should not talk about sex (Curtis & Burnett, 2017). Another sexual script is that direct, verbal consent cues are not required sexual behaviors that are perceived to be less intimate (Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski et al., 2014a, 2014b). One study found that explicit verbal consent cues were reported with much greater frequency for vaginal-penile sex and anal sex compared to kissing or genital touching (Willis et al., 2019b). Finally, in heterosexual encounters, men are typically assumed to have a strong desire to sex and to take on the role as the sexual initiator (Byers, 1996), whereas women are assumed to take a more relational approach to sex (Hynie et al., 1998).

Research has found that exposure to television influences adolescents’ conceptions of sexual behavior (Brown & L’Engle, 2009) as well as self-reported sexual behaviors (Ashby et al., 2006). While viewing a television program, adolescents may pay attention to the consequences of performing a sexual script, which subsequently motivate the viewer to model or avoid certain sexual behaviors (Bandura, 2002). For example, viewing a sexual encounter during which sexual consent is verbally requested and verbally granted may serve to promote verbal sexual consent communication as easy, typical, and enjoyable – contrary to existing perceptions that verbal consent requests are awkward, scary, and unpleasant.

In addition to scripts related to sexual consent, media are also likely to contribute to scripts related to gender in the context of sexual situations. For example, in a two-wave panel study, Wright and Bae (2015) found that pornography exposure was later associated with gendered attitudes. Seabrook et al. (2016) found a positive relationship between television viewing and people’s endorsement of the heterosexual script, a set of beliefs about men’s and women’s role in romantic and sexual situations. Thus, given the importance of sexual scripts in adolescents’ conceptions of sexual behaviors, and actual sexual behaviors, we first conduct a content analysis to understand how sexual consent is communicated to adolescents.

Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated the frequency and nature of sexual consent communication in television programs popular among adolescent viewers. Cognitive scripts are likely to be retrieved and applied to one’s own behavior if a script is observed frequently (Brown & L’Engle, 2009). For example, if television characters frequently employ verbal sexual consent requests, viewers may adopt the belief that verbal requests are a normative step in an unfolding sexual encounter. Given the potential for adolescent viewers to learn about which forms of consent are commonly used, it is important to investigate messages of sexual consent in narratives available to adolescents (Study 1) prior to testing the effects of such exposure (Study 2).

Contemporary advocates for healthy sexual and romantic relationships have stressed that enthusiastic consent should require the combination of physical, nonverbal cues and verbal affirmation to proceed with sexual activity (Project Respect, 2019). Evidence has further suggested that the type of consent used during a sexual encounter influences the clarity of the situation. For example, Lim and Roloff (1999) found that verbal statements were perceived by participants as being clearer signs of sexual consent compared to nonverbal behaviors. However, despite the social utility of establishing verbal consent, many sexual encounters progress without the presence of such overt consent cues. Indeed, in a recent content analysis of films, nonverbal and implicit sexual consent was portrayed more often than verbal consent (Jozkowski et al., 2019), and films rated R were less likely to portray sexual consent at all in comparison with other ratings (Willis et al., 2020a, 2020b), although it is not clear if this translates to television content directed toward adolescents. Given these previous findings and the potential for young audiences to learn about consent communication behaviors from media content, we pose the following questions:

RQ1: Which forms of sexual consent (e.g., verbal, nonverbal) are most frequently depicted on television popular among adolescents?

RQ2: Which forms of sexual refusal (e.g., verbal, nonverbal) are most frequently depicted on television popular among adolescents?

In addition to the frequency with which scripts are observed, television viewers are likely to attend to certain features of a sexual encounter in entertainment media. First, viewers may be influenced by media messages that endorse traditional gender roles related to sexual consent, for example, that men should be dominant and initiate sexual contact, and that women are passive and should prioritize their partner’s sexual needs (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

One study found that exposure to men's magazines, which frequently depict women as sexual objects, was negatively related to men's intentions to comply with sexual refusals, whereas exposure to women's magazines was positively related to intentions to refuse unwanted sexual activity (Hust et al., 2014). In another study, exposure to a crime drama that rarely depicted negative consequences for perpetrators of sexual assault was negatively related to people's intention to seek consent prior to engaging in sexual behavior (Hust et al., 2015). These findings suggest that the media play a role in the endorsement of gender-related consent norms, which are subsequently used in real-world sexual encounters.

Viewers may also attend to the circumstances under which consent is required from a sexual partner. For some, relationship history is an important indicator of the necessity of consent. Shotland and Goodstein (1992) found that both men and women were more likely to perceive a woman as obligated to engage in sex with a partner if they had previously engaged in sex at least 10 times prior to the encounter. In addition, participants perceived sexual assault to be less serious as the level of relationship intimacy between sexual partners increased (Monson et al., 2000). Further, researchers have identified a script indicating that lower-order behaviors (e.g., kissing) do not require consent to be explicitly communicated (Hall, 1998). Finally, college students have reported that the need for explicit consent increases as level of physical intimacy increases, such that explicit consent is more often necessary for penetrative sex (Jozkowski et al., 2014a, 2014b). Based on this extant research, it is clear that differing portrayals of sexual consent and refusal may influence viewers differentially as a function of character and behavioral characteristics of the portrayal. Thus:

RQ3: Do depictions of a) sexual consent and b) sexual refusal vary as a function of characters' gender?

RQ4: Do depictions of a) sexual consent and b) sexual refusal vary as a function of characters' relationship status?

RQ5: Do depictions of a) sexual consent and b) sexual refusal vary as a function of type of sexual behavior?

Method

Sample Selection

The study's sample contained one randomly selected episode from the 61 most highly rated broadcast, cable, and streaming series among adolescents aged 12 to 17. Compiling the sample came with two limitations. First, traditional sources of viewership ratings such as Nielsen do not publish

such ratings for viewers under the age of 18. Second, popular streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu do not publish their viewership ratings to the public. Thus, we relied on Common Sense Media's "TV Reviews" for a list of broadcast, cable, and streaming series that were rated as popular among adolescents aged 12 to 17. Common Sense Media website users can rate television series using a 5-star system. Each series targeted to individuals 12 and over was designated to be "popular with kids" if the average child rating was 3 stars or above. Sampled series included *13 Reasons Why* (Season 1, aired 2017), *The Fosters* (Season 5, aired 2018), *The Vampire Diaries* (Season 1, aired 2010), and *Grey's Anatomy* (Season 7, aired 2011), among others. For a complete list of series included in the sample, see Appendix A in the online supplement. We elected to sample one episode from a broader range of programs using sample sizes similar to those employed in recent content analyses (e.g., Anderegg et al., 2014; Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Sink & Mastro, 2017). Thus, from a sampling frame of 153 television series (88 broadcast, 49 cable, and 18 streaming series), we randomly selected 40% of the series from the list for a final sample size of 61 series (34 broadcast, 20 cable, and 7 streaming series). An additional note on how we determined sample size for this study can be found in Appendix B in the online supplement.

Procedure

Two undergraduate coders were trained by the first author to analyze the sample. First, the coders were trained by the first author on the contents of the codebook, and practiced coding using episodes not included in the study's sample over five sessions. During these sessions, coders discussed any discrepancies in their "practice" sample. Next, the coders analyzed a reliability sample of nine series represented by one randomly selected episode (15% of the study sample). Acceptable reliability was achieved, and the coders analyzed their independent samples.

The unit of analysis was the sexual encounter, which was defined by the presence of any one of the five categories of sexual behavior described in Kunkel et al. (1999): (1) physical flirting, (2) passionate kissing, (3) intimate touching (which included manual and oral stimulation), (4) sexual intercourse (or penetrative sex) strongly implied (wherein the program narrative strongly suggests that sexual intercourse has taken or will take place), and (5) simulated sexual intercourse. In the current study, we collapsed passionate kissing and intimate touching to increase reliability. For each sexual encounter, depicted or implied, coders analyzed the characters' traits (including age, gender, and race), relationship status with the depicted sexual partner, role as the initiator or gatekeeper of the sexual encounter, and consent and refusal cues enacted by the characters (Jozkowski et al., 2016). Character attributes,

variable frequencies, and reliability coefficients can be found in Appendix C in the online supplement.

Measures

Role

For every sexual encounter, coders identified an initiator and a gatekeeper. The initiator is the character who attempts to make sexual contact, either successfully or unsuccessfully, and the gatekeeper is the target of sexual contact. In situations where both characters initiated sexual contact at the same time (e.g., both move in for a kiss), coders identified this encounter to be mutually initiated, and the roles of initiator and gatekeeper were not assigned.

Relationship Status

Coders identified the relationship status between characters engaging in sexual behavior. Characters who engaged in sexual behavior could be married ($n=9$), be unmarried but in an established relationship ($n=13$), be in a casual sexual relationship (e.g., ongoing or one-time sexual encounter; $n=8$), have past history of romantic involvement (e.g., ex-partner; $n=10$), have met before in a romantic context (e.g., went on a date; $n=1$), have met before in a non-romantic context ($n=25$), have just met ($n=4$), or have a transactional sexual relationship (e.g., sex worker; $n=0$).

Consent Cues

Consent cues were coded as either present or not present during a sexual encounter. We note that the cues outlined below do not universally qualify as “affirmative consent,” but rather reflect those cues that have been identified in previous research on sexual consent in mainstream films (Jozkowski et al., 2016) and have been identified by individuals as attributions of sexual consent (Bedera, 2021). Consent requests could be explicit and verbal (e.g., “Let’s have sex”), implicit and verbal (e.g., “Do you want to go upstairs?”), explicit and nonverbal (e.g., putting on a condom), or implicit and nonverbal (e.g., caressing one’s thigh). Similarly, gatekeeper characters’ responses to consent requests could be explicit and verbal (e.g., “Yes”), implicit and verbal (e.g., responses to the initiator’s implicit verbal request), explicit and nonverbal (e.g., nodding head), or implicit and nonverbal (e.g., removing clothing). Consent was coded if consent was requested by the initiator and/or granted by the gatekeeper (for a full list of operational definitions and examples of consent cues, see Appendix D in the online supplement; Jozkowski et al., 2016).

Refusal Cues

Similarly, refusal cues were coded as either present or not present during a sexual encounter and could be verbal or nonverbal, explicit or implicit in nature. A sexual refusal could be enacted by the initiator or gatekeeper when an attempt to stop the sexual activity occurred (for a full list of operational definitions and examples of refusal cues, see Appendix D in the online supplement; Jozkowski et al., 2016).

Results

Frequency of Sexual Consent (RQ1a-b)

Across the 61 series included in the sample, coders identified 70 sexual encounters, averaging 1.1 sexual encounters per episode ($SD = 1.5$). Approximately half of our sample depicted some form of sexual behavior ($n = 31$, 50.8%). In order to address RQ1, we first considered the number of sexual encounters that contained either verbal or nonverbal consent. Verbal consent (either explicit or implicit) was requested by the initiator or given by the gatekeeper during 33 sexual encounters (appearing in 47.1% of sexual encounters). In other words, 33 of 70 sexual encounters contained some form of verbal consent from at least one character in the sexual encounter. Verbal consent was requested and given within the same sexual encounter 14 times (20.0% of all sexual encounters). Nonverbal consent was more prevalent: 56 sexual encounters (80.0%) contained some form of nonverbal consent from at least one character in the sexual encounter. Nonverbal consent was requested and given within the same sexual encounter 32 times (45.6%). Isolating instances in which consent was granted by the gatekeeper character, rather than requested by the initiator only, 32 sexual encounters depicted consent (either verbal or nonverbal) being granted by the gatekeeper (45.6%).

It should be noted that multiple types of consent cues could be depicted within a single sexual encounter and employed by a single character. Thus, we then considered the frequency with which each type of consent was presented across all encounters by all characters (see Appendix C in the online supplement). Because coders identified whether a consent cue was employed by the initiator, by the gatekeeper, or by both characters, we report on a total frequency that equals to $N_{\text{initiator}} + N_{\text{gatekeeper}} + 2 * N_{\text{both}}$. Considering these frequencies, the most frequently depicted form of sexual consent across characters was explicit nonverbal consent ($N = 74$).

Finally, there were nine instances in which no consent was shown (12.9%), wherein the scene cut directly to characters engaging in sexual behavior. This also occurred in

cases where the scene began immediately after sexual behavior has occurred, for example, with clothes strewn over the floor and the characters lying in bed together. Therefore, in answer to RQ1, among our sample of adolescent-directed series, nonverbal consent appeared most often, followed by verbal consent, and no portrayal of consent.

Frequency of Sexual Refusal (RQ2a-b)

Of the 70 coded sexual encounters, nearly half depicted some form of sexual refusal (either verbal, nonverbal, or a combination of both, $N = 33$, 47.1%). Verbal sexual refusal (either explicit or implicit) was enacted by the initiator or gatekeeper during 27 sexual encounters (appearing in 38.6% of sexual encounters). There were no sexual encounters in which both explicit and implicit verbal sexual refusal appeared in the same sexual encounter. Similarly, nonverbal sexual refusal appeared in 27 sexual encounters (38.6%). Unlike sexual consent, which was shown to be frequently enacted by both characters in a sexual encounter, there were zero instances of this in the context of sexual refusal. Thus, in answer to RQ2, sexual refusal occurred frequently (though not as frequently as consent), and verbal and nonverbal refusals were portrayed equally.

Sexual Consent and Refusal by Character Gender (RQ3a-b)

To examine whether sexual consent and refusal varied as a function of character gender, it is important to understand how characters' genders were distributed across the various types of sexual encounters. Coders identified seven mutually initiated sexual encounters (10.0%), or encounters in which there was no clear initiator or gatekeeper. Within these seven encounters, six encounters occurred between male and female characters, and one occurred between two female characters. Eliminating the seven mutually initiated sexual encounters, there were no significant differences in the gender of the sexual initiator ($N_{\text{male}} = 32$, $N_{\text{female}} = 31$) or gatekeeper characters ($N_{\text{male}} = 29$, $N_{\text{female}} = 34$). Of the 63 sexual encounters that had a clearly identified initiator, coders identified six same-gender encounters ($N_{\text{male}} = 2$, $N_{\text{female}} = 4$). During mixed-gender sexual encounters, male characters acted as the initiator and female characters acted as the gatekeeper in 30 encounters. Female characters acted as the initiator and male characters acted as the gatekeeper in 27 encounters.

The distribution of verbal consent and nonverbal consent across encounters in which male or female characters were the sexual initiators was not significant: 56.3% of verbal consent cues occurred in sexual encounters with a male initiator, and 49.1% of nonverbal cues occurred in sexual encounters with a male initiator. Similarly, the distribution

Table 1 Chi-square analyses of sexual consent and refusal by sex, relationships status, and sexual behavior

Test variables	χ^2	df	p
Character gender $\times$ initiator role	0.40	1	.53
Initiator gender $\times$ verbal consent	0.75	1	.38
Initiator gender $\times$ nonverbal consent	0.04	1	.83
Initiator gender $\times$ verbal refusal	0.50	1	.48
Initiator gender $\times$ nonverbal refusal	3.33	1	.07
Relationship status $\times$ verbal consent	1.84	1	.18
Relationship status $\times$ nonverbal consent	0.07	1	.80
Relationship status $\times$ verbal refusal	0.64	1	.42
Relationship status $\times$ nonverbal refusal	0.07	1	.80
Sexual behavior $\times$ verbal consent	0.03	1	.86
Sexual behavior $\times$ nonverbal consent	0.02	1	.89
Sexual behavior $\times$ verbal refusal	9.39	1	.002
Sexual behavior $\times$ nonverbal refusal	12.76	1	< .001

of verbal refusal and nonverbal refusal across encounters in which male or female characters were the sexual initiators was also not significant: 57.7% of verbal refusals occurred in sexual encounters with a male initiator, and 40.7% occurred in sexual encounters with a male initiator. In sum, male and female characters were equally likely to express sexual consent and refusal during a sexual encounter. For a listing of χ^2 statistics, please see Table 1.

Sexual Consent and Refusal by Relationship Status (RQ4a-b)

We conducted a two-dimensional chi-square analysis with relationship status and the presence of verbal consent (RQ4a). For ease of interpretation, we collapsed couples who were married and couples in an established relationship into one category (reflecting those who are seriously involved = 1), and all other statuses into a second category (reflecting those who are not seriously involved = 0). There was no significant difference in verbal consent as a function of relationship status: 60.6% of verbal consent cues occurred in sexual encounters where the characters were seriously involved. Next, we conducted a two-dimensional chi-square analysis examining the presence of any type of nonverbal consent. Similar to verbal consent, there was no difference in nonverbal consent among those in a serious or casual relationship: 67.9% of nonverbal consent cues occurred in sexual encounters where the characters were seriously involved.

To address RQ4b, we conducted a two-dimensional chi-square analysis with relationship status and the presence of verbal refusal. Verbal refusal was not statistically more likely to be used by couples in either type of relationship: 62.9% of verbal refusals occurred in sexual encounters where the characters were seriously involved. Similarly, nonverbal

refusal was not statistically more likely to be used by couples in either type of relationship: 70.4% of nonverbal refusals occurred in sexual encounters where the characters were seriously involved. Thus, in answer to RQ4a and RQ4b, the characters' use of verbal and nonverbal consent and refusal cues did not vary as a function of the relationship status portrayed in the program. For all statistics, please see Table 1.

Sexual Consent and Refusal by Sexual Behavior (RQ5a-b)

Coders identified the presence or absence of each sexual behavior. Frequencies of these behaviors, which were mutually exclusive, appear in Appendix E in the online supplement. We conducted a two-dimensional chi-square analysis of sexual consent and sexual behavior to determine if verbal or nonverbal sexual consent cues varied depending on whether sexual intercourse was enacted. We collapsed sexual behaviors into two categories. The first category included sexual intercourse (implied or depicted), and the second category included other behaviors (physical flirting, kissing, touching). The distribution of verbal consent and nonverbal consent across encounters in which sexual intercourse was present was not significant: verbal consent occurred in 63.6% of sexual encounters with sexual intercourse, implied or depicted.

Next, we conducted a two-dimensional chi-square analysis with sexual behavior and sexual refusal. The distribution of verbal refusal was significant. Notably, verbal refusal occurred during 15.4% of sexual encounters with sexual intercourse, implied or depicted ($n=4$). Similarly, the distribution of nonverbal refusal was significant and occurred during 11.5% of sexual encounters with sexual intercourse ($n=3$). For a listing of χ^2 statistics, please see Table 1.

Discussion

A quantitative content analysis identified the frequency with which verbal and nonverbal sexual consent cues are communicated in television programs popular among adolescent viewers, suggesting that both are portrayed, especially in comparison with instances where no consent was asked or offered. Nonverbal consent, however, is more prevalent in comparison with verbal consent, which is consistent with past research on popular films (Jozkowski et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2020a, 2020b). One notable difference is that in the current study on consent communication in television programs, explicit nonverbal cues appeared more frequently than implicit nonverbal cues, whereas Jozkowski et al.'s (2019) study on popular films reported the opposite findings. Further, we found that sexual refusal, either verbal or nonverbal, was frequently portrayed as well and

occurred at the same frequency as previous research (Jozkowski et al., 2019). Our results indicated that the presence of sexual consent and refusal did not differ by character gender or relationship status. The lack of significant results suggests generally positive portrayals of sexual consent and refusal; both are common, and both men and women in different types of relationships and in different sexual situations offer them relatively equally.

This study had limitations, although these limitations do offer some guidance for future coding and portrayals of sexual consent. Identifying consent during a real-world sexual encounter requires perceiving a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues reflecting a partner's willingness to engage in sexual activity; thus, coding for the presence of a media character's consent is undeniably challenging. Using the coding scheme created by Jozkowski et al. (2019), we relied on communication cues that would be available to another person during a sexual encounter. Although coders examined behaviors ranging from straightforward (e.g., "yes," "no") to subtle (e.g., a look of discomfort), even the most seemingly straightforward of signals can be difficult to code. For instance, one may verbally indicate a willingness to engage in sexual intercourse, but not actually want to because they are not "in the mood." Alternatively, one may refuse to engage in sexual intercourse due to their beliefs about sex, but nevertheless be sexually attracted to the initiator and desire sexual contact (Peterson, 2013). Without a clear invitation for the gatekeeper's response, such as asking a direct question, or leaning in for a kiss and waiting for the gatekeeper to lean in as well, it can become difficult to determine whether a behavior is merely a sexual initiation attempt, a genuine request for consent, or both. These issues while coding provide guidance for future portrayals of sexual consent in adolescent programming. Indeed, given the difficulty of coding sexual consent among researchers with expertise in this content area, for adolescents with minimal sexual experience learning from entertainment media, it is particularly important to view portrayals of (1) sexual encounters in which the initiator uses both verbal and nonverbal consent cues that invite a response from the gatekeeper, and (2) sexual encounters in which gatekeepers' refusals are met with respect and compliance.

Overall, the goal of Study 1 was to describe the landscape of sexual consent communication in television messages available to adolescent viewers; however, the effects of exposure to such messages on adolescents' intentions to seek verbal sexual consent remain unknown, even though Study 1 demonstrated that portrayals of both verbal and nonverbal sexual consent are relatively prevalent. Thus, we expanded on the findings from the quantitative content analysis in order to understand how exposure to verbal and nonverbal sexual consent influenced adolescents' intentions to seek sexual

consent. We focused on both verbal and nonverbal consent considering that we found both to be relatively prevalent in adolescent-directed programming. Given the importance of establishing verbal sexual consent, we sought to understand how media portrayals of consent affected viewers' attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control pertaining to offering or obtaining consent. As such, Study 2 experimentally investigated whether television narratives can be used to promote verbal sexual requests among adolescent viewers.

Study 2

Theory of Planned Behavior

Exposure to sexual media content may influence the three predictors of intended behavior posited by TPB: attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control. TPB assumes that one's behaviors are predicted by their behavioral intentions, and that behavioral intentions are rooted in three cognitive factors. The first factor is attitude, or a person's general assessment of a behavior. A person is particularly likely to espouse a positive attitude toward verbal sexual consent if they believe that seeking verbal consent will lead to positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). The second factor is perceived behavioral control, or a person's beliefs about their abilities to engage in a behavior. A person's perceived behavioral control related to using verbal sexual consent cues is rooted in the belief that they would have difficulty performing those cues, or that successfully performing those cues would be out of their control (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). The last factor is perceived social norms, or a person's perceptions of what others expect them to do in a certain situation. Previous research has demonstrated a link between perceptions of peer sexual behaviors and individual sexual behaviors among teen and young adult samples (e.g., L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). Included in these perceptions of normative consent behaviors are those of the sexual partner: If a person expects their sexual partner to react negatively to a verbal request for consent, then that person is less likely to ask for verbal consent.

Importantly, television has been shown to contribute to viewers' valence (e.g., attitudes; Eyal & Kunkel, 2008), prevalence (e.g., perceived norms; Aubrey et al., 2003), and feasibility (e.g., perceived behavioral control; Collins et al., 2003) of performing sexual initiation strategies and sexual behaviors. Thus, extant literature has demonstrated a relationship between viewing sexual media and each of the three predictors of behavioral intentions, consistent with TPB. Therefore, a media narrative that highlights the use of verbal sexual consent as a natural part of sexual initiation may therefore serve to promote a verbal exchange before proceeding with sexual activity through increases in attitudes

toward establishing verbal sexual consent and perceptions that verbal sexual consent is normative.

Exposure to verbal sexual consent may also indirectly influence adolescent viewers' sexual consent intentions via attitudes toward women. Research suggests that people's attitudes and beliefs about gender are associated with exposure to gendered media depictions (e.g., Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Further, the endorsement of traditional gender roles can contribute to problematic beliefs and attitudes about sex. For example, the endorsement of traditional gender roles is negatively associated with women's sexual agency and condom use self-efficacy (Curtin et al., 2011), and positively associated with rape myth acceptance (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Rape myths are "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" and serve as a means of reasoning behind a person's decision to commit sexual assault (Burt, 1980, p. 217). One study found that negative attitudes toward women more strongly predicted rape myth acceptance compared to gender or endorsement of sexual double standards (Lee et al., 2010). Such attitudes are not strictly limited to men: women who endorsed sexual stereotypes were found to be less likely than other women to expect to engage in healthy negotiation of sexual consent (Hust et al., 2017). In contrast, it is likely that viewing the initiator and the gatekeeper (regardless of sex) engage in a verbal exchange about consent would promote more positive attitudes toward women, considering that regardless of role, the exchange involves a female character acting with agency. Thus, for adolescent participants, we expect an indirect relationship, such that exposure to verbal sexual consent will lead to more positive attitudes toward women, and that attitudes toward women will be positively associated with intentions to seek verbal sexual consent. Therefore, we predict:

H1: Adolescents exposed to verbal sexual consent portrayals will report greater intentions to seek sexual consent via (1) attitudes toward verbal sexual consent, (2) perceived behavioral control, (3) perceived norms regarding verbal sexual consent, and (4) attitudes toward women.

See Appendix F in the online supplement for the hypothesized model.

Method

Participants

Participants were adolescents aged 12–18 years old recruited via Qualtrics Panel and were compensated \$5.25 for their time. Parents consented to their children's participation in research prior to opening the link to this study. Upon clicking the link to the current study, adolescent participants were presented with an assent form, which informed them that

the objective of the study was to investigate how adolescents respond to media portrayals of characters in intimate relationships.

Based on Fritz and MacKinnon's (2007) recommendations for detecting an indirect effect with 0.80 power, we aimed to collect data from approximately 400 or more participants. After omitting participants who took more than 1 SD below the mean study duration (approximately 9 min, $n=9$), 402 participants completed the study.¹ The sample was comprised of 247 female participants (61.4%), 149 male participants (37.1%) and 6 participants who identified as having another gender identity (1.5%). Participants reported an average age of 15.8 ($SD=2.1$). The race composition was as follows: 43.8% Caucasian ($n=176$), 21.1% Black or African American ($n=85$), 9.2% Hispanic or Latino ($n=37$), 6.2% Asian ($n=25$), 1.2% Alaska Native ($n=5$), and 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($n=3$). Participants could also identify as mixed race by selecting more than one race (14.9%, $n=60$) or having another racial identity (2.7%, $n=11$). Most participants reported their relationship status as single ($n=273$, 67.7%), followed by seriously dating ($n=68$, 16.9%), casually dating ($n=55$, 13.9%), and engaged to be married or married ($n=6$, 1.5%).

Measures

Intention to Seek Verbal Consent

Participants were asked to imagine they have just started an intimate relationship with someone or, if they were already in an intimate relationship, they are starting a new relationship in the future. Next, they were asked to imagine that they are in a situation in which they would like to have sex with this person. Language for these items was modified from the Sexual Consent Scale-Revised (SCS-R): Indirect Behavioral Approach Subscale (Humphreys & Brosseau, 2010) to express behavioral intentions regarding the use of verbal sexual consent. For example, "I would make sure that my partner wanted to have sex by asking them if they wanted to continue" ($M=5.8$, $SD=1.6$, $\alpha=0.91$; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

¹ Because this was an online study, we wanted to account for the possibility that participants completing the study at home may get distracted and leave the web browser, or complete survey measures without reading instructions. After conducting the analyses reported above, we conducted the same analyses again eliminating participants whose time to complete the study was 1.5 standard deviations above the mean (i.e., whose time was over 30.5 min). The sample size reduced to 382 participants. All significant and non-significant paths remained the same. Thus, we opt to present findings from the larger sample.

Attitudes toward Sexual Consent

Participants completed the SCS-R: Positive Attitude toward Establishing Consent Subscale (Humphreys & Brosseau, 2010), which consists of 11 items. Higher scores represented more positive attitudes toward consent, for example "I feel that verbally asking for sexual consent should occur before continuing with any sexual activity" ($M=5.1$, $SD=1.5$, $\alpha=0.92$; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Perceived Behavioral Control

To measure participants' perceived behavioral control regarding seeking verbal consent during a sexual encounter, participants completed 11 items from the SCS-R: Perceived Behavioral Control Subscale (Humphreys & Brosseau, 2010). Since the original subscale measured participants' lack of perceived behavioral control, items were reverse-coded such that higher scores represented greater behavioral control regarding verbal sexual consent. Sample items included, "I would have a hard time verbalizing my consent in a sexual encounter because I am too shy," and "I believe that verbally asking for sexual consent reduces the pleasure of the encounter" ($M=5.0$, $SD=1.5$, $\alpha=0.91$; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Sexual Consent Norms

We employed the 7-item SCS-R: Sexual Consent Norms Subscale (Humphreys & Brosseau, 2010) to measure participants' beliefs about how sexual consent communication normally occurs. Items included, "I believe it is enough to ask for consent at the beginning of the sexual encounter," and "I believe that sexual intercourse is the only sexual activity that requires explicit verbal consent." All items were reverse coded such that a higher score reflected the belief that sexual consent is required in situations beyond sexual intercourse ($M=3.7$, $SD=1.5$, $\alpha=0.85$; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Attitudes Toward Women

Participants completed 12 items to measure their attitudes about the equality of men and women (Attitudes toward Women Scale for Adolescents; Galambos et al., 1985). Statements included, "Boys are better leaders than girls," and "Girls should be more concerned with becoming good wives and mothers than desiring a professional or business career." Higher scores represented more negative attitudes toward women ($M=2.9$, $SD=0.5$, $\alpha=0.80$; 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree).

Control Variables

To control for potentially confounding variables, we asked participants to report their biological sex, age, their current relationship status, past sexual behavior, and mother's and father's level of education as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Only variables that significantly correlated with the dependent variable, intention to seek verbal consent, were included as controls. Biological sex (female participants dummy coded: $r=0.07$, $p=0.164$; male participants dummy coded: $r=-0.08$, $p=0.114$), age ($r=0.01$, $p=0.846$), and father's level of education ($r=0.04$, $p=0.42$) were not correlated with intention to seek verbal consent; mother's level of education was significantly correlated, however ($r=-0.13$, $p=0.011$). Participants' relationship status was dichotomized so that single and casually dating participants made up one category ($n=328$), and seriously dating, engaged, and married participants ($n=74$) made up the second category. Relationship status was not correlated with intention, $r=0.08$, $p=0.108$. Participants reported on their past sexual behavior by selecting which sexual behaviors they have ever engaged in (where 1 = have engaged in this behavior, 0 = have not engaged in this behavior; Bleakley et al., 2008). None of the behaviors were significantly correlated with intention (deep kissing/making out: $r=-0.02$, $p=0.735$; genital touching: $r=0.03$, $p=0.623$; oral sex given or received: $r=0.06$, $p=0.246$; vaginal sex: $r=0.02$, $p=0.666$; anal sex given or received: $r=-0.09$, $p=0.086$). Therefore, we used only mother's education as a covariate in analyses.

Procedure

After providing assent, participants were randomly assigned to one of three viewing conditions: Verbal consent, nonverbal consent, or control. Participants watched a compilation of three television scenes from three different television programs (*The OC*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Gilmore Girls*). These scenes were selected because they (1) portrayed a clear, verbal exchange between characters about proceeding with the sexual encounter (except scenes used for the control condition), (2) portrayed adolescent characters, and (3) aired between 2003 and 2010. We selected slightly older programming for two main reasons. First, we wanted to ensure that adolescents were viewing programming that was aimed at adolescent audiences, but second, we also wanted to ensure that it was unlikely that adolescents had recently viewed these scenes to control for confounding effects of having recently seen these portrayals or heard about them from other sources, such as the popular press.

In the verbal consent condition, participants viewed three scenes depicting verbal and nonverbal sexual consent cues. Each scene depicted an adolescent male and female character kissing. The male character requests verbal consent from the

female character before proceeding with the sexual encounter, and she verbally grants it.² Following this exchange, sexual intercourse was inferred by narrative device (i.e., the characters lay down and the screen fades to black). Characters were not depicted having sexual intercourse or any behavior other than kissing or talking. The presentation of the three scenes was counterbalanced. In the nonverbal consent condition, participants watched a compilation of the same three television scenes described in the verbal consent condition. These scenes were cut and spliced to eliminate the verbal exchange between the two characters—only nonverbal cues including removing one's clothing and pulling one's partner in closely remained. Thus, in these scenes, the male and female characters kiss, lay down, and the screen fades to black. Once again, participants did not view any behavior other than kissing and talking. Lastly, in the control condition, participants watched a compilation of three television scenes featuring the same characters as those featured in the other two conditions. These scenes, however, depict a casual verbal exchange between the male and female characters and did not contain any romantic or sexual content. Following exposure to the stimulus, participants completed survey measures about their perceptions and attitudes related to sexual consent.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Variable correlations are reported in Appendix G in the online supplement. Negatively skewed variables (intention to seek verbal sexual consent: skewness = -1.49 , $SE=0.12$; attitudes toward consent: skewness = -0.81 , $SE=0.12$; and perceived behavioral control: skewness = -0.52 , $SE=0.12$) were transformed using an exponential transformation. Positively skewed variables (sexual consent norms: skewness = 0.48 , $SE=0.12$; attitudes toward women: skewness = 1.18 , $SE=0.12$) were transformed using a reciprocal transformation. We used the normalized variables in subsequent analysis. Controlling for mother's level of education, a univariate ANCOVA showed that experimental condition

² Verbatim dialogue for each clip is as follows. *The OC*. Male character: Are you sure you want to do this? 'Cause we've done a lot...but not this. Female character: [Nods]. Male character: You know it's going to make it that much harder for you to leave. Female character: I know.

Pretty Little Liars. Male character: Are you sure? Female character: I'm sure. Do you have...? Male character: [Nods].

Gilmore Girls. Male character: Do you want me to go? Female character: [Kisses male character]. Male character: Rory, do you want me to go? Female character: No.

did not directly influence intention to seek verbal sexual consent, $F(2, 386) = 0.34$, $p = 0.711$. Next, we conducted a MANCOVA to test the effects of experimental condition on the four indirect variables. Experimental condition did not significantly influence participants' attitudes toward consent, $F(2, 396) = 0.32$, $p = 0.724$, perceived behavioral control, $F(2, 396) = 0.60$, $p = 0.549$, or endorsement of sexual consent norms, $F(2, 396) = 0.61$, $p = 0.543$. Experimental condition significantly influenced attitudes toward women, $F(2, 396) = 5.25$, $p = 0.006$. Planned contrasts indicated that participants exposed to verbal sexual consent, $M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.5$, reported more positive attitudes toward women compared to those exposed to the control stimuli, $M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.6$, $p = 0.021$, and compared to those exposed to nonverbal sexual consent, $M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.5$, $p = 0.002$, considering that higher scores indicate more negative attitudes toward women.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 was tested using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). We coded the independent variable using simple contrast coding (exposure to verbal sexual consent = 1, exposure to nonverbal sexual consent = -1, control = 0; see Hayes & Preacher, 2014) and controlled for participants' mother's level of education. A multiple mediation model (Hayes, 2017; PROCESS Model 4) was used to determine whether exposure to verbal sexual consent on television related to participants' intention to seek verbal consent via attitudes toward consent, perceived norms about consent, and perceived behavioral control (H1). Contrary to our hypotheses, there was no indirect relationship between exposure to verbal sexual consent and intentions to seek verbal consent via attitudes toward consent, $b = 2.63$, $SE = 12.52$, $LLCI = -20.54$, $ULCI = 29.20$, perceived behavioral control, $b = -0.28$, $SE = 4.09$, $LLCI = -9.49$, $ULCI = 7.71$, and perceived norms, $b = -0.40$, $SE = 2.17$, $LLCI = -6.27$, $ULCI = 3.11$. However, there was a significant indirect relationship of exposure to verbal sexual consent on intentions to seek verbal consent via attitudes toward women, $b = 10.73$, $SE = 5.76$, $LLCI = 2.07$, $ULCI = 26.37$.³

³ Because of the focus of this study, and because participants' gender was significantly correlated with attitudes toward women, ($r = .19$, $p < .001$), we tested H1 again to include participant gender as a covariate. The indirect effect of condition on intention via attitudes toward women remained significant, $b = 9.53$, $SE = 5.26$, $LLCI = 1.68$, $ULCI = 23.61$, and is consistent with findings when not controlling for participant gender.

General Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that adolescents are exposed to both verbal and nonverbal sexual consent, as well as verbal and nonverbal sexual refusal, when viewing adolescent-directed programming. Study 2 expanded on these findings to show that exposure to media portrayals of verbal consent can indirectly influence adolescents' own intentions to seek verbal consent via increases in attitudes toward women. Thus, portrayals of verbal consent in media may have prosocial effects on adolescents, as they relate to attitudes toward women and intentions to seek verbal consent, and the importance of these findings is underscored because such portrayals occur with relative frequency in adolescent-directed media. These findings together are also particularly important in the context of adolescence as individuals establish intimate relationships and explore their sexuality. This builds on recent work by Padilla-Walker et al. (2020), together suggesting that both parents and media can influence adolescents' sexual consent communication under certain conditions and via certain processes. They also underscore opportunities to improve consent portrayals in media, however.

For example, nonverbal consent cues were more prevalent than verbal cues in Study 1 sample. Though this is consistent with young adults' reports of their own sexual consent communication (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), and research on sexual consent in films (Jozkowski et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2020a, 2020b), these types of media messages may underplay the importance of the combination of both verbal and nonverbal sexual consent cues. Researchers have defined sexual consent as an internal state of willingness (Muehlenhard et al., 2016); however, it is likely difficult for the initiator of a sexual encounter to fully understand the internal state of the gatekeeper. Empirical work has found that verbal cues were reported to be clearer signs of sexual consent in comparison with nonverbal cues (Lim & Roloff, 1999) and that women's active consent cues, such as a verbal affirmation, were associated with their internal consent (Willis et al., 2019a). Further, the act of "doing nothing" or not refusing sexual activity was not significantly associated with women's internal feelings of consent, suggesting that sexual partners should not infer consent simply in the absence of sexual refusal (e.g., pushing away, saying "no"). Thus, although it is positive that, among our sample, consent (either verbal or nonverbal) was portrayed more frequently than sexual encounters with no consent, it is somewhat problematic that physical, potentially even nonsexual, actions were more frequent than verbal consent, given the relative ambiguity and opportunity for misunderstanding (Bedera, 2021).

The largely null results from Study 1 suggest that sexual consent is portrayed in a relatively consistent way, regardless of character gender, relationship status, or sexual behavior.

This is somewhat surprising, considering that research has found that people in long-term committed relationships are less likely to rely on overt consent cues (Humphreys, 2007), and that women are more likely to indicate their consent verbally in comparison with men (Jozkowski et al., 2014a, 2014b). Another important finding is that the presence of sexual consent did not differ by behavior. That is, sexual consent cues were no more likely to co-occur with sexual intercourse than other behaviors such as kissing or intimate touching. This pattern seems to differ from the traditional script that higher-order sexual behaviors require consent, whereas lower-order behaviors do not (Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski et al., 2014a, 2014b). From a sexual assault prevention perspective, these null responses can be viewed in a positive light, especially considering that these portrayals occur in popular adolescent television programming. Given that adolescents are learning about sex and sexuality during this developmental period, viewing such programming may create prosocial sexual consent scripts in which consent is obtained regardless of the sexual activity, the length of the relationship, or the sex of the initiator or gatekeeper.

We are less optimistic, however, about the presence of verbal and nonverbal refusals during sexual encounters that, regardless of refusal, seemed to escalate to sexual intercourse. Though small in number, these encounters cue toward and could potentially normalize beliefs in token resistance, believing that when someone indicates “no” to sex, they really mean “yes” (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988). Although both men and women may refuse sexual contact despite wanting to engage in sex (e.g., for reasons related to the sexual double standard, social and moral reasons; Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998), those who exhibit stronger beliefs in token resistance may be less likely to take a partner’s refusal seriously. In a vignette study, Osman (2007) found that participants’ beliefs in token resistance were negatively associated with perceptions of sexual harassment. In another study, men with stronger beliefs in token resistance paid less attention to verbal resistance cues (Osman & Davis, 1997). It should be noted that the analyses examining verbal and nonverbal refusal across sexual encounters yielded one cell in each test with an $n < 5$ and thus, should be interpreted with caution.

In Study 2, exposure to verbal consent (in contrast to nonverbal consent only) resulted in more positive attitudes toward women, and more positive attitudes toward women were associated with intention to seek verbal consent. Previous research has found that college students communicate consent in ways that seem to be governed by traditional gender roles (Humphreys, 2007), and research among adolescents further suggests that gender role beliefs shape attitudes toward sexual consent (Javidi et al., 2020). Women are socialized to believe that a sexual refusal may cause them to be perceived as a tease, whereas agreement to have sex may cause them to be perceived as a “slut” (Jozkowski & Peterson,

2013). Viewing a verbal sexual exchange between two individuals in which the woman grants consent may strengthen one’s view of women as sexual agents in charge of their bodies, thus explaining the positive relationship between exposure to verbal consent and attitudes toward women. This may especially be the case, given that both male and female adolescents believe the definition of sexual consent to have a verbal component, but acknowledge that women may convey sexual consent via nonverbal means (Righi et al., 2021).

Attitudes toward women, however, was the only significant variable in our analysis; there was no indirect relationship between exposure to verbal sexual consent and intention to seek verbal sexual consent for any of the three TPB variables. This is somewhat surprising, given that exposure did change attitudes toward women but not attitudes toward sexual consent. It is possible that, due to the salience of sexual consent in the national discourse in the USA over the past several years, attitudes, norms, and perceived efficacy regarding sexual consent are more salient and hardened, and thus, more difficult to shift via exposure to media narratives, in comparison with attitudes toward women. We are unable to test this proposition directly; however, if this is indeed the case, it is even more imperative for researchers to explore other pathways to shifting adolescents’ intentions to seek verbal sexual consent.

These findings also have practical implications. Research has demonstrated that television narratives may serve to educate young audiences, particularly in the areas of moral, prosocial, and healthy behaviors (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In addition, they may be more effective compared to traditional persuasive messages, such as those that students may encounter in sexual education classes. By embedding a persuasive message in an entertainment media narrative, audience members exhibited lower levels of reactance and decreased perceptions of the message’s persuasive intent (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Subsequent work also demonstrated that exposure to media messages pertaining to the discussion of sexually taboo topics promoted discussion of such topics among viewers two weeks later (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011).

The entertainment-education approach to affirmative sexual consent may be useful because, as demonstrated in Study 1, these narratives are available through broadcast television, cable television, and streaming services, all of which are pervasive in adolescents’ lives (Lauricella et al., 2016). This arena is of particular importance because education about sexual consent is not required in US public school health education standards (Willis et al., 2018). Study 2 showed that depictions of active verbal consent communication between male and female characters foster more positive gender attitudes that can promote the use of verbal sexual consent. Importantly, these narratives can be informative and appealing: Piemonte et al. (2020) found that erotic fiction narratives featuring verbal consent were rated by participants as

equally as sexy as narratives without verbal consent. Given that young people often use television and streaming media for information about sexual behavior, an understanding of how adolescents respond to such content is an important step toward developing media content promoting the use of verbal consent. In the long term, providing adolescents with more clearly defined parameters for what “counts” as consenting to sexual behavior may serve to demobilize rape culture for future generations, and media may serve as one avenue, among others, to do so.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, participants’ identification with characters and perceptions of realism were not measured, which may have moderated effects. The degree to which television viewers resonate with these depictions of sex may be important for influencing cognitive change (Gerbner et al., 1980). Because the clips containing verbal sexual consent communication depicted the male character posing a verbal request, and because the clips depicted white, cisgender, heterosexual characters, some participants may have felt disconnected from the content. We also did not measure adolescents’ previous experiences with different types of sexual education, which may have further moderated results. Second, we selected three different clips from existing television series to achieve external reliability, and to address issues of generalizability. However, this form of television viewing is not a perfect imitation of how adolescents traditionally view television content. In a natural setting, television series allow for character development and relational cues. Although television and streaming media consumption is quite popular among this age group (Lauricella et al., 2016), we did not measure participants’ media habits, and thus, the extent to which participants view sexual media is not clear. Third, the video clips included in our control condition needed to meet two criteria: They needed to portray the same characters in all experiment conditions to achieve internal validity, and they needed to be completely absent of any sexual consent communication. This required us to find video clips that did not contain any sexual content; depictions of sexual activity without any consent cues may be perceived as passive participation or discomfort. In meeting these criteria, the control narratives manipulated two factors, the presence of consent and the presence of sexual content. Findings should be interpreted with this in mind. Fourth, it is also possible that the use of the word “consent” in the measures’ instructions elicited social desirability effects. For example, one study found that male college students endorsed the definition of affirmative consent, but did not always practice direct and unambiguous consent communication (Bedera, 2021).

Finally, although these studies highlight the need for verbal sexual consent and the conditions under which television

narratives can promote its use during a sexual encounter, the presence of verbal consent does not guarantee both parties’ enthusiastic participation in sexual activity, as some women may be afraid to say no (Lyndon et al., 2007). Thus, these findings do not suggest that verbal cues alone should be treated as an indisputable measure of one’s willingness to engage in sexual activity. However, in light of individuals’ discomfort with verbally requesting sexual consent, it is possible that entertainment media can, under certain conditions, normalize one’s use of clear verbal consent requests and the willingness to attend to a partner’s verbal and non-verbal consent cues. Indeed, certain portrayals may be able to frame these behaviors in a positive light, thus increasing the chances of an adolescent viewer asking for or granting consent in a real-life sexual encounter. The findings of the present study suggest pathways to understand the process of how this can occur as a function of viewing television, with implications for theory pertaining to media effects regarding sex and sexuality, as well as implications for the design of entertainment-education programming.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The researchers have no conflicts of interest to report.

Ethical approval The stimuli, questionnaire, and methodology of this study were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Massachusetts Boston (Ethical approval #21312019013).

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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