

# If You Wanna Be My Lover, You Gotta Get My Consent: Dutch University Students' Experience with Sexual Consent during Heterosexual Intimacy

Master  
Thesis

June 2021  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
Social Inequalities  
Supervised by Dr. Bonnie French  
10.964 Words

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## Abstract

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If You Wanna be My Lover, You Gotta Get My Consent: Dutch University Students' Experience with Sexual Consent during Heterosexual Intimacy  
(Under the direction of Dr. Bonnie French)

Key Words: Heterosexual Intimacy, Sexual Consent, Students

University students are at risk to experience sexual assault. One of the reasons is the difference in sexual expectations. While men are expected to initiate sex, women are supposed to gatekeep it. Therefore, the research question of this study is to : *How do male and female Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy?*

To study the experience of Dutch university students with sexual consent, 21 semi-structured interviews with twelve men and nine women were conducted. These interviews resulted in three themes: Verbal versus Non-Verbal Consent, Unwanted Intimacy and Reasons for Unwanted Intimacy.

The results imply that Dutch university students experience sexual consent as a verbal or a non-verbal agreement or as non-existent. Some experienced that consent was gathered under duress, which is heavily determined by societal expectations and power differences between men and women. This indicates the importance of studying sexual consent because awareness surrounding how societal expectations and power differences affect consent negotiation can improve intimate experiences.

## **Preface**

Performing the research and writing this thesis has been an incredibly fulfilling and valuable process. When I started my study about the subject of sexual consent, I knew it was highly significant and had great societal relevance. However, during the interviews I have become even more aware of the importance of studying consent because sexual consent is often absent in intimate relations. I had not expected how much the interviewees would be willing to open up to me, and that so many stories would come up that are important to share, but may also be saddening and distressing. To use the words of Hirsch and Khan (2019) “we seek to move our readers beyond simply being shocked by these statements, or saddened by the stories that follow. Our goal is to impel action, but from a position of empathy and understanding, rather than fear” (p.13). Caution should be taken when reading this thesis since potentially triggering subjects are mentioned like sexual assault. I hope everyone who reads this thesis will understand the importance of continuing the conversation about sexual consent beyond the scope of this research, because there are so many more stories that need to be heard. This thesis has entered the conversation, but the conversations should be continued from here on out. .

First, I want to thank my supervisor Dr. Bonnie French, for her unwavering support through all my stubbornness, which is usually a result of my great passion for the subject. I want to thank all the interviewees who took part in this research, who were willing to share their stories and gave me the opportunity to share these stories with you. Without their openness and honesty this study would not have been possible. Very importantly, I want to thank my thesis group; Emily, Gabie, Chantelle and Alsyssa, who have continuously shared their enthusiasm about this project with me, and who have selflessly shared their feedback in order to improve. Many thanks to my parents for proofreading, my dad, a brilliant academic himself and my mom who completed her own master at 55. And last but not least, thanks to you, for taking an interest in this thesis.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 #LetsTalkAboutYES

The international human rights organisation Amnesty International (2021b), has started the campaign #LetsTalkAboutYES to argue for a change in Dutch law regarding the legal definition of rape. The current Dutch law only acknowledges rape if force was used (Amnesty International, 2021a). Amnesty International (2021a) argues that all non-consensual sex should be qualified as rape, since many sexual assaults happen without the use of force, for example when victims are either under the influence of alcohol or because they experience a freeze reaction during the assault (Kanne and Driessen, 2020). Amnesty International (2021a) emphasises the importance of having a law that protects rape victims because nineteen percent of women and three percent of men in The Netherlands have been penetrated without consent (Kanne and Driessen, 2020) and rapists often do not get punished for their crimes.

In May of 2020, the Dutch minister of Justice and Safety Grapperhaus, presented his initiative to change the current rape law in The Netherlands (Amnesty International, 2021a). Because Amnesty International (2021a) did not agree with his proposition they started the campaign #LetsTalkAboutYES. As part of this campaign, 53.000 women send a card to Grapperhaus to explain why the current Dutch rape law was not sufficient. On International Women's Day 2021, Grapperhaus proposed an improved concept of the rape law, which recognises three punishable offences: rape by negligence - having a strong suspicion your sexual partner did not want to have sex but continuing anyways, with a maximum sentence of four years; rape with intent - knowing your sexual partner did not want to have sex but continuing anyways, with a maximum sentence of nine years; and rape by force, with a maximum sentence of twelve years (Amnesty International, 2021a).

### 1.2 Societal Relevance and Research Question

The #LetsTalkAboutYES campaign shows the relevance of the subject of sexual consent in the Dutch society and the importance of studying the subject of sexual consent. Thanks to Grapperhaus, Dutch law will now use the criterion of consent to establish if a person was sexually assaulted (Amnesty International, 2021a). Therefore it is of great importance to study what consent means to people to create consensus and be able to establish what a lack of consent entails and use it to convict perpetrators of sexual assault. As Humphreys and Herold (2007) indicated, studying sexual consent is

crucial because for both legal and research purposes sexual consent is used to define notions of “sexual assault, rape, and abuse” (p.305).

One area where sexual consent research has great societal relevance is among university students, due to the link between sexual consent and sexual assault (Jozkowski, 2015). Sexual assault is more prevalent among university students for several reasons. The limited knowledge students possess about sex, the party culture at universities, and the consumption of large amounts of alcohol among students play a role in the number of sexual assaults at universities (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). A fourth reason according to Muehlenhard et al. (2016) found for the pervasiveness of sexual assault at universities is the difference in sexual expectations for men and women in college.

According to Jozkowski et al. (2013), men are expected to always want to engage in sex, while women are seen as the gatekeepers of sex, who are expected to verbally give or deny access to sexual activity. As a result of these gender roles, male consent feels implied to their partner, and women might feel like their consent needs to be asked for by their partner, and this might deprive them of the autonomy to reject sex without being asked. The influence of gender on sexual consent is an important subject to study, especially since only limited studies have been done regarding this subject (Jovkowski et al., 2013). To dive deeper into the subject of gender and sexual consent this study will tackle these subjects in a heterosexual context, however, this should in no way take away the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students, who experience even more sexual assault than heterosexual students (Hirsch and Khan, 2020). This subject needs to be addressed in further research.

All the research mentioned above has been performed at American universities. (Jozkowski, 2015; Hirsch et al., 2019, Hirsch and Khan, 2020). At the time of this current study, no research had been performed on sexual consent at Dutch universities, even though the #LetsTalkAboutYES campaign by Amnesty International (2021b) clearly shows that there is a pressing societal need for it. Therefore the research question of this study is: *How do men and women experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy among Dutch University students?*

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Sexual Consent

In the years that sexual consent has been studied, many scholars have attempted to define this concept. They concluded that consent is an agreement to want something, an “internal state of willingness”, an “act of explicitly agreeing to something”, “behaviour that someone else interprets as a willingness” (Muehlenhard et al., 2016) or the compliance to partake in sexual acts (Beres, 2007). The problem with these definitions is that it does not take power differences within sexual relationships into consideration. It ignores the idea that consent is also influenced by the oppression one can experience due to privileges of their partner because of “gender, gender expression, nationality or race” (Kalbuga and Spencer, 2019, p.78). Hickmann and Muehlenhart (1999) address this problem by defining sexual consent as “to engage in sexual activity as the freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness” (p.259). Hickmann and Muehlenhart (1999) explain that by using this definition you take into account the decision one makes to willingly participate in sex, the act of communicating one’s consent and takes outside forces into account which could influence the freedom of expression of consent.

Kalbuga and Spencer (2019) cite Spencer (2015) when they address what she calls the “necessity and impossibility of a definition” (p.3). This encompasses the idea that it is incredibly important to create greater consensus on what consent is, because the ambiguity that now surrounds sexual consent contributes to the occurrence of sexual assault. However, the more you think about it the more complex the idea of consent becomes (Kalbuga and Spencer, 2019). Laker and Boas (2017) brilliantly explained this complexity of sexual consent when they stated: “We believe that consent is a term that ‘feels’ defined, but it quickly falls apart when we begin to unpack what it involves in lived experience. Also, consent is not a static moment, but rather a dynamic decision that ebbs and flows depending on many variables over time. Coercive forces such as loaded or sexually charged contexts, guilt, shame, anxiety, fear, sexism, homophobia, racism and other forms of bigotry and discrimination, threats of rejection, emotional manipulation and eagerness to please others, all have the possibility of compromising the ideal of a truly consensual experience” (Laker and Boas, 2017, p.1).

Angel (2021) offers critique on the concept of ‘consent culture’ by stating: “the widespread rhetoric claiming that consent is the locus for transforming the ills of our sexual culture” (p.7). She proposes the idea that society’s focus on consent as the end all be all is problematic because it suggests that we always have a clear understanding of what we want even though that is often not the case. She argues that there is a power disbalance during sex caused by the inequalities between men and women

and that this will always have to be a part of consent negotiation, and that no matter how hard we try to understand our desires and those of the other, we will never get a definite answer to what we want and can act accordingly. The arguments by Laker and Boas (2017) and Angel (2021) seem to suggest that in society's search for a clear-cut definition of consent, we surpass the idea that intimacy is, just like all human interaction, heavily influenced by power imbalances, and that by stating that consent is a simple yes or no we ignore the reality that people say yes or no for different reasons.

In this study, we do not try to construct a static definition of sexual consent, but try to define what sexual consent means to students through the discourse about their experiences, and thereby create more symbiosis between the various individual meanings people have of sexual consent. By establishing greater consensus surrounding consent, we can not only construct better legal definitions of sexual assault, but also create more satisfying sexual experiences for every individual.

## *2.2 Sexual Non-Consent*

Sexual consent is often not present during intimate situations (Angel, 2021, Hirsch and Khan, 2019, Popova, 2019). Non-consensual intimacy occurs in situations where a person hears a “no” after which they continue with intimate acts, in situations where someone's body language indicates that intimacy is not wanted, but these signs are ignored, or situations where someone coerces their partner to the point that they will consent to unwanted intimacy (Hirsch and Khan, 2019). Unwanted intimacy, on the other hand, occurs when people “will consent (in a legal sense) to having sex [being intimate] even if they do not want it” (Popova, 2019, p.66). For example, as a form of “relationship maintenance” - “doing things for your partner, even if you do not necessarily want to, in order to make them happy or because they also do similar things for you” (Popova, 2019, p.66). Angel (2021) elaborates on this concept, by stating that many women consent to unwanted intimacy because they feel like they have no other option. She stressed the importance of making a “distinction between consent and enthusiasm” because this will give an insight into what the role of differences in power is (p.31). She states: “unequal power relationships mean that consent itself cannot distinguish from good and bad sex, though it can to a limited extent distinguish sex from assault” (p.31).

There are situations in which a person is unable to express consent or non-consent, for example when they are intoxicated. Hirsch and Khan (2019) found that students agree that someone extremely drunk cannot consent. Besides being drunk, another situation in which a person cannot communicate their consent or lack thereof is when a person “freezes up” - “the victim being unable to speak or move” (Bucher and Manasse, 2011, p.128). According to the Dutch Centre for Sexual Violence (Centrum Voor

Seksueel Geweld, n.d.), fifty percent of sexual assault survivors have experienced a freeze reaction during the assault.

Due to the sensitive nature of non-consensual intimacy or unwanted intimacy this study will use unwanted intimacy as an umbrella term for non-consensual intimacy and other negative intimate experiences. Looking at the dynamics between people of different genders in relation to sexual consent is of societal relevance because “violence arises in contexts of power imbalance and oppression, so working to change those power dynamics is the best way to construct cultures of consent” (Kalbuga and Spencer, 2019, p.67). In the past, studies were mostly focussed on the non-consensual experiences of women, because the vast majority of assaults were committed by men and towards women (Hirsch and Khan, 2019). However, this study will go beyond this traditional narrative because as Hirsch and Khan (2019) state: “thinking of men as predators and women as prey misses so much. It flattens women into passive victims in need of protection and provides little in the conceptual tools to understand, or even recognise, instances in which men are assaulted by women” (p. 25).

### *2.3 Sexual Consent among University Students*

At the time of the initiation of my research project, no study in The Netherlands had investigated sexual consent in the context of higher education. This was a severe gap in academic research that is especially appalling when you take into account that North-American studies have shown a high prevalence of sexual assault among university students (Hirsch and Khan, 2020, Kalbuga and Spencer, 2019). As previously mentioned in the introduction, the same factors that play a role in the common occurrence of sexual assault in universities in the United States, may also play a role in Dutch universities (Jozkowski and Peterson, 2016). However, when Pinedo (2016) interviewed Bicanic, the head of the National Psychotraumacentre and the Centre for Sexual Violence (Landelijk Psychotraumacentrum and the Centrum Seksueel Geweld) about the comparison between rape at North-American universities and Dutch universities Bicanic explained that we cannot take the results of studies from North-American universities and copy and paste them onto universities in The Netherlands. Pinedo (2016) points out that in The Netherlands, we do not have the same campus culture. However, she does state that alcohol consumption plays a big part in the occurrence of sexual assault, which is a substance often enjoyed by the student population, in the United States as well as in The Netherlands.

Hall (1998) and Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) found that consent among students is more often communicated through non-verbal signals than verbal ones. Hirsch and Khan (2020) found that students sometimes use affirmative consent, but more often construe consent through the use of social

cues. Jozkowski et al. (2013) provide three reasons why students prefer to communicate consent non-verbally. First, they theorize that students are socialised to follow certain sexual scripts that provide them with a direction of how to indicate sexual consent that is more focused on non-verbal cues. According to Jozkowski et al. (2018), these scripts already start in public when clues such as “eye contact, body language, touching on the arms, legs, back, hair, face, and flirting” are taken as indicators of sexual consent (p.14). Second, students might feel awkward asking whether their partner wants to get sexually involved or they might feel like this is off-putting at the moment. Third, students may feel like consent is obvious until contested by their partner. One of the social cues that students take as sexual consent, is when a person leaves a social setting to go home with a person (Jozkowski et al., 2018). Going back to someone’s place of residence was indicated to be a clear sign of interest in sexual activity. Whether this was true varied across genders. Men agreed that going home with someone equated sex, while women indicated that their consent was more of a process and that they would still have to decide whether sex was going to happen.

The studies performed on sexual consent among college students in the United States provides this study with a framework of what one might expect students to experience regarding consent. However, just because students experience intimacy in a certain way in the United States, does not mean we can apply those exact results to Dutch students.. Therefore, studying sexual consent among Dutch university students is necessary to close the gap in Dutch research regarding sexual consent.

#### *2.4 Men and Women and Sexual Consent*

The importance of studying both male and female experiences with sexual consent lies not only within the difference in sexual expectations between genders, but also in the idea that gender differences may account for miscommunications regarding consent, which can lead to unwanted intimacy (Jozkowski et al., 2013). Miscommunication in sexual situations is a predictable outcome when looking at the gender differences in communicating consent (Jozkowski et al., 2013). In their study, they found men focused more on nonverbal cues when it came to giving and receiving consent, whereas women were more likely to communicate consent verbally. Angel (2021) stresses the idea that during intimacy, power differences between men and women are not left behind, and that inequality between genders largely influences how consent is asked for and given. Hirsch and Khan (2019) enunciate that even though men are not always the ones with the most power in intimate relationships, they are usually older and physically stronger. Furthermore, gender roles have made men the ones who usually initiate intimate contact, this makes them more likely to be the ones committing sexual assault

because they “think of themselves as good people and not assaulters may not recognise the power disparities that make it hard for women to voice their wishes” (Hirsch and Khan, 2019, p.143).

Society has great respect for male desire (Hirsch and Khan, 2019). Women are therefore socialised to cater to men’s needs and keep them satisfied (Angel, 2021). These expectations lead to the belief that women are responsible for a man's satisfaction, that if they have shown previous interest in a man, that this prevents them from turning down intimacy later on. If women decide they want to turn down a man they will do it very carefully to protect themselves against anger and aggression, or will continue with unwanted intimacy to prevent male violence. However, society’s respect for male desire also has negative effects on men. It does not only cater to men’s desires but also creates expectations. This is part of the “male sexual drive discourse”, the stereotype that men are in a constant state of wanting sex, and that they are always ready to have intercourse (Popova, 2019, p. 70). Despite, and maybe even because of this stereotype, men also experience unwanted intimacy (Hirsch and Khan, 2020). When they do experience this, it is hard for them to speak out about this - “how could it be assault if they were not afraid or were never physically overpowered (Hirsch and Khan, 2020, p.20).

The previously indicated sexual gender roles (Jozkowski et al., 2013, Jozkowski and Peterson, 2012 and Hirsch and Khan, 2020) prove why studying consent of men and women during heterosexual intimacy is so important. Due to gender stereotypes and gender expectations, men and women might both feel like they cannot deny sexual consent and might engage in sex unwillingly. Therefore, it is important to study how men and women perceive sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy so that we can uncover how to make heterosexual intimacy consensual for both men and women.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Qualitative Research

The research question of this study is: *How do male and female Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy?* A qualitative research design has been chosen to answer this research question. According to Bryman (2016), qualitative research is a good option when studying the worldviews of a group of people. Since this research project focuses on the perceptions of students on sexual consent, qualitative research is the best opportunity to accurately grasp the students' opinions. Furthermore, Bryman (2016) states that qualitative research is the best method to employ when trying to gain the confidence of your participants. This study is about sexual consent and intimacy, two subjects that are very personal to people, and are still considered taboo to talk freely about. To establish rapport with the subjects of the study and build enough trust so they are willing to open up to the researcher, a qualitative method is preferred in order to gather the most accurate, reliable and extensive data.

#### 3.3 Sampling

A total of 22 university students were gathered by using a combination of generic purposive sampling and convenience sampling. The students were partly selected through generic purposive sampling because they had to possess certain characteristics that would make them eligible to be part of the sample. As Bryman (2016) states in generic purposive sampling, "the researcher establishes criteria concerning the kinds of causes needed to address the research question, identifies appropriate cases, and then samples from those cases that have been identified" (p.413). In this study, the inclusion criteria of the respondents were male or female, studied at a Dutch university, and had the Dutch nationality.

Besides purposive sampling, convenience sampling was applied. Bryman (2016) described convenience sampling as "one that is simply available to the researchers by virtue of its accessibility" (p.187). Participants were recruited via the researcher's social media pages and via her network (see figure 1 and appendix A).

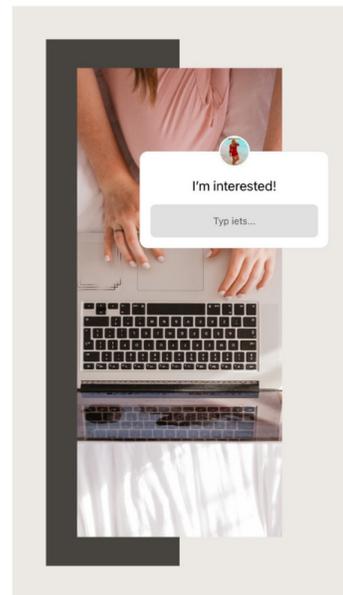
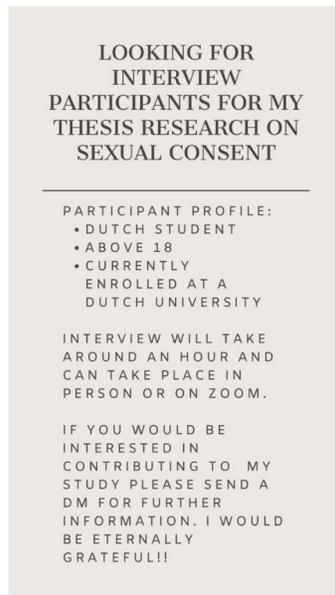
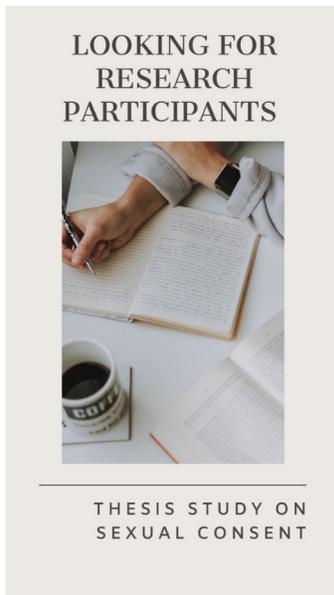


Figure 1: Social Media Posts for Recruitment

### 3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

The data was collected by performing semi-structured interviews. Bryman (2016) explains semi-structured interviews as interviews that follow a so-called “interview guide” (p.468). He elaborates that an interview guide is a list of questions that the researcher loosely follows. While the exact wording of the questions might differ and questions might be added, the same type of questions are asked to all respondents (Bryman, 2016). During this study, a flexible, semi-structured approach

was especially important since the concepts of sexual consent and intimacy were not previously defined by the researcher, but the participants had to come up with their own definitions. The reason for this approach is that even though legally there is a focus on penetrative sex requiring consent, in a healthy partnership consent is required for all acts you chose to partake in together (Popova, 2019). The way this consent is negotiated and which of these acts require consent interviewees could fill in themselves so the researcher would not inflict her own biases about intimacy and consent upon the interviewees before the interview had even begun.

### *3.5 Data Collection*

Participants were interviewed between April 21 and May 19 2021. The interviews lasted ten-fifty minutes depending on how much the participants were willing to disclose and the extent of the answers. The interviews started with an introduction to the subject. The interviewees were reminded of the sensitivity of the subject and that they could stop the interview at any time and not answer questions that they did not want to answer. After this, they were asked if they consented to being part of the study and for their answers to be recorded (see Appendix C). One interviewee declined the use of results of the interview to be part of this study, hence 21 interviews were used for analysis.

Nineteen interviews were done via Zoom due to the COVID-19 measures and two were done in person. During the Zoom call, the interviewee and the researcher had their camera on, and the calls would be recorded. Six baseline questions would be asked on gender identity and year of study. After this, 21 questions and seven sub-questions were asked as part of four broad topics: defining intimacy and sexual consent, getting sexual consent wrong or right, factors that influence sexual consent and conclusion. Examples of questions asked are “How would you prefer your partner to explore whether you are consenting or not?” and “Did you ever regret the way you handled sexual consent during an intimate experience?” (see Appendix D).

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and were sent to all interviewees to check whether they felt like their answers were accurate and whether they felt comfortable with their data being used. Privacy was guaranteed throughout the process by anonymising the recordings and the transcripts. Afterwards, the interview transcriptions were analysed using open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Bryman, 2016). The coding process resulted in three main themes with subthemes.

#### 4. Results

Twenty-one students participated, twelve men and nine women, who were cisgender, heterosexual and had experienced intimacy. Nineteen were current university students, two had graduated within the last year. They studied at six different Dutch universities. The interviews resulted in three themes: verbal versus non-verbal consent - the discrepancy between students who felt like non-verbal consent in their experience sufficed and students who felt like there should be at least a verbal component to sexual consent, unwanted intimacy - students who experienced some form of unwanted intimacy, reasons for unwanted intimacy - the main reasons students indicated for experiencing unwanted intimacy.

Quotes by participants have been a very valuable asset during this research. Interviewees sharing their personal experiences was highly meaningful but also very personal, therefore interviewees are indicated by gender.

Before presenting the results it is important to know how Dutch students defined the core concepts of this research project. The students were asked what they believed to be the definition of sexual consent and what they considered to be intimacy, so the students would not be limited in sharing about their experiences. It was especially important to not provide the interviewees with a strict definition of intimacy because as Popova (2019) indicated “if we conceptualise penile-vaginal intercourse as the main or only act that requires consent, we risk obscuring a whole range of behaviours that push boundaries and violate bodily autonomy” (p.36). How the interviewees would describe intimacy can be divided into two categories, physical intimacy and emotional intimacy. When asked how they would define sexual consent many participants were conflicted, a large part of interviewees mentioned being torn between whether consent had to be a verbal or a non-verbal agreement.

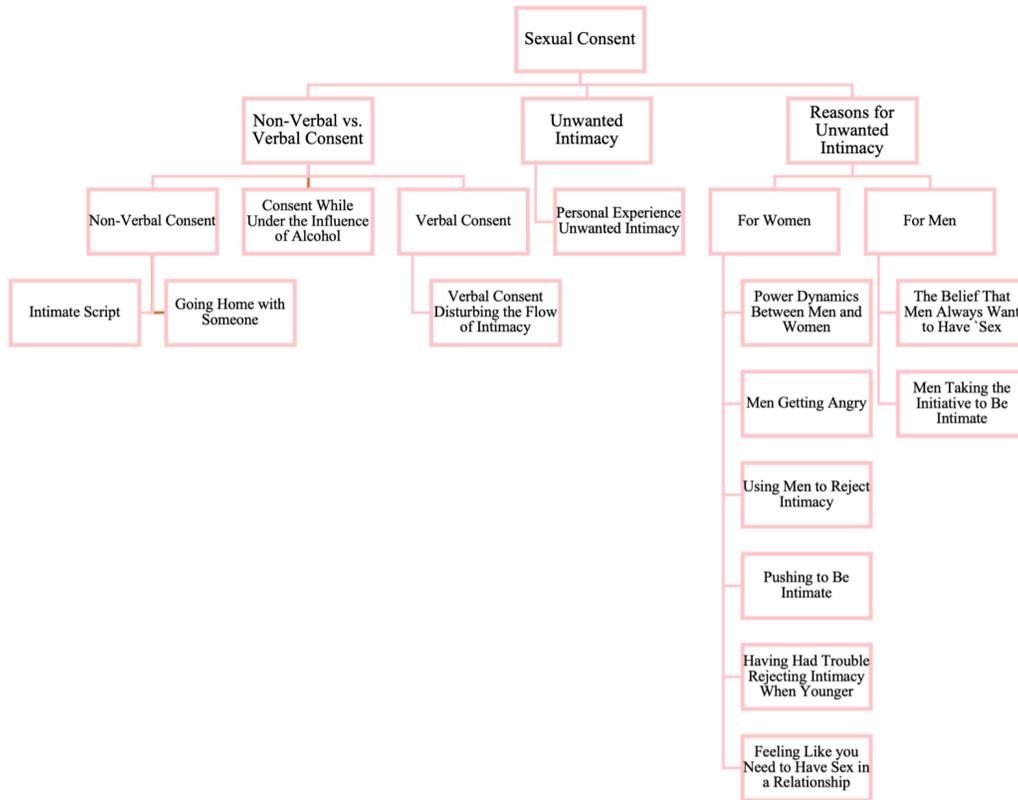


Figure 2: Results Structure

#### 4.1 Non-Verbal versus Verbal Consent

##### 1. Non-Verbal Consent

When students talked about their definition of sexual consent, a clear theme emerged: the battle between whether verbal consent should be obtained or whether non-verbal signs were sufficient. Some participants indicated that consent to them was based on non-verbal signs you receive from your partner.

*“I think it’s a feeling you get from the other person that you’re allowed to do what you’re doing. Indeed, that is usually a certain feeling a person gives you. If he or she likes it, if he or she wants you to continue. I think you always notice and feel it.” [Male]*

Most interviewees agreed that consent is something that can be based on a feeling the other person gives you or that every “sane” person should be able to tell whether someone wants to engage in intimacy or not. One woman summarised this idea by saying that:

*“Maybe you should be like that, that someone clearly needs to state “yes, I want this” or “no, I don’t want this” but I don’t believe this happens in our generation. I’ve never been asked “do you want to have sex or not?” even though in certain situations that may have been better. But I do think, at least in a sober setting, you should be able to tell whether someone is open to it or not.” [Female]*

### *Intimate Script*

Besides basing consent on a feeling, men and women also based their assessment on a set of actions that would lead them to believe that their partner wanted to be intimate. Most of these actions would take place in public, and followed a similar script of eye contact, touching, followed up by kissing. If their partner would engage in these public displays of affection and not object in the form of turning or walking away then this would be a form of non-verbal consent.

*“It’s definitely the case if I was out and I saw a cute girl then we had an animated conversation, and there were just things that made me believe that she was interested in me, and me in her. Eye contact, for example, touching each other, those things contributed to that.” [Male]*

### *Going Home with Someone*

Another non-verbal indication of consent to intimacy that interviewees mentioned was ‘going home’ with someone as a progression to the intimacy script that took place in public. Going home with someone was then equated to having sex with the person that you went home with. For example, one man and woman said:

*“Imagine you meet each other drunk and you go home with someone, then it’s usually quite clear what the intention is.” [Male]*

Other male interviewees believed that this would not be consent enough as someone might feel comfortable to come home with you but not to have sex with you. One of them stated:

*“I can imagine that as a man or woman you meet someone, you go home with someone and then you’re laying there and you think “fuck I actually really don’t want to have sex,” but*

*you're already there, you're lying in bed with each other, you've been drinking, one thing leads to another, you have sex, and then you're thinking "this didn't really need to happen."* [Male]

Their idea was confirmed by a female interviewee:

*"I had that especially when I had not had sex before, that I thought I do want to be lying in bed intimately with you but I don't want sex with you. Then I would cover myself beforehand, "I can sleep at your place but nothing is going to happen, I just want to sleep together." Then I had covered myself beforehand, and if someone then tried something, which they always still did because that's how things go, then I would push them away or I would say no, and then I wouldn't feel bad about it because I had mentioned it beforehand."* [Female]

Even though there is a common understanding that going back to someone's place of residence means you are going to be intimate, students were still able to reflect on this implication.

## 2. Verbal Consent

Some participants agreed that sexual consent is better and more secure if you ask for it explicitly. One finding became very clear during the interviews, men were much more focused on asking women for verbal consent than women were on asking men for verbal consent. Only one of the nine interviewed women indicated she would ask her boyfriend for verbal consent, while many men indicated they would prefer asking for verbal consent.

*"I prefer the explicit, just asking, "Is this okay? If I have reached one of your boundaries, please stop me because this has to be fun for everyone." I also sometimes ask explicitly "yo is it okay if I touch your butt" or "is it okay if I go under your shirt?" stuff like that."*  
[Male]

### *Verbal Consent Disturbing the Flow of Intimacy*

One major reason indicated why they were hesitant to ask for verbal consent by both male and female interviewees was that asking for verbal consent in some way messed with the flow of the

intimate experience. Many different ways were used to describe this disturbance of intimacy. While some reported verbal consent took them out of the moment, others stated it made the intimacy feel mechanical.

*“Because otherwise, it becomes so incredibly rigid, if you constantly have to ask someone this and that, then it just becomes very complex. There needs to be the opportunity for a spark to ignite, and if you have to ask each other for permission constantly that just doesn’t work. I don’t think that helps, a lot of the intimacy that you’re trying to achieve gets lost then. While I do think it’s very important to get consent, no doubt about it.” [Male]*

Another reason that verbal consent was not preferred was that it is an awkward, not socially acceptable thing to do. If it would be socially acceptable, consent would be more likely to be asked for.

*Little weird to ask that in a way because I do think it’s very important to get non-verbal consent in the moment, but I think it’s a little weird to ask. “Can I hug you? Can I kiss you?” That’s actually the reason. If it wouldn’t be weird I would do it in that way, because that check does need to be there. [Male]*

### *Consent While Under the Influence of Alcohol*

Almost all interviewees indicated that there was a limit to the amount of alcohol a person could consume and still be able to consent to intimacy.

*“Yes, of course, if a person is crazy wasted then you don’t do that of course. You don’t take a hammered person home, I don’t think that’s okay.” [Male]*

Even though nearly all interviewees agreed that there was a boundary to when it was ethical to be intimate with a drunk person, they struggled to define what exactly that boundary was. Most of them agreed that when someone was no longer able to stand on their legs or be able to communicate they would no longer be able to freely consent to intimacy. One woman provided two examples of a situation in which she had experienced severely drunk people not being able to resist unwanted intimacy.

*“I once experienced being in the club with my friends and they were so drunk they were basically zombies, but they were still standing, they were moving, and there were all these*

*guys around them trying to lure them home and my friends were as cooperative as they could be, and these boys were like “let’s go.” I just see that as getting to a point where you can’t do anything anymore, where you can’t think straight or even speak, and some men take advantage of that.” [Female]*

*“I’ve also experienced it once. I was super drunk and someone just took me home and told me to jerk him off. I just did it because I was so drunk, too drunk to even be in a position to want anything. Looking back I did not like that at all.” [Female]*

In conclusion, some students felt like consent could be a non-verbal agreement based on the signs someone gives you, whether this was body language or an intimate script that took place. However, even though going home with someone is generally considered an indication of consent, interviewees agreed consent should still be confirmed once more. Interviewees considered verbal consent to be safer, and some men would ask for consent, but on the other hand most interviewees felt it was awkward or not socially acceptable to ask for consent, and therefore would not. No matter what, Dutch students agreed that a person under the influence of alcohol could no longer consent when they were at the point where they could no longer take care of themselves.

#### *4.2 Unwanted Intimacy*

##### *Personal Experience Unwanted Intimacy*

The majority of all interviewees had personally experienced unwanted intimacy. In these situations the person would explicitly say “no” or show signs of rejection but these would be ignored, or the person was not even in a position to consent, because they froze as a reaction to the unwanted intimacy. Both men and women experienced unwanted intimacy. Interestingly, men reported all non-consensual intimacy taking place in public places, mostly in a going out setting, like their but being touched or being kissed while they did not want to, while women had experienced unwanted intimacy in public, but also in the bedroom, where sometimes unwanted penetration would take place. Two women disclosed their non-consensual experiences.

*“I was on exchange and I was friends with a boy there, very platonically for me. We were doing homework once, it was nine or ten o’clock, and we were sleeping on different*

*campuses. He was at the main location and I had to drive ten minutes by bus. The last bus left at ten, and we were still doing homework, just chatting about things and then he said “oh your last bus leaves at 10, and then I said I could take an Uber. Around eleven we were still typing, and I noticed him sitting closer to me and touching me but I pushed his head away a bit. Then he came so close that I just pushed him away, but he still continued and came closer. Then I also said a few times that I did not want to, but at some point, I thought “if I just let him, it’ll be over with” and then he did. After, I told him again, “this isn’t what I wanted”, and he said, “you wanted to take an Uber home?” Back then I thought “maybe he’s right, maybe that was the vibe I was giving off.” [Female]*

*“But there was also this time for example that I did not want sex, and I did have sex with a boy, I didn’t want to and then he said “let it go, let it go” and I do blame him a bit for that. You know I don’t want you, you continue, which causes me to freeze, because I don’t know what to do, and we were in a relationship. It’s a little bit rape when I think about it, because I didn’t want to.” [Female]*

Besides women, men explained they too had been subjected to non-consensual intimacy.

*“It was half-past six in the morning, and we had been chilling with this guy all night. He was completely wasted, off his rocker, but then at some point, he said “one more thing” and then he kissed me. It was fucking weird, he grabbed the back of my head, and I pushed my teeth together, but I just felt his tongue going over my teeth, so fucking weird. He was a bit smaller than I was, but he asserted a lot of strength. At the moment I could laugh about it but later I did find it weird.” [Male]*

*“The moments that I’ve struggled with, that was two or three times that I was grabbed by another man or almost got kissed by a woman without really wanting it. But then I reject that, I say stop and then I don’t have any issues with that like that’s really not chill. I think for women that’s much harder, the rejection. I think it just happens much more, let me put it that way. And that the girl freezes or thinks I’ll just get it over with. I think with men that just happens a lot less.” [Male]*

The second man was not wrong when he said a woman might freeze up while experiencing non-consensual sex. However, it was not only women who experienced this, when confronted with

unwanted intimacy, both men and women noticed it took them a while before they could react. One woman described her experience of freezing often when being in sexual situations, she would be unable to reject the intimate acts inflicted upon her.

*“Yes I just froze, I’ve experienced that more often that I just freeze and then I just can’t think.” [Female]*

*“Yeah then I just let it happen, and then it’s kind of fun because you get sexual feelings and then it’s kind of fun but in hindsight and long term it comes back, that I don’t feel comfortable about it.” [Female]*

*“No, because things did happen that I think are not okay, that’s also really difficult for the other party, I mean they also don’t know and they think with their penis, men just think like that, that’s for real, and women think really differently, and I think when you’re really inexperienced then you don’t know different than from how you think yourself, so then you think I like it so I like it too, for example, I don’t blame my first boyfriend.” [Female]*

Respondents did not only report on their own unwanted intimate experiences but also opened up about moments where they too had questioned whether the intimacy they had initiated had been completely consensual. While they had never received confirmation from their partner how they had experienced it, they started having doubts either by how their partner had behaved towards them afterwards or because there had been no enthusiastic consent beforehand.

*“I believe that it can happen the other way around without intending to do any harm. I recently had a Tinder date who stayed over and then, I didn’t know this guy long at all but we did have sex, then the next time we were supposed to meet up he texted “I would like to sleep over but I don’t immediately want to have sex again”, and then I thought “oh interesting” because I did get that vibe that he liked it, that he also wanted it, and he acted like that, but now he’s telling me. (...) Then all of a sudden I thought “did he feel that too?” I’m curious about that, and did he dare to say it? Is that the reason why he agreed with it or did he already think “I don’t really want this, but I’ll just continue because we already got this far?” That is one of those moments, imagine he would tell a story like that, that’s the other side of the story.” [Female]*

*“Yeah there’s this girl who blocked me on Instagram, on Facebook, you name it. That was when I was like 15, and I feel like I went too quickly there. (...) I would say that’s a bit of a black page in history I would say because I do regret that a little. It could be that I hurt that person because I just went too fast. Yeah, what was that then? Just wanting it really badly, she was someone who was a lot younger than I was and very attractive. I do think that in a way it didn’t feel right after, also because I didn’t know the person for that long.” [Male]*

To conclude, most interviewees had experienced unwanted intimacy. This has happened to both men and women. For one interviewee who often experienced a freezing reaction when being intimate, her partners would not see her non-responsiveness as a sign to stop, which she, herself, felt like was because men thought with their phallus. A few men and women had experienced situations of which they could not recount with a 100 percent certainty if it had been consensual.

#### *4.3 Reasons for Unwanted Intimacy*

##### 1. For Women

#### *Power Dynamics Between Men and Women*

Several male and female interviewees suggested that unwanted intimacy is intertwined with the power relations between men and women, which are mostly caused by physical attributes. They suggested that, in general, men would be able to use their physical strength to overpower women in which case they tried to force unwanted intimacy. While women, who, in general, possess weaker physical strength, might be afraid to reject intimacy in fear of physical aggression that they would not be able to counteract.

*“Physically you are usually stronger and that complicates the dynamics, all a little bit complicated to explain. If a chick would really take things too far, I could always push her off me. A girl can’t just push me off her. I hope not too many girls are scared to stand up for themselves, or just say no, but also due to that physical difference between men and women I think it can be quite hard.” [Male]*

*“That’s always in the back of my mind, does she mean this, or is she just deathly afraid that I will beat her to death, well that might be an exaggeration, but that does play in the back of my mind, yes. With stuff like that it does play in the back of my mind, is she really in the mood or is she just afraid of me. I would really hate it if it was the latter.” [Male]*

### *Men Getting Angry*

The concern that women might agree to unwanted intimacy to avoid male anger was not baseless. Female interviewees recognised the fear of male aggression and that that might influence one's choices to be intimate. One woman reported involving another man in a situation where she was afraid that her partner would become outraged if she would reject his advances.

*“Because imagine that the person would ask but you don’t know them super well, but I don’t want to reject that person because otherwise, he would become super angry. I’ve been in such a situation where I involved a third party to get myself out of it because I didn’t dare to say I didn’t want to because I thought otherwise he will become crazy angry and he will start freaking out or do something to keep me here, so then I called someone else like “come here to come up with an excuse because then I can get out of this.” [Female]*

### *Using Other Men to Reject Intimacy*

This example of a woman using another male to reject a man pursuing intimacy with her was not uncommon, men also recounted their experiences helping out female friends who did not feel comfortable rejecting a man alone. This woman elaborated on her experience:

*“He had called me and I had seen him previously and I thought, I already had a drink, he can come for a drink, that could be fun. I think it was around one o’clock or something, and then he actually showed up. When he walked in, he started kissing me immediately. (...) “I said to him he could come over for a beer, but what is this?” “I don’t like it, it is way too direct” and then he pulled me into my room immediately and I thought “oh no, I don’t feel attracted to you at all”, I just thought we were going to have a beer and that, and then I thought “I’m not going to get this out of my room” and then I ran to my roommate and said, “help me.” [Female]*

*My roommate was calling with his boyfriend, and I said “pretend to break up” and then he started calling very loudly down the call, and called my name and said, “he’s breaking up with me, he’s breaking up with me.” So I said “no do you hear that? How unfortunate.” (...) And after a while of saying “I need to stay with my roommate because otherwise, he will hurt himself”, that dude thought “okay that chick isn’t gonna come back anymore because she needs to comfort her roommate, so I’m out of here.” [Female]*

As shown by these results, women mentioned involving men when they were trying to get out of an unwanted intimate situation with another man. Interestingly, they would go through great lengths to indirectly reject a man, staging fake scenarios before telling a man directly.

### *Pushing to be Intimate*

Several women reported that they had experienced unwanted intimacy because men had pushed them into continuing intimate acts, as the comments below illustrate.

*“Yes, I was struggling with Vaginismus at the time, so penetration was very difficult, very painful, and everything I thought “I’ll just try again, because maybe this time it will get better” or “I’m sure it will be better this time”, then there was someone who was quite pushy, and then I thought “okay he’s been pushy for a while now, I’ll just consent because then the bullshit around it will stop.” At that moment it started bothering me again, and I thought I wanted to stop because it was not pleasant. I do think it is a little bit self-destructive if you continue then, but you think “I will just get through it because then I will just get it over with because someone has been pushing so much.” [Female]*

*“My first boyfriend took his penis out of his pants after two weeks and then it was like “what am I supposed to do with this?” And then two weeks later, when it was already done, the threshold was not as high anymore, but I wasn’t ready at that moment, I was like ahh and I let it come over me and then it was okay. Then we had sex for the first time and he was pretty forceful, but I didn’t really want to have sex. Then we had sex, and I did like it, but in hindsight, it didn’t have to happen that quickly. And again I was like ahh I’m not good at saying no.” [Female]*

### *Having Had Trouble Rejecting Intimacy when Younger*

It is important to mention a large part of the female interviewees indicated that they were very capable of rejecting intimacy they did not want to partake in, citing that it was because they were confident or strong, independent women. However, one woman said:

*“I think I’ve always dared to, and I didn’t find it scary to reject someone. Other people do tell me sometimes that they find that hard. I used to say no, even though in hindsight I wish I would’ve said yes. I was very scared so I always used to say no. It almost came too easily, I was more afraid to do it, than to say no.”* [Female]

A common view among the female participants was that this confidence to reject intimacy came with age, most of them stated that when they were younger they might agree to have sex just because they felt like they had to, while now they will just say no when they do not want to be intimate. One interviewee stated:

*“Or maybe when I was younger, even if I wouldn’t be in the mood for let’s say sex maybe I would still overcome that and do it, whereas now I’ll just be like “I’m not in the mood, I just want to go to sleep or do something else, but I just don’t want to have sex now.”* [Female]

### *Feeling Like You Need to have Sex in a Relationship*

Another reason some female interviewees mentioned going along with unwanted intimacy was that they felt like when they were in a relationship that it was expected of them to have sex and that you could only reject sex so many times until it started to become a problem. One woman shared her feeling by stating:

*“Maybe because you felt like it was expected. Because it was not like I ever experienced that as rape or anything, cause I would still enjoy it. But maybe then you’re a bit younger and you think okay this person knows what he’s doing or we’re together and you’re supposed to have sex when you’re together. (...) So it’s more in my own head, that I felt like that’s how it should be and I can only say no that many times to not wanting to have sex.”*  
[Female]

One woman shared a very vulnerable story where she expressed having little to no sex drive, while she was having a mental problem. This has become complicated since her boyfriend does have a desire to be more sexually active. She explained her situation as follows.

*“Because I also feel like I don't really want to have sex anymore. It's just, it doesn't add something to my relationship. I think at least it's not too important. (...) That is also something that's very frustrating for him because he doesn't see it that way. And I don't know why it has been like that for me, I also have some sort of history with depression, and that has had an effect on how I want to have sex, and for him, that hasn't been the case at all. And for him yeah it's frustrating if I don't want it and sometimes he does want it, and then sometimes I don't really dare to say no or I just take some time getting some signals like okay “no not this time.” [Female]*

She stated that it has become hard for her to often reject her partner as she feels bad constantly not fulfilling his desires. This has led to situations in which she will just go through with it to please her partner.

*“While that's not always the case that I'm just purely in it for him. I can say that in some cases I actually feel repulsed or I really don't want to do it and I'll just keep laying there and I just let it go pass by.” [Female]*

## 2. For men

### *The Belief that Men Always Want to Have Sex*

During the interviews, one possible reason came up as to why men are subjected to unwanted intimacy, and that is that women do not ask men for verbal consent. This might be because they believe men do not have to be asked simply because they believe men always want to have sex. A large part of women mentioned the belief that men are always in the mood to have sex, whether this was their own belief or a societal stereotype. One woman felt like men were pretty much okay with anything intimate that happened, based on her own experiences.

*“According to me, men, or at least the ones I’ve had sex with or that I did stuff with, they are okay with anything, they just want it, doesn’t matter how quickly, they just want it.”*

[Female]

And later states that in her experience a male “no” did not actually mean “no”.

*“Even when a man says no they just really like it and a switch turns on. For example, I’ve experienced with a boyfriend that he said “I’m going to sleep now, I really don’t want to have sex” and then I started trying anyways and then he would just really like that. It would just be good, it’s not like with me, if I say no it really means no, while when men say no they usually still really like it.”* [Female]

### *Men Taking the Initiative to be Intimate*

Another possible reason why non-verbal consent of men is largely disregarded by women might be because men are usually the ones to initiate intimate acts. Many men reported that they were usually the ones who were expected to start initiating intimacy. Men reported believing that because they were the ones to take most of the initiative, they were also the ones responsible for getting consent from their female partners. This created complex situations for the interviewed men as they believed that if they were the ones to start initiating intimacy they would have to take some kind of leap, while they might not be sure if this was wanted by their partner. Men expressed in their interviews the difficulty they faced with taking the initiative while also being responsible for consent, as the following examples show.

*“I think that the idea of initiative complicates things in certain cases. That’s something I experience difficulty with, to manage that well, so to say.”* [Male]

*That is what happens then. That men take the initiative and that women think “What the fuck is this guy doing?”* [Male]

Many female interviewees shared the belief of the male interviewees that men were the ones to initiate intimacy, and that this creates complicated situations, as these women stated:

*“I think this creates more problems for women because women have more of a wait-and-see attitude and just let it happen to them and men are expected to take the steps. Then you easily encounter someone’s boundary.”* [Female]

*“That is the strange thing, you want someone to take the initiative, you want him to be careful, you want him to ask everything, and you also don’t want him to ask everything.”*  
[Female]

Finally, interviewees reported different reasons why men and women might experience unwanted intimacy. Women reported mostly reasons why they would go along with intimacy while they actually did not want to, such as being afraid that men would get angry if they would reject intimacy or because they felt like sexuality was part of being in a relationship. Both of these reasons seem to boil down to the power differences between men and women. This power difference, however, did not prevent men from experiencing unwanted intimacy. Many women explained they usually do not worry about the consent of their male partner because they feel like they always want to anyway, so why would you have to confirm then? They also felt like male consent was implied because men are usually the ones to take the initiative to be intimate.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1 Analysis

This thesis explored the experiences of male and female Dutch university students with sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy. Students reported that they felt conflicted between whether sexual consent had to be a verbal or a non-verbal agreement. Many reported that in their experience you could tell by someone's body language that they also wanted to be intimate. This finding aligns with the finding by Hirsch and Khan (2020) that students mainly use social cues to confirm consent. Jozkowski et al. (2013) found three reasons for this. The first reason that students follow sexual scripts is confirmed by the findings of this study. According to Dutch students, there is an intimate script that students use as an indicator of whether someone wants to be intimate with them. The signs "eye contact, body language, touching on the arms, legs, back, hair, face and flirting" that Jozkowski et al. (2018) found to be part of the sexual script align with the finding that Dutch students confirm a pattern of "eye contact, touching, followed up by kissing" (p.14).

For Dutch students, a natural follow up to this intimate script was going back to someone's place of residence. Even though Jozkowski et al. (2018) discovered a similar finding that going home with someone came with certain expectations, the findings of this study extend even further. Students were able to reflect on the implication that going home with someone equals consent to be intimate, by recognising that consent should still be confirmed. Notably, the implication of going to someone's residence equating sex is so strong that women felt like they had to cover themselves before going to someone's home to make sure there were no expectations. This feels very similar to Angel's (2021) argument that women are socialised to prioritise male desire and if they have expressed previous interest, they must now follow through with intimacy. Not wanting to give men false expectations and taking measures to prevent this, might also be a measure to let men down easy and thereby prevent a violent reaction as previously identified by Angel (2021).

The second reason mentioned by Jozkowski et al. (2018) why students are more focused on non-verbal signs is that students might feel that asking for verbal consent is awkward or off-putting. A very similar sound was echoed by Dutch students. Besides awkward and off-putting, they felt that verbal consent would make intimacy very mechanical. Intriguingly, interviewees reported that if it would be more generally accepted to ask for consent verbally they would also do it. This suggests that verbal consent could work like a ripple effect, the more

people notice others asking for consent verbally, the more they will do it themselves. This could normalise the practice of verbal consent. Students who did ask for verbal consent were mostly men. This contradicts the research by Jozwowski et al. (2013), who found that women are usually the ones who ask for verbal consent, while men focus on non-verbal cues.

The finding that Dutch male students are more focused on verbal consent, seems to make more sense if you view this finding in the context of the presumed difference in power between men and women. Because in many cases of intimacy, men are older and physically stronger, and because they are usually the ones who take the initiative to be intimate (Hirsch and Khan, 2019), men are usually the ones held accountable when sexual assault occurs. The men participating in this research were aware of this and they might have been conscious of the responsibilities that come with power differences between men and women. On the other hand, most women did not even consider male consent because they felt like this was assumed. This most likely has to do with the “male sexual drive discourse” that assumes that men are always eager and ready to be intimate (Popova, 2019, p. 70). Dutch female students confirmed this idea by stating that they had not even considered male consent until being interviewed for this study they were participating in. For women this resulted in situations where they could not really account whether an intimate situation had been consensual because they had not checked or had even ignored signs of refusal.

Besides men, women also suffer the consequences of what role society has assigned to them. The belief of Angel (2021) that women are conditioned to cater to male desire, seemed to be heavily reflected in the experiences of Dutch female students with sexual consent. Women experienced unwanted intimacy because their signs of rejection were ignored, because they were pushed into consenting, or because they felt like they could not say no out of fear for aggression. This means that firstly, some of the men these women had been with did not take the wishes of women seriously, and therefore pushed their boundaries or even crossed them, which could be a result of the world cultivating their desires their entire life (Angel, 2021). And secondly, that these women experienced power differences with men as such that it resulted in them having to pull other men into the situation so that their partner would take their rejection seriously or that they decided the battle was not worth it and ended up giving in. This again seems to align with Angel’s (2021) idea that women will let men down very carefully out of fear of what might happen when they reject men very directly. Another reason women mentioned to explain why they consented to unwanted intimacy was that they felt like being sexual is part of being in a relationship, as previously found by Popova (2019). What was very painful about this is that

women who had little to no desire to be sexual with their partner would still go with it in order to please their partner.

After having conducted this research project into the experience of Dutch university students with sexual consent, Amnesty International commissioned I&O Research to investigate unwanted penetration among the student population. I&O Research (2021) found that eighteen percent of female students and three percent of male students experience non-consensual penetration during their time as a student. A similar finding of I&O Research (2021) to this study was the occurrence of freezing during rape. One interviewee reported experiencing a freeze reaction, which occurred during unwanted intimacy, and the person performing the intimate act would not stop when they noticed their partner was non-responsive. I&O Research (2021) reported that during seventy percent of rape cases the person experiences freezing. Furthermore, 28 percent of sexual assault cases show that someone had taken advantage of the drunk or drugged state of a person. Some women had experienced that men performed unwanted intimacy with them while they were unable to consent due to intoxication. Most students in my study reported being aware that a drunk person could not consent but identified the boundary of when someone could not consent anymore as someone being unable to speak or stand on their own two legs. This idea could potentially be dangerous because there are many levels of intoxication that affect someone's ability to clearly make decisions that come before being unable to walk or speak. The findings of this research project and the study by I&O Research suggests that a rape law that only recognises clear rejection as sexual assault is not sufficient, because people can lack the ability to physically or verbally reject due to freezing or intoxication.

## *5.2 Limitations*

This study included 21 interviews with male and female students from six different Dutch universities. A lot of data has been gathered that allows an accurate description of how students experience consent. However, one issue with credibility could be that because a female researcher conducted the interviews this resulted in men maybe feeling less comfortable disclosing their true feelings. On the other hand, female interviewees might have experienced a level of comfortability they might not have with a male researcher. Another concern is that of "social desirability bias" - "the fact that research subjects often tell you what they know to be socially desirable, rather than what they actually do" (Hirsch and Khan, 2019). However, this study tries to minimize the occurrence of this bias by promising interviewees anonymity and mentioning beforehand that this would be an open conversation without judgement.

### 5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study has answered the research question: *How do male and female Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy?* Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy, as either a verbal or non-verbal agreement. If they experienced unwanted intimacy, this was because their consent was either completely disregarded, for example when men are not asked for consent because their consent is implied, or because consent is given under duress. Unwanted intimacy is very closely related to societal expectation in combination with the power differences between men and women. The societal expectation that men always want to be intimate ties in with the narrative surrounding men that if they did not want to be intimate they could just push the women away. Furthermore, the societal expectation that romantic relations must always be sexual leads to unwanted intimacy because women feel like male desires need to be fulfilled in a relationship. Besides this, women consenting to unwanted intimacy because they are afraid of male aggression or because men push them into it comes from the expectation that men could hurt them if they would directly reject them, which is why they would involve other men in the rejection or why women feel more confident rejecting men as they get older.

These findings presented in this thesis are extremely relevant as there is still so much more to win when it comes to enhancing experiences with sexual consent for students in a heterosexual context. If we could change the societal expectations regarding male sexuality and the expectation for women to please men, men and women could feel more, situations can be created in which both male and female students feel comfortable to give and ask consent. Furthermore, if both men and women become more aware of what effect their power has on the way their partner gives or does not give consent, they could adjust their behaviour accordingly.

### 5.4 Recommendations for further research

This study has only focused on the heterosexual experience with sexual consent. McKie et al. (2020) indicate most research has had a heteronormative focus, and academics have hereby neglected to study marginalised communities. Therefore, my recommendation is to perform a study on sexual consent in the LGBTQIA+ communities, and if gender plays a role in homosexual intimate relationships.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment of Participants

Via social media participants were reached by using the following images that were posted on Instagram stories, on Instagram and Facebook, with the text: *“If you would be interested in contributing to my study please send a dm for further information. I would be eternally grateful!! Participant profile: - Dutch student, - Above 18, - Currently enrolled at a Dutch university. Interviews will take around an hour and can take place in person or on Zoom.”*

Friends who had expressed interest in the study or who knew friends who wanted to participate were invited to send the following message to their network: *Hi! I’m Sarah, a Social Inequality Master student at Erasmus University. I’m writing my master thesis about sexual consent, with the RQ: How do male and female Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy? I’m currently looking for students who would like to tell me during an interview about their view on sexual consent. If you’re interested in participating in my research, you can always shoot me a message (my phone number) for more information. I would love to hear from you!*

## Appendix B: Ethics and Privacy Checklist

### PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: If You Wanna be My Lover, You Gotta Get My Consent: Dutch University Students' Experience with Sexual Consent during Heterosexual Intimacy

Name, email of student: Sarah Lebeek. 432983sl@eur.student.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Bonnie French, french@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: January 1, 2021 for 6 months

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES - NO**

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?  
(e.g. internship organization)

### PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. **YES - NO**

*If 'NO': skip to part V.*

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? **YES - NO**

*Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).*

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. **YES - NO**

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). **YES - NO**

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

### PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? **YES - NO**
  
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? **YES - NO**
  
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? **YES - NO**
  
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? **YES - NO**  
*Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*
  
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? **YES - NO**
  
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? **YES - NO**
  
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? **YES- NO**

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?  
YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?  
YES - NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?  
YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Participants might experience psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered due to the nature of the research. The study regards sexual consent which is a topic closely linked to sexual assault. Survivors of sexual assault might be triggered by the subjects that will be asked during the interview. Sexual assault survivors are not specifically targeted in this study but may be part of the sample of interviewees. To make the experience of the interviews as pleasant as possible, interviewees are very clearly briefed beforehand on the topic that they will encounter and they might want to indicate what they want to avoid. Furthermore, before the interviews it will be clearly stated that participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

To make the experience of the interviews as pleasant as possible, interviewees are very clearly briefed beforehand on the topic that they will encounter and they might want to indicate what they want to avoid. Furthermore, before the interviews it will be clearly stated that participants may withdraw from the study at any time. There will also be room for aftercare, for interviewees to take a deep breath after the interview and have a sip of water.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Unintended consequences may be if a participant is triggered by the topics addressed in the study and might experience PTSD from talking about past experiences.

*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix C, if applicable.*

*Continue to part IV.*

#### PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Data will be obtained through interviews with male and female Dutch university students, one-on-one or over Zoom.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

The size is 21 interviews, of which twelve men and nine women.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

There are currently 260.000 students enrolled in Dutch research universities.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

*Continue to part V.*

#### Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

After recording the interviews with Audacity, an online recording programme that is installed on the computer of the researcher, the data will be saved as an audio recording on the computer of the researcher. After the audio recording, the data will be transcribed by the researcher, perhaps with the help of the artificial intelligence transcription program Otter.Ai who claims “not share Personal Information or Customer Data with others except as Customer requests per written instructions or by sending a message.” After the data have been transcribed these files will be stored in a Google Drive that is password protected.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

The conductor of this study, Sarah Leebeek.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Google Drive automatically saves any changes made in the files.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

In the audio recordings the names of the participants will not be mentioned. Both the recordings and the transcripts will be saved not under the names of the participants but under a number from one to fourteen, for example: Audio Recording Participant 1.

*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.*

## PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in

storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Sarah Leebeek

Name (EUR) supervisor: Bonnie French

Date: March 20, 2021

Date: March 21, 2021



## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

This study into the sexual consent perceptions of men and women during heterosexual intimacy will attempt to answer the question: *How do men and women experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy among Dutch University students?* The main researcher who will conduct this research and is in charge of your interview is Sarah Leebeek. She is a student at the Erasmus university and is supervised by Dr. Bonnie French.

If you sign this form you agree to understand the following:

- This study is conducted to investigate how men and women perceive sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy.
- You will participate in an interview that will last approximately 60 minutes, during which ten questions will be asked.
- The questions might contain sensitive topics such as sexual activity, sexual consent and sexual assault.
- If you are not comfortable with any of the questions asked you can choose to opt-out of them at any time.
- You are completely free to discontinue the interview at any time.
- If you consent, the interview will be recorded using the audio program Audacity.
- After the recordings have been transcribed, you are allowed to read your answers and make any changes.
- The results of this study will appear in Sarah's academic thesis, containing no identifiable information or names of the participants.
- Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses.

Name participant, date, signature.

Name main researcher, date, signature.

## Appendix D: Interview Guide

- Hello, my name is Sarah, I will be conducting this interview today. I am a student at Erasmus University, where I study Social Inequality at the ESSB faculty.
- This interview is part of my Master Thesis. The Research Question of my Thesis is *“How do male and female Dutch university students experience sexual consent during heterosexual intimacy?”*
- The topics that will be discussed during this interview “Defining Intimacy and Sexual Consent”, “Getting Consent Wrong or Right” and “Factors that Influence Sexual Consent” can be difficult to talk about and might trigger negative feelings. Please take care of yourself during this interview and tell me if the subject matter gets too much so we can take a break or stop the interview.
- At any point during this interview, we can stop the interview if you do not feel comfortable continuing. Please tell me if you do not want to answer a question, this is absolutely no problem. You will remain completely anonymous during the process of this research project.
- Please tell me your unfiltered opinions, I am not here to judge, just to listen to what you are telling me. To get the most accurate results, it would be preferable if you answer me as truthfully as possible.
- Do you consent to me interviewing you about sexual consent and recording this interview?

### Topic: Baseline Questions

1. What is your gender identity?
2. In what year of university are you?
3. Are you a member of a sorority/fraternity?
4. Are you a member of another student association?
5. What is your relationship status?
6. Can you tell me something about your sexual history?

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### Topic: Defining Intimacy and Sexual Consent

1. What do you believe qualifies as intimacy?
2. How would you define sexual consent?

3. Do all forms of intimacy require consent?
  4. Does consent play a role before you engage in intimacy?
    - 4.1. If yes, how do you find out whether your partner is consenting?
    - 4.2. If yes, how do you give consent yourself?
  5. How would you prefer your partner to explore whether you are consenting or not?
  6. Does sexual consent depend on the relationship with the partner you are intimate with?
  7. How did you develop an understanding of sexual consent?
  8. Do you encounter difficulties with sexual consent?
    - 8.1. What kind of difficulties do you encounter with sexual consent?
  9. Are there circumstances under which a person cannot give consent?
- 

Topic: Getting Sexual Consent Wrong or Right

10. Have you experienced non-consensual intimacy?
    - 10.1. Why was this intimate experience non-consensual?
  11. Did you ever regret the way you handled sexual consent during an intimate experience?
    - 11.1. Is there anything you would do differently because of this experience?
  12. Does consenting guarantee a positive intimate experience?
- 

Topic: Factors that Influence Sexual Consent

13. Are there certain factors that make giving and asking for consent more difficult for you?
  14. Do you believe your gender has an influence on how you give and ask for consent?
  15. Do you have certain beliefs about how the [if male, female if female, male] gives and asks for consent?
  16. Do you discuss the issue of sexual consent with your social circle?
    - 16.1. If yes, with whom do you discuss sexual consent?
    - 16.2. If yes, do these people share your views on sexual consent?
    - 16.3. Would you address it if you heard an issue with sexual consent with a person from your social circle?
-

Topic: Conclusion

17. Have you got anything else you want to tell me about this subject that I have not asked yet?
- After the interview, I will transcribe our conversation. I will send the transcription to you, and if you have anything you want to change or add this is possible.
  - The subject of sexual consent can be quite heavy and triggering, please take care of yourself and contact me if you are struggling after this interview.
  - Thank you so much for participating, and feel no hesitation to reach out.