

## **ABSTRACT**

WORSDALE, ALLISON. Meanings of Sexual Consent for Those Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual. (Under the Direction of Dr. Kama Kosenko).

Previous research on sexual consent has focused solely on heterosexual individuals and their impressions of how people define and negotiate consent in relationships, leaving lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals out of the conversation and potentially vulnerable in their sexual communication with partners. Guided by Goldsmith's normative perspective, I completed a qualitative study involving interviews with 25 LGB individuals about their meanings of sexual consent, the communicative dilemmas associated with consent, and the factors that have shaped these meanings and dilemmas. Meanings of sexual consent included showing enthusiasm for what is about to happen and what is happening in a sexual encounter, clearly communicating willingness to participate in a sexual encounter, constantly communicating one's willingness to engage in a sexual encounter, an agreement is being made between two or more parties to engage in sexual activities, and meanings of consent applying to all sexualities but need to be of particular concern to LGB individuals. Individuals shared dilemmas involving the determination of what constitutes "sex", discomfort voicing consent needs before or during a sexual encounter, problems with partners being unwilling to discuss consent, and dilemmas related to past sexual assault. Factors that have shaped both meanings and dilemmas included previous interactions with sexual partners, discussions with friends, conversations with family members, lack of a "consent model", lack of representative sexual health materials, and inadequate school-based sexual education.

Meanings of Sexual Consent for Those Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual

by  
Allison Worsdale

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

Communication

Raleigh, North Carolina

2020

APPROVED BY:

---

Dr. Kama Kosenko  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Stephen Wiley

---

Dr. Elizabeth Nelson

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Allison Worsdale received her Bachelor of Sciences degree in Communication from Appalachian State University in 2017, with a concentration in health communication and a minor in apparel design and merchandising. During her time as an undergraduate, she developed a particular interest in health and sexual communication, leading her to pursue and develop her interests in the Master of Science in Communication program at North Carolina State University. She plans to continue pursuing a career in communication research following graduation.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Meanings of Sexual Consent for Those Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual</b> .....	1
<b>Methods</b> .....	8
<b>Results</b> .....	10
Meanings of Sexual Consent for LGB Adults.....	11
Dilemmas LGB Adults Experienced Discussing Sexual Consent .....	19
Factors That Have Shaped LGB Adults' Views of Sexual Consent .....	26
<b>Discussion</b> .....	39
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	43
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	45

## **Meanings of Sexual Consent for Those Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual**

In recent years, there has been a cultural shift that has drawn attention to the meaning of sexual consent and created a demand for men and women to be educated on the term. The public has become hyper-aware of sexual harassment and sexual assault because of the “Me, Too” movement, which brought to light the fact that sexual harassment and violence have become normalized in our society and that there needs to be additional education on consent and policies put in place to shift this norm (Lee, 2018). The Me, Too movement, as well as other similar cultural movements whether national or international, have opened the discussion up to policymakers, legal professionals, scholars, and the public about how people define and negotiate consent in relationships of varying intimacy.

Previous research on sexual consent has focused solely on heterosexual individuals and their impressions of how people define and negotiate consent in relationships, leaving individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) out of the conversation and potentially vulnerable in their sexual communication with partners (Abbey, 1982; Jozkowski, Manning, & Hunt, 2018; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). There is evidence that sexual assault and sexual harassment are just as big of an issue (if not more so) for LGB individuals as they are for heterosexuals. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that 44% of lesbians and 61% of bisexual women surveyed experience rape, physical violence, or stalking from a partner, compared to 35% of heterosexual women while 26% of gay men and 37% of bisexual men experience these same issues compared to 29% of heterosexual men (Human Rights Campaign, 2010). For LGB individuals, fear of discrimination over their sexual identities can prevent them from seeking help for sexual violence; there is also the possibility that the available resources for LGB individuals are directed

more so towards heterosexual individuals, failing to provide information tailored to their needs (RAINN, 2019). Traditional sexual education courses, even comprehensive sex education, do not include discussions of LGBT+ health information that individuals who identify as such need in order to protect themselves. Not only do most sex education programs lack discussion of sexual orientation, three states require negative discussion of sexual orientation, and only three states require any discussion of sexual consent (Blackman & Scotti, 2019). Furthermore, sexual education programs are not policed, so we do not know whether these courses are actually being taught accurately, if at all. Although issues surrounding consent are of significance to LGB individuals, we know little about how they define and negotiate consent as well as where they learn this information.

Despite these gaps in the literature on sexual consent, the concept has received quite a bit of attention from researchers and legal professionals. A review of this literature indicates that there are numerous legal and scholarly definitions of consent. Based on the legal perspective, consent has two components: an indication of who can give consent and a description of how consent is communicated (Beres, 2014). The legal understanding of who has the capacity to consent varies around the world as well as across America where consent is contingent on age and/or the mental capacity. There is no overarching definition of consent for the American Judicial System, and North Carolina law does not specifically define consent. The concepts of “force” and “against the will of the other person” are used but not defined in North Carolina statutes (RAINN, 2019). North Carolina law does acknowledge that “a threat of serious bodily harm which reasonably places fear in a person's mind is sufficient to demonstrate the use of force and the lack of consent” and that the definition does not require “freely given consent” or “affirmative consent” (RAINN, 2019). Many other states have adopted the definition of

affirmative consent while others have fallen behind in addressing the definition of consent, creating a gap in how states define consent.

Due to issues with the “no means no” standard to consenting or not consenting, other definitions of consent have been proposed. The State of California has created a standard that requires individuals to give what is called “affirmative consent,” which is defined as:

Affirmative consent means affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the affirmative consent of the other or others to engage in sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. (RAINN, 2019)

The idea of affirmative consent has existed for a number of years now but has gained more attention recently as a way to mediate any issues with sexual consent while also empowering individuals to engage in more sexual communication than has been previously reported (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Affirmative consent attempts to reinforce the idea of the individual initiating the sexual encounter needing to obtain verbal consent from each person they are actively pursuing. Note the fact that, in this definition, the word “person” is used to describe those involved in the sexual encounter; this definition of consent is one of the few that uses more inclusive, gender-neutral terminology. However, not every state has adopted this concept of affirmative consent, which is why there are issues with adhering only to the legal definitions of sexual consent. Affirmative consent is offered as a solution to issues of sexual assault and ambiguity over whether someone is consenting, but it still has some critics. Critics argue that affirmative consent will harm men, causing “innocent men to be falsely accused of assault,” that it is unrealistic to ask for consent for every step of a sexual encounter, and that (heterosexual) men will be unable

to engage in sex if they must get verbal, definitive consent (Weiss, 2015). We do not know what LGB individuals think of affirmative consent or any other definition of the term.

Just as there are varying legal definitions of consent, scholars differ on how they define the concept, as well. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) defined sexual consent as “freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity” (p. 259). It is important to note that, in this definition, the researchers acknowledged the idea that individuals can give consent nonverbally, although this is not a widely-accepted form of consent. Other scholars suggest that consent can only be given through a definitive verbal agreement to engage in sexual intercourse. Labeling consent as a firm, verbal agreement to participate in a sexual encounter can take away some of the ambiguity involved in nonverbal consent negotiations; however, definitions that restrict consent to the verbal realm ignore the needs of individuals who cannot or will not vocalize their sexual needs (Beres, 2007). There are also gender differences in perceptions of nonverbal consent that should be considered. For example, one study found that men rely more heavily on nonverbal cues and that women are more likely to use verbal cues when communicating consent in a sexual encounter (Jozkowski et al., 2014). In addition, much of the communication involved in a sexual encounter is nonverbal, especially when individuals are following sexual scripts (Beres, 2007; Jozkowski, Manning, & Hunt, 2018). However, this dependency on nonverbals can make it more difficult to determine if consent has been granted, creating the potential for miscommunication and non-consensual sex. Although we know that individuals are relying on nonverbal cues to negotiate consent in sexual encounters, we also know that there are problems with including and excluding nonverbals from the definition of consent.



Other scholars' definitions distinguish between consensual and wanted sex. These scholars have labeled consent as a minimum requirement and warned that consent can be given without necessarily wanting to engage in intercourse (Beres 2007, 2014; Pugh & Becker, 2018; Walker, 1997). Other researchers have sought to establish the differences between "consensual sex" and "wanted sex" for the reason that some studies have found that adults may give consent to intercourse but do not necessarily want to engage in intercourse. For example, Walker (1997) has had considerable interest in factors that surround heterosexual women consenting to unwanted sex as a result of physical or verbal coercion. In heterosexual culture, it has been normalized to accommodate a partner's (almost exclusively male's) sexual needs, which leads to women losing their sexual agency in the relationship in order to maintain a standard of love and intimacy (Beres, 2014; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; West, 2012). Individuals can feel a sense of obligation or feel as though it's "too late to say no now" prior to or during a sexual encounter, creating a situation in which one can give consent but does not want to have intercourse (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). The affirmative consent standard deals with consensual but unwanted sex by requiring an enthusiastic "yes" to all activities, but we do not know how people are dealing with these issues in their sexual relationships.

A vast majority of the sexual consent literature only acknowledges heterosexual men and women, giving us little insight into how lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals define and negotiate consent and how power dynamics are involved in those negotiations. The literature on sexual communication among heterosexuals suggests that gender roles and power can complicate consent and, thus, may affect the results of the current study. For example, Abbey (1982) indicated that women are perceived more as the "acted upon" in sexual encounters while men are considered to be the actors. For women, this can make it seem like they are required to be the

ones to give consent, especially when they follow the script. Traditionally, there is what researchers call a “sexual script” that individuals follow as a guide in sexual situations (Jozkowski et al., 2014; Jozkowski, Manning, & Hunt, 2018; O’Sullivan & Byers, 1992). This script embraces traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships and provides a conceptual framework for how people make sense of and act in sexual situations. In these scripts, women have been seen as sexual gatekeepers in a more subservient role to men who are the initiators of sex and must persist until women “give in” and consent (Jozkowski et al., 2014; O’Sullivan & Byers, 1992; Pugh & Becker, 2018). These behaviors shape individuals’ ideas of what sexual consent looks like by providing social cues that they feel they should follow when leading up to the moment of giving consent or non-consent. Due to a lack of research on LGB individuals’ definitions of and experiences with consent, we do not know if and how these scripts or gender/power dynamics influence their sexual relationships.

Although we do not know how LGB individuals define consent, we do know that multiple, conflicting meanings of the term creates the potential for miscommunication and sexual violence. Sexual scripts reinforce the idea that there is a gatekeeper and an initiator involved when communicating sexual goals and do not invite the idea that both parties can be equally interested in initiating (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). With gatekeeper and initiator being traditionally heterosexually based, this can create conflict in LGB sexual encounters over who fits these two roles. In instances where sexual coercion is part of the script, there is a lack of consent in these encounters as the initiator employs different tactics that will more than likely elicit a positive response from a typically unwilling partner (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McCall, 2008). Pugh and Becker (2018) define sexual coercion as “a continuum of tactics to elicit sexual activity from unwilling partners ranging from non-forceful verbal tactics to physical force, with

taking advantage of women due to voluntary or administered alcohol and/or drug intoxication somewhere in the middle” (p. 3). Other researchers have defined sexual coercion as “the use of any tactic or strategy to engage another person in sexual behaviors despite the absence of free and informed consent, or the clear expression of a refusal” (Benbouriche & Parent, 2018, p. e16). Consent cannot be given when a partner uses coercion to engage in sex, and it is possible that the conflicting meanings of what consent is can lead to miscommunication and coercion. Given the potential for multiple meanings of consent to lead to communication problems, at best, and sexual assault, at worst, it’s imperative that we know more about how individuals, particularly LGB individuals, define and negotiate consent.

We know that multiple meanings of consent can be problematic in sexual encounters and result in sexual coercion and violence. Given the prevalence of sexual violence and assault among LGB individuals, there is a pressing need to understand how they define and negotiate conflicting meanings of sexual consent. A study of definitions of consent for LGB individuals and the communicative dilemmas created by multiple, conflicting meanings of the term would be well informed by Goldsmith’s (2001) normative approach. The approach was originally developed to predict and explain the “meaning of communicative responses to uncertainty” (p. 515), but it’s since been used to examine related areas where conflicting goals and multiple meanings of a shared topic intersect in a single community. The normative approach has been used to explore multiple meanings of sexual safety in the transgender community (Kosenko, 2010). Middleton, McAninch, Pusateri, and Delaney (2016) utilized the theory to understand communication challenges that can threaten one’s identity when goals conflict, specifically in the context of disclosing sexual assault. The theoretical lens has also been used to address how parents disclose their HIV-positive status to their children (Edwards, Donovan-Kicken, & Reis,

2014). Although it has yet to be applied in this specific context, the approach is useful for any researcher interested in the negotiation of multiple meanings in conversation. The framework acknowledges individuals' distinct and various meanings of shared experiences as well as the potential for differing meanings and multiple goals to contribute to communicative dilemmas (Goldsmith, 2004). The framework also addresses how communication can be used to manage these dilemmas and can contribute to the sense-making process. The normative model of social support recognizes that the quality of communication is conceptualized as the extent to which a person is able to effectively manage these dilemmas that may arise (Goldsmith, 2001). In order to determine the approach that LGB individuals take towards defining and negotiating sexual consent, it will require an understanding of how the meaning of this concept is constructed, maintained, and/or transformed. To this end, this study was designed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the meanings of sexual consent for LGB adults?

RQ2: What dilemmas have LGB adults faced when discussing sexual consent?

RQ3: What factors have shaped LGB adults' views on sexual consent?

## **Methods**

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with individuals who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The sample consisted of 25 individuals with an average age of 24.2 years ( $SD = 5.4$  years, range from 18 to 42 years). Nineteen (76%) participants identified as non-Hispanic White, four (16%) identified as African American, and two (8%) identified as Asian American. Eight (32%) identified as lesbian, seven (28%) identified as bisexual, four (16%) identified as gay, three (12%) identified as queer, and three (12%)

identified as pansexual. These individuals responded to recruitment materials, which specified that potential participants needed to be 18 or older, to be able to read and write in English, to have access to a computer and Internet, and to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Individuals who identified as transgender were not specifically recruited for participation because of this study's focus on sexual orientation and not gender identity. However, if a transgender individual met the criteria for participation and expressed interest in the study, then they were included in the sample.

I employed purposive sampling and various recruitment methods. Local LGBT organizations were contacted to get permission to post recruitment flyers around their offices in order to reach potential participants as well as to add more credibility to the study. In addition, electronic announcements were posted on craigslist and other online platforms that allow users to post ads for free. Individuals were able to take part in the study after completing a survey, which was used to determine if individuals met the criteria for participation. A small monetary incentive (i.e., a \$5 gift card) was offered to participants. During participant recruitment, I used the term "LGB," which may have deterred some from participating due to the negative connotations of this term. This is due to the existence of the "LGB Alliance," an organization criticized for its exculsory behavior towards transgender individuals.

Individuals took part in face-to-face, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews. Each interview began with the participant choosing the pseudonym that they preferred to use for the study. Then, I asked questions related to sexual consent, including how the individual defined sexual consent, the dilemmas the interviewee faced related to sexual consent, the sense-making processes involved, and the factors that have influenced their understandings of consent. Following the interview, the participant answered basic demographic questions in a short

questionnaire. Participants were given the opportunity to express preferred pronouns for use in this manuscript.

In keeping with a constant comparative approach, I engaged in concurrent data collection and data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each interview was transcribed immediately, which allowed for the interview and analysis processes to evolve over the course of the project. I used the features of Goldsmith's normative approach as sensitizing concepts and focused on identifying themes related to multiple meanings of consent, communicative dilemmas associated with consent, and contextual influences on these meanings and dilemmas. In the first round of coding, I identified (a) participant meanings of sexual consent, (b) dilemmas experienced when discussing sexual consent, and (c) the factors they identified as those that shaped their understandings of consent. Following the identification of data pertaining to each research question, I noted any overlapping data clusters and descriptions for each category. The next round of coding involved going over the transcripts again in order to determine if the categorical system fully captured the data. The final round of coding involved consolidating and naming categories as well as identifying representative quotations for this manuscript. Member checks were employed to assess the validity of the data and analysis. Of the 25 individuals who participated in this study and were contacted to review their transcripts and the results section, 15 participants responded to the request, and each described the findings as accurate.

## **Results**

Interviews with gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults revealed a wide range of meanings of, dilemmas associated with, and contextual influences on sexual consent. Participants' meanings of sexual consent varied in terms of what sexual consent looked like, how it should be communicated, and how it differed from meanings to heterosexual individuals. Many of the

communicative dilemmas experienced by participants can be traced back to the multitude of meanings of sexual consent as well as difficulty navigating when and how to communicate sexual consent. Participants also addressed a number of factors that have influenced their perceptions of sexual consent, many of which have come from their social support systems and previous sexual consent discussions. The following sections detail the meanings of sexual consent identified by participants as well as the communicative dilemmas associated with sexual consent and factors that have shaped their perceptions of sexual consent.

### **Meanings of Sexual Consent for LGB Adults**

Meanings of sexual consent for LGB adults varied greatly, but I derived several themes from the responses of participants. Among participants, showing enthusiasm for what is about to happen and what is happening in a sexual encounter came up a number of times. Clearly communicating one's willingness to participate in a sexual encounter was associated with sexual consent for several participants as well as constantly communicating one's willingness to engage in a sexual encounter. Many participants viewed sexual consent as an agreement being made between two or more parties to engage in sexual activities. Of these meanings of sexual consent, participants felt as though they applied to all, regardless of sexuality, but that sexual consent is of particular concern to LGB individuals.

#### ***Sexual Consent Means Showing Enthusiasm for What is About to Happen and What is Happening in a Sexual Encounter***

Participants placed a great deal of emphasis on communicating enthusiasm to one's partner in order to signal consent for a sexual encounter. Alex, 24, who identifies as bisexual, explained the priority she places on enthusiastic consent:

Oh, I think, in any situation, it just means that you have to be like enthusiastically going along with it with no pressure for any other, sort of, for any other like reason or gain that may not be implicit or explicit, I mean, that might be implicit or explicit. So, like nobody should pressure you into it just because you, you didn't say, 'no,' doesn't mean you said, 'yes.' Stuff like that.

Participants discussed various ways in which they determined their partner's enthusiasm. For example, some described looking for signs of visible excitement. Cassie, 21, who identifies as gay, said: "I would say a clear, enthusiastic 'yes.' Other than that, I kind of feel like excitement also. Like, yeah. Kind of like the body language part of it is like important." Expressing happiness or satisfaction with one's partner was also mentioned by participants. For instance, Joseph, 24, who identifies as gay, described sexual consent as: "You know, you just want to make sure you're comfortable, secure, safe in the moment or environment you're in and happy or okay with the person you're about to be with." Others seemed less concerned with visible signs of happiness or excitement and were more concerned with everyone being comfortable. Tyler, 21, who identifies as bisexual, emphasized both comfort and the ability to retract consent when talking about what sexual consent meant to her: "Just making sure everyone's cool with what's going on. Cause it can be revoked at any time, and I don't want to ever make anyone uncomfortable in any kind of situation." All participants who mentioned enthusiasm also acknowledged the continuous process of consent, noting that the enthusiasm needs to be perceived before and throughout a sexual encounter.



*Sexual Consent Means Clearly Communicating Willingness to Participate in a Sexual Encounter*

Many of the participants described the need to clearly communicate one's willingness to participate in a sexual encounter. This could be indicated by one showing enthusiasm to engage in sex. For some, clear communication was synonymous with verbal communication. Leah, 22, who identifies as bisexual, said: "A really like clear, affirmative, communicative thing. And like usually it is verbal. Like I would say like if I'm asking for consent or getting consent, it's always verbal." To Leah, sexual consent meant expressing and gauging interest verbally. Other participants echoed Leah's sentiments regarding the connection between conversational clarity and the verbal communication of consent. Adrian, 20, who identifies as queer, added:

So, it's always like the biggest step is always like starting anything at all. And, I try to make it very verbally clear when I'm into something. Just because like, I know I'm bad at things. So, I want to make sure that people know what's going on. Basically, my approach is because I'm rarely the initiator. Well, besides like the big main trigger things, if I'm not down for something or I changed my mind, I will let you know.

Adrian touched on verbal clarity and sexual safety when discussing the meaning of sexual consent, mentioning hesitation in taking on the role of initiator in a sexual encounter and talking about sexual activities that could potentially trigger feelings of past trauma. Other participants went further into their definition of clearly communicating one's willingness to engage in a sexual encounter. Pam, 22, who identifies as bisexual, discussed both the verbal and nonverbal elements of clearly communicating one's willingness to participate:

So, sexual consent to me means the verbal or physical cue, someone giving you consent to have sex with them or perform a sex act of some sort whether it'd be a girl being

touchy or actual intercourse. I see it as an obvious sign, however, you know, like someone allowing you to and mentioning and saying, 'yes,' you know, nodding of the head, eye contact, things like that, to me, signal consent.

Pam highlighted many of the cues provided by partners to signal sexual consent and later described following the lead of her partners to avoid compromising someone's sexual or physical safety. She explained:

I find that it's very important, also distinguished because of the fact of like sometimes people are not always comfortable with saying, 'no.' So, you need that verbal cue, I believe, to really ensure that what you're doing is, and you know, not crossing a boundary.

The importance of one's own and one's partner's comfort came up in several different participants' interviews, with many discussing similar ideas to Pam around ensuring a partner feels comfortable with saying, "yes," and has the power to say, "no."

### ***Sexual Consent Means Constantly Communicating One's Willingness to Engage in a Sexual Encounter***

Participant interviews not only signaled the importance of clear communication when negotiating consent but also their recognition that the consent process requires constant communication. Leila, 20, who identifies as a lesbian, explained: "Consent is about talking to your partner before and during sex about what is and isn't okay for them to do and what you are and aren't allowed to do to them or with them." For many, consent meant talking with a partner before and during a sexual encounter about actions that were permissible and off-limits. Jessica, 19, who identifies as pansexual, described her approach to constant communication about consent:

I mean, personally, before any encounter, I like to talk about it, because I know that puts me at ease. Just discussing, where people's limitations are or what they're comfortable with how they express their sexuality because some people, you know, like don't view sex the same way. So yeah, just making sure that there's like a thorough conversation in place and an active dialogue like throughout the, yeah, encounter.

To Jessica, the constant communication throughout a sexual encounter was equally as important as the conversation about sexual consent prior to engaging in sex. Nancy, 23, who identifies as asexual and a lesbian, also emphasized the need for an active dialogue throughout sexual activity. Her meanings of sexual consent focused on constant communication and having awareness of her own feelings during the consent process. She commented:

I mean, I definitely, I think about like ahead of time or like I'll, I'll, I journal a lot, so I'll like, think about my feelings and how I can like, react better. Like have a, have a clear answer of what I'm going to want. And then in the moment we're definitely, we're talking a lot or like checking in every step. And then if she asked like a reasonable 'why I like feel uncomfortable with a certain thing,' I can have thought about it beforehand and like understand my own feelings and why that's okay in the moment or why like I'm not consenting for this right now or not consenting for whatever.

Many of the participants, when discussing constant communication, focused on themselves in regards to their feelings and emotions going into a sexual encounter. This practice of checking in with yourself physically and mentally in preparation for a sexual encounter as well as continually doing so during sex in order to understand where your own boundaries lie seemed to be employed by other participants. Tyler mentioned this idea during her interview, saying:

That's why I think communication is super important during it because there can be a moment of like questioning whether or not you're actually cool with something or still doing it. I'm like, I've been in that situation before where I'm like, you're getting into it, but I'm like, 'Wow, I really don't want to keep doing this.' But, if you're comfortable with the person and you have felt the communication can keep happening and you're being asked like, 'Are you okay, is this okay?' You might be more willing to actually say, 'Actually not so cool with this, or can we start doing this?' And, especially if the other person shows where those boundaries are for them, that can be helpful.

To Tyler, constant communication provides oneself and one's partner with the ability and opportunity to speak up during an encounter if someone feels uncomfortable in a situation or would want to engage in a different activity. For participants, constant communication about consent during sexual activity seemingly allowed them to establish the direction a sexual encounter would take while also giving them the opportunity to communicate any feelings of discomfort or distress., which was expressed by many as a positive aspect to sex.

***Sexual Consent Means an Agreement is Being Made Between Two or More Parties to Engage in Sexual Activities***

Scholars have argued that framing sexual consent as a verbal agreement can assist in alleviating any ambiguity that may arise when discussing sexual consent with partners (Beres, 2007). Many of the participants specifically labeled their meanings of consent as an agreement between any parties involved in the sexual encounter. Gabriella, 22, who identifies as pansexual, defined sexual consent as: "Making sure that two people or more, whoever's involved in the act of the sexual encounter, are all agreeing to what's going to take place." Elbert, 21, who identifies as bisexual, defined consent similarly:

Sexual consent is essentially an agreement between two sober parties, that is essentially going into sex like, ‘We're going to do this. We both agreed to do this.’ Both partners or parties have the ability to stop at any point.

Here, Elbert emphasized the sobriety of both individuals involved as individuals under the influence of illicit substances do not have the ability to consent. For some participants, this agreement had both verbal and nonverbal components. As Kate, 28, who identifies as queer, explained:

Yes, so I would say that, before anything is like initiated, it's, I don't know necessarily if it's like 100% verbal, but there is like an agreement. Like, okay, we're both interested in engaging in what we're about to engage in. And, then as, I guess I, as the encounter progresses, just like asking like, ‘Is this, is this okay?’ Or, yeah, just like verbalizing, like, ‘I would like to do this. Like, are you okay with that?’

Participants also noted that this agreement could be retracted at any point during sex. Kate went on to say: “They also know that that agreement can be revoked at any time. People can, are free to change their minds, that there's no like threat, involved.” Kate explained that, in order for the agreement to be consensual, both parties must first agree and must have the freedom to say “no” at any point in the sexual encounter.

***These Meanings Apply to All but Are of Particular Concern to LGB Individuals***

Participants acknowledged that sexual consent should have similar meanings for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation; however, participants also explained the particular importance of sexual consent for LGB individuals. Leah explained that the lack of a universally understood definition of “sex” made it a particularly important conversation for same-sex partners:

I, my personal experience with it is that people in the LGBT community seem to be more into the idea. I think it's because the kind of sex that LGBT people are having is not really your traditional type of sex. And you have to be more aware of people's bodies because there's trans folks and people who are gender nonconforming. So, there's different types of things. You would want to consider them. And, so, I've definitely seen people within the queer community more, more steadfast about enforcing consent and things like that.

Leah addressed the fact that the LGB community is not a monolith nor should individuals within this community be treated as such when it comes to their sexual needs, including their needs regarding sexual consent. Other participants discussed how many individuals within the LGB community may not be fully comfortable with their sexual identity during a period of time in which they engage in sexual activity as sexuality is a process that develops over time. Pam articulated the complications that can ensue when discussing consent and entering a sexual encounter with an individual who does not necessarily have a clear indication of what their sexual identity is yet:

So, I believe that we have to try harder to ensure consent. Because people are, some people are still navigating that part of their identity, and they're not completely clear to say what they are. And, a lot of people have just never had the experience yet, but they have known for a while that they were on the spectrum.

Participants acknowledged the differences in how individuals defined themselves sexually as well as their definitions of sex and sexual consent. Ayil, 18, who identifies as gay, offered a contrasting opinion by saying that he felt that sexual consent had a different meaning for each person, but especially so in the LGB community:

It does differ between person to person, especially in the LGBT community. Because again, we have different identities that have a different way of thinking about sex or relationships or the way that one interacts with another person. I think it means the same thing overall, but like whenever people want to, you know, again, in the LGBT community, we have a lot of identities that, you know, think of sex in a different way.

To Ayil, how an individual defines and navigates the meaning of sexual consent will differ from person to person as well from one sexual encounter to another. Other participants agreed that meanings of both sex and sexual consent were different for every individual and that the meaning of sexual consent for LGB individuals was not widely discussed. Karen, 20, who identifies as a lesbian, shared her feelings related to the lack of importance placed on sexual consent for LGB individuals:

I think that it, like broadly, I think that it's not focused on enough, because nobody really has told us that that was an important part of like, interacting. But I think it means a lot of different things to people, depending on how they choose to define their sexual interactions.

Karen expressed concern for a lack of attention to issues of sexual consent for LGB individuals and hinted at some of the communicative dilemmas associated with sexual consent discussions for LGB individuals.

### **Dilemmas LGB Adults Experienced Discussing Sexual Consent**

For LGB participants, sexual consent had multiple meanings and was associated with efforts to effectively communicate one's sexual desires and to determine and acknowledge a partner's sexual interest. The multiple meanings of sexual consent articulated by participants

created communicative dilemmas with various individuals within participants' social support systems. Each of these dilemmas or conflicts will be discussed further in turn.

### ***Dilemmas Determining What Constitutes "Sex"***

Many participants expressed concern over the lack of a clear definition as to what "sex" is in LGB relationships. Individuals created their own definitions of what constituted sex for themselves both physically and mentally. In turn, this caused some participants to experience dilemmas over what sexual activities definitively required sexual consent. Bonnie, 26, who identifies as bisexual, argued that this was particularly difficult to negotiate when one was new to same-sex relationships:

Especially if it's your, you know, first encounter or you're, you know, still trying to figure out how to come out of the closet. And, you're learning your own boundaries. It can be difficult to give consent to certain things when you go, when you don't know what they are or you don't know if it's the norm within an LGBT relationship.

Bonnie acknowledged it can be notably more difficult to establish sexual consent with LGB individuals who may be less sexually experienced with same-sex partners. Lack of a definition of sex for LGB individuals caused dilemmas for other participants, as well.

Molly, 29, who identifies as a lesbian, discussed the differences in consent and sex with same-sex partners versus heterosexual partners:

And, it's always like to, you want to ask consent and like, even if like we've had sex, it's so hard because you know, gay sex is so different than hetero. Like, you know, I guess 'homo-sex' is so different than 'heterosex' but like hard to define what sex really is. Or like, 'Is there steps to this?' And there's like, you know, levels to this, right? So, it was like, it's, a 'okay' to, and we have five levels of, you know, like sex for us. It's okay to hit



one and two because it's so simple and so easy. But who's to say that they're ready for three, four and five, you know?

Molly reflected on her experiences with same-sex partners, describing efforts to determine what “levels” of a sexual encounter need to be approached with more hesitation and consideration for a partner’s feelings. Other participants shared this view. For example, Leah stated: “Like I said before, you know, we're, we're weird in terms of sex, you know. We don't have like that typical like penis and vagina sex. Um, so sometimes it's hard to like, you know, what even is sex?”

Kanan, 21, who identifies as gay, argued that it was also difficult to determine what constituted foreplay:

So, I think what's, what's honestly more difficult is not for me in my experiences is not full on like sex. It's, it's a lot of other things. So, it's a lot of, what we would define as foreplay. Honestly, a lot of it is very simple things. When you're on a date and it's kind of like, ‘Okay, did this go well enough for us to like have a kiss or something?’ And, it's kind of part of it as reading the energies. Cause sometimes I've been on dates and it's like, it's very sexual.

For Kanan, the dilemmas he has experienced were related to correctly determining which activities might lead to intercourse and reading his partner’s “energy.” For some participants, these varying definitions of sex and foreplay necessitated multiple consent conversations with partners. As Nancy explained, “So, I mean, you need to get consent for every step of the process really. Like you can't just, or at least I guess, clarify what you're asking or like what sex is to you.” Nancy went on to explain that her approach to consent stemmed from a previous dilemma with a partner who did not define sex similarly to her:

And, there was like some moment after that where like she considered something to be not sexual that I consider to be sexual and like vice versa. Just that like what she thought was considered something nonsexual. Um, and so that was a little bit upsetting that I felt like my definition wasn't as important as her definition. I mean, after that, there were like multiple conversations, and even still after those conversations, there were still problems with understanding each other and what concepts like meant to both of us and what sexual acts meant to both of us. Like, what counts.

In that instance, Nancy and her partner had conflicting definitions of what actions were classified as sexual or non-sexual. Just as there are multiple meanings of sexual consent, participants have experienced consent dilemmas stemmed from multiple definitions of sex and what activities require sexual consent.

### ***Discomfort Voicing Consent Needs Before or During a Sexual Encounter***

Several participants described being uncomfortable discussing consent in a sexual encounter because they feared their partners' responses. Anna, 19, who identifies as a lesbian, attributed her difficulties to not wanting to displease her partner:

I, well for me specifically, sometimes I have a hard time being vocal and telling others something that like would upset them or something like that. So, that's one thing that I'm particularly bad at is being vocal. I can be shown more physical signs rather than vocally.

Other participants experienced dilemmas related to communicating their needs to partners, but, for some, the difficulties stemmed from not knowing one's own desires. Raven, 23, discussed her experience: "And, then, just honestly struggling to voice what I want and what I didn't want. I guess like, as a society, it's kind of harder for women to say what they want." Raven felt

pressured to adhere to the traditional (heteronormative) sexual script rather than asserting herself in a sexual encounter. Raven went on to explain:

And, then also being a black woman, it's kinda harder for me to say what I want. So, I guess kind of all the pressure from that was also affecting my ability to say what I did and didn't like.

For Raven, these societal pressures manifested in her inability to decipher what she would want from a sexual relationship and difficulty speaking up for herself in sexual encounters. These dilemmas exemplify the issue of consensual versus unwanted sex, with individuals consenting to sexual activities but losing their sexual agency in an effort to either accommodate a partner's needs or out of fear of "ruining the moment" (Beres, 2014; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

### ***Problems with Partners Being Unwilling to Discuss Consent***

Participants mentioned past dilemmas experienced in which partners had been unwilling to have discussions about sexual consent and desires. Tyler disclosed one such experience:

There was, I had a partner in high school, and he sucks. So, I like tried to talk to him about it, and he always would handle, he would go away and be like, 'You're being emotional' or 'We don't really talk about this kind of stuff.' And, it really, like every time that it happened, kind of made me feel like small and like upset at myself for bringing it up, which I hated that he made me feel that way.

Other participants experienced similar responses from partners when the topic of sexual consent came up in conversation. Gabriella shared her experience:

There was no conversation. I was just, yeah, here we go. Here we go there. Yeah, I think, like my, my ex-girlfriend, when I was with her, she, when she wanted sex, she wanted sex. And it didn't matter if I did, which is a very, like, I think what's important. I think a

lot of that like terminology and like those situations are only associated with heterosexual men. And, like where they want what they want and they're gonna get it regardless.

Whereas she's a lesbian woman.

Gabriella described her experience as having her sexual agency disregarded and limited by her partner putting her own sexual desires before Gabriella's. Joseph also described conversational dilemmas involving partners who were unwilling to talk about sex or sexual consent. He explained:

I mean, there can be problems if the other person isn't so reciprocating and fully answering your questions. If they like dodge it almost and try and change the subject cause maybe they aren't uncomfortable discussing that or they don't want the same things you want. So, they're like, 'Oh hey, this isn't going to work,' because he wants different things than I do. Which I don't feel is true.

Anna, another participant, expressed concern for these types of relationships: "I mean, I just think that would be very confusing and challenging. If you weren't willing to talk about it, then how are you ever supposed to learn and grow with someone and kind of figure those things out?" Participants expressed the positive aspects of partners being willing to discuss sexual desires and sexual consent before and during a sexual encounter, while participants also acknowledged the negative impacts to their relationships with partners and sexual consent due to partners being unwilling to discuss sexual consent.

### ***Dilemmas Related to Past Sexual Assault***

Many participants disclosed instances of sexual assault and acknowledged how those experiences both shaped their views of consent and complicated consent conversations. Tyler shared an experience in which she was assaulted by a previous partner:

When I was with him, him and one of his friends raped me. So, kind of that has shaped like how I feel about consent, how I've become like a really a big advocate for, there needs to be people talking about this. There's not enough communication about it. I especially didn't feel like I had anywhere I could go because, like I said at the time, identifying as a queer woman, I felt that, yeah, they're gonna minimize my queerness. Cause I've always been like really open about that kind of identity. So, I felt like there was nowhere I could turn, and I felt like that for years. I didn't talk about it until literally last year, and it happened five years ago.

For many years, Tyler lived with the trauma of being assaulted by her partner and his friend, and this experience had a significant impact on her ability and desire to discuss consent in the future.

Gabriella shared how a past experience shaped her view of consent:

We were like in a car, just at first making out. And then, when I do, how do I even word this, like she wanted to go further, but I think my body cues obviously gave out the impression that I didn't. I was kind of pulling away, but she was kind of forcing herself on top of me, as much as you can in a car and, had put, like I was waiting, had put her hand in my pants and was like trying to start doing stuff. And, I said, 'I'm not comfortable, so I'd prefer to not continue. Is that okay?' And, she was not, that was, that was not what she wanted. She wanted to continue, and she got mad. I know. Ridiculous. And yeah, so there was that situation. I ended up having to push her off of me, but that showed enough.

In this instance, Gabriella attempted to withdraw consent by utilizing nonverbal cues that would indicate displeasure; however, her partner did not respond to these cues. Many participants mentioned this lack of respect for boundaries when describing instances of sexual assault or

harassment. For some, not respecting boundaries meant not acknowledging the power differentials between partners that complicated consent discussions. Lexa, 27, who identifies as a lesbian, discussed one such experience with an individual she previously worked with:

We had been drinking and, this girl was always very naturally flirty with me. And so that night I, like we are in my house and she like lived down the street, like she could walk home, but she decided to get in bed with me. And, she came onto me, and, in that moment, I was cognizant enough to realize that, if I had turned her down, it would have made the remainder of our team engagement very sour. So, I was upset that she had put me in that position where I felt like I couldn't say, 'No.' So, that goes back to this whole like physical, mental thing that we were talking about earlier. Like, mentally, I was like very upset with it.

These dilemmas related to sexual assault demonstrate that this is not just a heterosexual issue; sexual assault is an issue for LGB adults despite perceptions that rape does not happen in same-sex relationships.

### **Factors That Have Shaped LGB Adults' Views of Sexual Consent**

Participants shared a number of factors that helped them develop their meanings and understandings of sexual consent as well as communicative strategies for negotiating consent. As stated in the literature, significant benefits come from social support, especially in regards to the meaning-making process when multiple meanings exist for individuals (Goldsmith, 2004).

Participant descriptions of the contextual factors that have contributed to their understandings of and approaches to consent are consistent with this. Interviewees mentioned multiple sources of social support, including partners, friends, family, and informational resources, that have shaped participants' views of consent. They also mentioned a lack of social support, including sexual

health information tailored to the LGB community, as having influenced their understanding of sexual consent. In the following section, each of these contextual factors is described in turn.

### ***Previous Interactions with Sexual Partners***

Positive interactions with partners helped shape participants' views of consent as well as their conversational strategies. Partners who seemed receptive to discussing sexual consent and those who actively engaged in those conversations made participants more comfortable with consent conversations. Leah shared her experience with a previous partner who helped establish her first understandings of sexual consent:

The, the first time that I was hooking up with a woman, I had told her that it was my first time, and she was really nice about it. And, she was the one that said like, 'Can I kiss you? Can I do X? Can I do Y?' And, then all throughout the encounter it was like, 'Is this okay? Is this okay?' You know? So, that was a good experience, and it kind of gave me sort of a framework for how I was going to go about other encounters, you know.

For Leah, this experience shaped how she would proceed with other partners in sexual encounters. Leah went on to explain:

Like, at the time, I kind of felt awkward, but, I mean, you know, your first time is always going to feel awkward. But, like, you know, I was like, 'Oh wow! She's really asking if everything's okay, like every few seconds.' You know, when I look back on it retrospectively, I mean, that's amazing. Like, it really framed my understanding of it, and it was awesome.

Other participants mentioned similar experiences with partners that had a hand in shaping their views on sexual consent. Nancy discussed her experiences with a previous partner that illuminated new understandings of sexual consent and sex acts:

Like my first relationship was a big influence on like actually understanding what consent was and that like we're not always thinking of the same thing as a sexual act. I mean just, just that whole experience was like, 'Okay, so I need to actually like make sure that whoever I'm with understands what consent is to me. That you have to ask for permission or like ask if it's okay at each step before you do anything.'

Nancy's positive experiences with a previous partner allowed her to navigate and find her own definition of what would constitute a sexual act for her. The experience also helped her determine her boundaries in a sexual encounter and what her ideal sexual consent script would like. In order for Nancy to feel comfortable in a consent situation, her ideal sexual consent process involved multiple check-ins with a partner, and this experience assisted in shaping that understanding.

Participants felt that having the ability to engage in a dialogue before a sexual encounter in a non-sexual setting also affected their consent definitions and strategies. Having conversations about one's sexual desires and boundaries in non-sexual settings normalized the ability to talk about these topics, making future encounters more comfortable and agentic. Tyler described one such experience:

One of my queer partners, we had a really great conversation. We like literally went and got coffee and just talked about things you were cool with and like kinks that we had and whether or not that was like cool or maybe cool or like a hardline 'no.' So, that was like really awesome--being able to just like sit and openly talk about it and having them like respond really well to it and be like super enthusiastic about it and being like, 'Yeah, yeah, I love this.'



For Tyler, having this discussion on the topic of sexual boundaries in a non-sexual setting allowed more clarity for future sexual encounters as having these conversations “in the moment” can invite higher chances of miscommunication or consent issues. For Ayil, who described having a particular understanding of sexual consent, actually having a conversation about consent in a non-sexual setting helped reaffirm his perspective. He explained, “That made me feel really good that we had that conversation because that reaffirmed my understanding of sexual consent and that it should be something that both partners agree to.” Although he had an idea of what consent might look like, actually having the conversation gave him a mental framework for future consent negotiations.

Some participants described learning from negative experiences; in effect, these problematic conversations taught them what not to do in consent conversations. Karen shared an experience with a partner who talked about consent but in a way that felt inauthentic:

And then at first, like when we first had sex, like my very first experience, there was consent, between, she like asked specifically, which I thought was kinda weird because, like I said, it's usually, it's not, it's not textbook-like asking. She's like, ‘Do I have your consent to, you know, have sex with you?’ And, the way she asked it felt weird.

Karen explained further:

It felt very forced. Like in a very condescending, looking down on the way, like looking down on even the concept of having to get consent because it, to her, it was almost like, if we're in a relationship, I have your consent to have sex with you because you're signing up with that because we are dating. And, for me, that's not what I wanted.

These differing views of consent created multiple dilemmas throughout the remainder of their relationship. These experiences influenced Karen's understanding of sexual consent and how she

would want to approach this conversation with future partners. Other participants mentioned learning from similar experiences where their partner's definition of sexual consent did match with their own. Pam described an instance with a previous partner where they were discussing a hypothetical consent issue:

Yeah, I talked to my ex-boyfriend, we're not, again, we had broken up in like February this year. But, when I was like getting to know him, when dating initially, we had talked about like consent, and it was kind of weird cause like his view was kind of, I just didn't understand. He was like, 'If she is unconscious, I'm not gonna do anything. Cause like, that's not right.' And I was, ugh. I mean, I was just like, 'What if she's conscious when she says no?'

For Pam, this conversation was when her partner's "true identity came into play." Both positive and negative experiences with partners helped shape participants views of and approaches to sexual consent.

### ***Discussions with Friends***

Many participants described developing their understandings of consent through discussions with friends. Participants sought advice from their friendship group and learned from friends' past experiences with sexual consent. By communicating with friends, participants were able to make meaning of sexual consent. Anna gained more information on defining consent and determining what activities do and do not need explicit consent through conversations with peers:

I mean, I've talked a lot with friends about it, too, kind of more when I was older and moving into like, actually in a relationship and having sex and like actually having consent. So, that's when I was kind of asking my friends questions about like I actually

kind of asked them like how do they define it and how do you say like, 'yes, you can do this without asking,' or 'no, you can't do this unless you ask' and stuff like that.

Conversations with friends helped Anna understand different approaches to navigating sexual consent with a partner.

Talking with friends about past experiences also helped participants better understand their own views on consent. Jessica described how conversations with friends helped her "unpack" her feelings about past sexual experiences:

So, we'll talk about like things that happened and like whether or not we realize that it was like a breach of consent. Like then we'll talk about it, and there'll be like, 'Oh, that's kind of weird.' And they're like, we'll unpack the situation with that. And, like I would say 80% of the time, whenever that situation arises, it's something like, 'Yeah, I mean I thought it was like, it made me uncomfortable, but I didn't really say anything about it.' Like that's always almost always what it is. It's like I just, I didn't really feel like it was enough to like, you know, to talk about.

Several participants mentioned similar experiences to Jessica's in which their boundaries were challenged or violated, but being able to share these experiences and know others had experienced similar issues helped them cope. Other participants also expressed that they had learned from their friends' experiences, which altered participants' previous views of sexual consent. Elbert discussed his views of sexual consent being changed by hearing about a friend's experience being sexually assaulted:

I also think kind of like talking about my friends from earlier, like just hearing them in their own sexual experiences and the way that they talk about like, so one of them had been sexually assaulted. And, talking about like the fear and the emotional trauma behind

not being able to physically consent to your like, not being able to physically like have sexual consent and like the fear behind that. And, so, I think hearing her own personal anecdote about like, just how, like how traumatic that event was has like made me more aware of like how I go about doing that with my partner.

Elbert described the salience of this conversation with his friend, mentioning that this influenced his understanding of the importance of consent. Participants said that sharing experiences with sexual consent and receiving advice from friends helped illuminate issues they may have had with partners. Karen said that talking with friends about the ongoing consent issues in her previous relationship gave her the ability to acknowledge these issues:

And, like, almost hearing their experience really opened my eyes to like, how bad I needed to like have a conversation with my first partner. And, then, wanting that conversation, and, then immediately after, realizing I couldn't do it opened my eyes to like the toxicity of that relationship. So, but like I also feel it felt like a, when we talk about consent within like my friend group and that kind of stuff, uh, like my queer friend group, it's like a lot of, it's empowering.

The aspect of empowerment was important to Karen when discussing views of sexual consent with friends. When discussing consent issues with friends that are also in the LGB community, Karen mentioned feeling less judgement when talking about her issues with her partner and more empowered to address any breaches of consent. Participants said that they were better able to make sense of sexual consent and their meanings of sexual consent when they discussed these topics with friends.

### *Conversations with Family Members*

In addition to friends, family members influenced participants' views of and approaches to sexual consent. Several participants mentioned learning about sex and sexual consent from discussions with parents and siblings where they were taught what sexual consent should look like. Molly discussed her first experiences with the word "consent" and how this lesson on consent informed her understanding and view of the topic:

Well, I mean my parents taught me what that word means, yeah. I mean, I guess over time you kind of just like, as you mature, you get older, you realize what, how do I say? It's like, as a kid, you don't know that it's called having consent. When you ask somebody like, 'Hey, do you want to play?' or 'Do you want to like do something?' But, as you get older, you start learning that you kind of have to have a 'yes' or a 'no' from somebody. And, also, I feel we have to like, we've learned that like you have to have consent to do something to somebody.

Other participants also described learning about consent from conversations with their parents.

As Pam explained:

We have, I feel like I've always been encouraged to, you know, use my voice and in, where I'm uncomfortable, you know. Although I'm not going to lie--I do feel like a lot of it was like scare tactics and not wanting me to have sex ever.

Although her parents used "scare tactics" when teaching her about consent, Pam felt like the conversation empowered her to use her voice in sexual situations. Some participants' parents did not engage in direct conversations about consent but, instead, identified opportunities for their children to have those conversations with others. For example, Kanan said:

So, in eighth grade, I came out to my parents; that all went fine. They were super, super supportive. And, so, in ninth grade, they took me to a, so I don't know if you're familiar, but in [location and organization redacted], which is like kind of the LGBT organization, but it's very youth-focused. And, so, they had a sexual education workshop night thing that my parents took me to. And, that was really nice cause they just kind of dropped me off as like this is, you will learn, we're not going to be like mom hovering at the sexual education thing. It was really nice.

Kanan would further discuss the emphasis that his parents placed on being properly educated about sexual health issues, such as sexual consent:

It's something that my parents have been very open about because my parents are very sex positive. You know, they're very much like, you know, 'Do what you feel comfortable with. Don't feel bad about turning someone down if you're not feeling it currently.' To the extent you could have like that kind of conversation with the parents.

For some participants, conversations with parents about consent informed their own understandings of the concept.

### ***Lack of a "Consent Model"***

The lack of a representative sexual consent model that LGB individuals can follow when attempting to approach a sexual encounter was discussed by several participants when asked about the dilemmas they have experienced with sexual consent. Participants felt as though many of their dilemmas experienced could be attributed to not fitting into the traditional sexual consent model that involves two heterosexual individuals. Joseph addressed how holes in the sexual health literature made it difficult to determine a consent model for LGB relationships:

Cause I feel like the only health information anymore about sex for same sex couples is STDs, HIV. 'Don't get it. Here's a condom. Here's some PrEP.' Send you on your way. Like there's no actual, you know, ways to prevent rape with same-sex couples or being verbal with your partner. It's just like the physical health aspect. There's no emotional, mental health about talking about.

Joseph described the kinds of sexual health information that he feels is targeted to gay men, and he indicated that this information did not assist with issues, such as establishing consent, preventing and/or reporting sexual assault, and coping with the affective aspects of sex. With no consent model to learn from, Joseph attributes many of his communicative dilemmas to this gap in the literature. Tyler discussed some of the issues that arise from the lack of a consent model for LGB individuals:

Like, if it's their first experience with something or first experience with a new partner, then it might be harder, especially cause there's not like any representations of some, of the acts that are more LGBT-centric. Like, how will that consent play out? But, I think that, I think there's a lot of like growing room that exists in the community for there to be more talks about consent.

Tyler explained that because there is a lack of representative models of sexual consent for LGB adults, it makes it that much harder for those who are sexually inexperienced to know how to verbalize or indicate their consent as well as what acts they are needing consent for. She also emphasized that this issue exists both outside the LGB community as well as for LGB community members.

### *Lack of Representative Sexual Health Materials*

Almost all participants expressed a great deal of concern for a lack of sexual health information that takes into account LGB individuals and relationships. Many attributed their consent dilemmas to the lack of information available to them. Waverly, 28, who identifies as a lesbian, described the disconnect between the sexual health literature and the LGB community:

So, a lot of the sexual health, the information that I had learned at least, and I can talk more about like what I know in the present, but, at least, like what I had learned growing up focused a lot on like, you know, ...it's all about like a condom.

Waverly's early experiences with sexual health information left her feeling left out of the discussion due to its focus on condom use and heterosexual sex. Eventually, she was able to find more nuanced and LGB-specific health information, but the process of locating that information was difficult and left her feel sexually stunted as a young adult. Other participants shared similar sentiments. As Kate explained,

I would say like the only sexual health resources I would remember getting are like 'safe sex.' But, it was like, not really applicable. Like, I dunno. It was like things that people, you know, like don't really use like dental dams, you know, or like, you know what I mean? I just like didn't, the sexual health information for LGBT people, I think it was like either not there or, if it is, it's just not really, I don't know. People aren't really going by that.

For Kate, the sexual health resources she has encountered do not apply to LGB relationships, and what little information they do provide about LGB individuals is insufficient. Other participants noted similar issues with the limited sexual health information available to LGB individuals. Raven explained: "I feel like, a lot of the times, it's very heteronormative information, and, even



when they do try to mix in some marginalized, LGBT information, sometimes, they don't even have it right, yeah.” Some noted that they had never encountered any sexual health information focused on consent in the LGB community. One participant noted that this study was the first time that she thought and talked about consent: “This is the first time I've ever heard it in my life that it's kind of sexual consent within the community. First time ever.”

### ***Inadequate School-Based Sexual Education***

Many participants mentioned inadequacies in sexual education, in general, and LGB sexual education, in particular. If these programs did address consent, then they tended to use scare tactics. For example, Leah said:

And, they didn't really give the impression that it was like a normal thing for people to do, you know? It was kind of like the context was, ‘Oh, someone has accused someone. Did they give consent?’ You know, and so like, after the fact, to try to figure out, so yeah, definitely something like scary and not normal.

For Leah, her initial introduction to sexual consent was only in the context of sexual assault, which established a sense of fear in her when approaching sexual activity with a partner. Kate shared a similar experience when asked when she first heard about consent:

Definitely not high school. That was back in like, I graduated high school in [date taken out]. So, definitely not anything in high school, or anything you need before that. In college we did, like, I participated in like a Take Back the Night march, but again, it was all like in response to, you know, like sexual assault. It was tied in in a very negative way. So yeah, so that was kind of my introduction. Responding to sexual assault. I think it's focusing, focuses mostly on like what's not consent as opposed to like what is right.

Like Leah, Kate described school-based sexual education regarding consent as focused on sexual assault and did little to normalize consent conversations between two or more willing partners.

Most participants indicated that their school-based sexual education programs only addressed heterosexuals. Waverly mentioned both the scare tactics that were used in her sexual education experiences and the lack of any discussion of LGB sexual health:

I think because most of the context of talking about sex was, one, heteronormative but also focused more on like what can go wrong with sex. I think it actually just kind of scared me. So, it made the whole like idea of sex seem very taboo and scary.

Waverly's experiences in heteronormative, sex-negative sexual education programs made her fearful of sex. Kanan provided an example of the heteronormativity in school-based sexual education programs:

So, like I just remember a very distinct activity because it was so heteronormative, was so gender-operated. Like 'describe your ideal boyfriend or girlfriend.' I'm sitting here, I'm like, "Well, I'm joining the girls. I'm going over to their side, like woo.'

Although LGB individuals could complete the activity, Kanan felt like it put pressure put on students to describe a typical heterosexual relationship. Kanan would discuss further the limited explanation of sexual consent in his sexual education class, which was not part of their set curriculum:

We did, I will say for sure we did not have like a big like, 'What is sexual consent?' And, that was not a unit for us, but we did, I guess, I mean I guess it was kind of said and mentioned, like only do something if your partner wants to, as well. But we didn't have, you know, it wasn't like a, I think it was one of those things that our teacher added in. It

was definitely not a part of like curriculum of like we're going to talk about this and this is a whole part of the unit or whatever.

Kanan indicated that there was no in-depth discussion of what consent looked like or how to go about discussing sexual consent with a partner and that the coverage of the concept was brief and limited. In review, participants' meanings of and dilemmas with consent were influenced by conversations with partners, friends, and family; a lack of a consent model for LGB individuals; and, inadequacies in sexual health information and school-based sexual education programs.

### **Discussion**

This study examined how LGB adults created meaning of sexual consent, the dilemmas experienced when discussing or employing sexual consent in their own relationships, and the factors that have shaped their understanding of sexual consent. Early applications of the normative approach focused on how individuals made sense of and responded to uncertainty (Goldsmith, 2001). This study extends the use of Goldsmith's approach to a novel context—sexual consent for LGB individuals. Goldsmith's approach acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings and goals in any given interaction and the communicative dilemmas that arise when trying to manage these multiple goals and meanings. In the current study, each participant had similar but distinct definitions of consent and the conversational strategies used to negotiate consent in sexual encounters. When discussing meanings of consent, several participants reported that consent required enthusiastic agreement and communication before, during, and after sexual activity. Participants also highlighted the need for clear communication, which sometimes meant verbal communication, when attempting to negotiate sexual consent with partners.

Many participants experienced communicative dilemmas when attempting to discuss sexual consent with partners. Some described partners who were uncomfortable talking about sex or unwilling to do so; others mentioned their own discomfort with the topic. Disagreements regarding what constitutes “sex” for LGB individuals also contributed to these conversational dilemmas. Participants disclosed dilemmas related to sexual assault and rape with same-sex partners, despite societal perceptions that these dilemmas are non-existent in same-sex relationships. Views of sexual consent were shaped by a number of factors, such as previous positive and negative experiences with partners, discussions with family and friends, a lack of a consent model, and inadequate representation of LGB individuals in sexual health materials and school-based sexual education programs.

The most frequently mentioned meanings of sexual consent involved showing clear willingness to participate in sexual activity and constantly communicating this willingness throughout sexual activity, aligning with an affirmative consent standard and definitions of consent found in the research literature (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019). Participants described the emphasis they placed on communicating consent to both their partner or partners as well as themselves. Balancing intra- and interpersonal communication was an ongoing process for individuals who were simultaneously determining their own boundaries and trying to communicate those boundaries to their partners. Other research has hinted at the role of intrapersonal communication in sexual relationships (Hernandez et al., 2017), but few, if any, studies attend to intrapersonal communication in the context of sexual consent or the dilemmas involved in balancing intra- and interpersonal communication. How individuals manage the consent process at an intrapersonal level warrants further exploration in addition to exploring the

intrapersonal processes of those who are exploring new sexual practices and navigating their sexual identities.

Although the general sentiment was that consent should look the same to individuals regardless of sexuality, participants noted consent-related concerns that were specific to the LGB individuals. These concerns stemmed from difficulties determining what counts as LGB “sex,” navigating sexual relationships with individuals at various stages of their sexual identity development, and finding relevant and representative sexual health information. The extant literature indicates that difficulties defining “sex” are not unique to the LGB community, but this literature has not addressed how these difficulties affect the consent process (Hille, Simmons, & Sanders, 2019; McBride, Sanders, Hill, & Reinisch, 2017; Pitts & Rahman, 2001). For LGB adults, navigating various definitions of sex, especially for individuals still coming to terms with their sexual identity, complicated consent conversations. Conversational dilemmas surrounding consent also stemmed from the lack of a consent model and sexual health materials for LGB community members. Although the consent model may be the same for same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, the lack of research on the topic, in general, and the dearth of research on consent for LGB individuals makes it difficult to determine if there is a consent script and if it differs depending on sexuality (Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004). Additional research on the consent script for adults, in general, and LGB individuals, in particular, is needed.

Members of participants’ social support systems contributed to much of how participants understood and navigated sexual consent with partners. Many participant’s views of sexual consent were shaped by sexual experiences, both positive and negative, with partners. Participants mentioned conversations with partners about consent that occurred in non-sexual settings as particularly helpful; these experiences provided a framework for discussing consent in

sexual situations and helped normalize the conversation. Previous research has found that discussing sexual health issues before getting into a sexual situation has benefits for transgender adults (Kosenko, 2010), and the participants in this study felt that the conversations they had were similarly beneficial. Additional research is needed to determine what these advance consent conversations look like and how they can be promoted.

In contrast to conversations with partners, peers, and family, which helped solidify participant views of consent, school-based sexual education programs were not helpful in this regard. When consent was addressed in these programs, participants noted that consent was only discussed in the context of sexual assault and that instructors relied heavily on scare tactics. In addition, participants felt that these programs only seemed to address heterosexual individuals and were not sex-positive. The extant literature on school-based sex education supports these participant perspectives. Most school-based sexual education programs are not addressing the topics necessary in order to provide basic sex education to middle and high school-aged students. In the U.S., 24 states require sex education, and 34 states require HIV education. But, only half of high schools and a fifth of middle schools that offer sexual education programs teach the 16 topics recommended by the CDC as essential to sex education (Planned Parenthood, 2020). These topics range from the transmission of STIs/STDs and HIV to critical communication skills, healthy relationships, and sexual orientation. However, some state laws restrict what can be said about LGBT individuals in the classroom. These “no promo homo” laws, which exist in six states, require that LGBT individuals and issues be discussed in a negative light (Lambda Legal, 2020). As such, school-based sexual education programs are limited in various ways and unable to serve students, especially those who identify as LGBT. These programs also have not caught up with the ever-evolving nature of sexual health issues, such as the discovery of

antibiotic-resistant STIs and the recognition of “stealthing”, the practice of an individual removing a condom during sex without the consent of their partner, as a problematic practice. Efforts are needed to improve and standardize school-based sexual education programs for all individuals but especially for LGBT individuals.

Several limitations to this study should be mentioned. First, the description of the study as being about LGB sexual consent was off-putting to many participants and others who expressed interest in this study. This was due to the use of the term “LGB.” While the intent behind this was to address sexuality only and not an individual’s gender identity, some individuals who were used to the LGBT grouping did not understand why the study left out transgender individuals. The potential association with the LGB Alliance could have possibly dissuaded individuals from participating in the study, however the study is in no way associated with the organization. It is possible that individuals did not respond to recruitment efforts for this reason, but it is difficult to determine how that would affect the results. Finally, the recruitment procedure proved to be difficult in getting in touch with individuals interested in participating while also not risking their identity being known. Because participants were required to reach out and contact me in order to set up an interview, the study is skewed toward those who are willing and able to talk about sexual consent and their sexual identity.

### **Conclusion**

This study supports and extends the normative model of communication (Goldsmith, 2015) by revealing the meanings, dilemmas, and factors that have shaped the views of sexual consent for LGB adults. The experiences of participants suggests the role social support for LGB adults when navigating sexual consent is complex. Participants’ definitions of consent largely adhered to the affirmative consent standard, and dilemmas communicating consent stemmed

from difficulties determining one's own boundaries and talking with partners with different views of consent. Utilizing the normative model in order to understand the meanings of sexual consent for LGB adults allowed for the identification of multiple and conflicting definitions of sexual consent, which resulted in communicative dilemmas experienced by participants. This approach also allowed for a consideration of the contextual influences on these meanings and dilemmas, such as the gaps in the sexual health literature and school-based sexual education programs that have left LGB individuals vulnerable to sexual health disparities. This study highlights the importance of continuing the conversation surrounding consent and acknowledging the specific consent issues experienced by members of sexual minority groups.



## References

- Abbey, A. (1982). Sex differences in attributions for friendly behavior: Do males misperceive females' friendliness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *42*, 830-838.  
doi:10.1037//0022-3514.42.5.830
- Adams-Curtis, L. E., & Forbes, G. B. (2004). College women's experiences of sexual coercion. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *5*, 91-122. doi:10.1177/1524838003262331
- Benbouriche, M., & Parent, G. (2018). Sexual coercion: Thinking and understanding sexual violence beyond sexual offenders. *Sexologies*, *27*, e15-e19.  
doi:10.1016/j.sexol.2018.02.001
- Beres, M. A. (2007). "Spontaneous" sexual consent: An analysis of sexual consent literature. *Feminism and Psychology*, *17*, 93-108. doi:10.1177=0959353507072914
- Beres, M. A. (2014). Rethinking the concept of consent for anti-sexual violence activism and education. *Feminism & Psychology*, *24*, 373-389. doi:10.1177/0959353514539652
- Beres, M. A., Herold, E., & Maitland, S. B. (2004). Sexual consent behaviors in same-sex relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *33*, 475-486.  
doi:10.1023/B:ASEB.0000037428.41757.10
- Blackman, K., & Scotti, S. (2019). State policies on sex education in schools. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-policies-on-sex-education-in-schools.aspx>.
- Burkett, M., & Hamilton, K. (2012). Postfeminist sexual agency: Young women's negotiations of sexual consent. *Sexualities*, *15*, 815-833. doi:10.1177/1363460712454076
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Strategies for qualitative data analysis. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (pp. 85-106). Sage Publications, Inc.

- Donde, S. D., & Ragsdale, S. K. (2017). Assuming personal responsibility for sexual victimization: Harmful but potentially adaptive for college women? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 32*, doi:10.1177/0886260517734223
- Edwards, L., Donovan-Kicken, E., & Reis, J. (2014). Communicating in complex situations: A normative approach to HIV-related talk among parents who are HIV. *Health Communication, 29*, 364-374. doi:10.1080/10410236.2012.757715
- Farris, C., Treat, T. A., Viken, R. J., & McFall, R. M. (2008). Sexual coercion and the misperception of sexual intent. *Clinical Psychology Review, 28*, 48-66. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2007.03.002
- Goldsmith, D. J. (2001). A normative approach to the study of uncertainty and communication. *Journal of Communication, 51*, 514-533. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02894.x
- Goldsmith, D. J. (2004). *Communicating social support*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goldsmith, D. J. (2015). Normative model of social support. In C. R. Berger, M. E. Roloff, S. R. Wilson, J. P. Dillard, J. Caughlin, and D. Solomon (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 1171-1179). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic110
- Guttmacher Institute (2019). Sex and HIV education. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>
- Hernandez, B. F., Peskin, M. F., Markham, C. M., Burr, J., Roberts, T., & Emery, S. T. (2018). The context of sexual decisions and intrapersonal and interpersonal factors related to sexual initiation among female military-dependent youth. *The Journal of Sex Research, 55*, 73-83. doi:10.1080/00224499.2017.1298715

- Hickman, S. E., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (1999). “By the semi-mystical appearance of a condom’’: How young women and men communicate consent in heterosexual situations. *Journal of Sex Research*, *36*, 258–272. doi:10.1080/00224499909551996
- Hille, J. J., Simmons, M. K., & Sanders, S. A. (2019). “Sex” and the ace spectrum: Definitions of sex, behavioral histories, and future interest for individuals who identify as asexual, graysexual, or demisexual. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *56*, 1-11. doi:10.1080/00224499.2019.1689378
- Human Rights Campaign. (2010). Sexual assault and the LGBTQ community. Retrieved from <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>
- Humphreys, T. P. (2004). Understanding sexual consent: An empirical investigation of the normative script for young heterosexual adults. In M. Cowling, & P. Reynolds (Eds.), *Making sense of sexual consent* (pp. 209-225). London, England: Routledge.
- Jozkowski, K. N., Manning, J., & Hunt, M. (2018). Sexual consent in and out of the bedroom: Disjunctive views of heterosexual college students. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *41*, 117-139. doi:10.1080/07491409.2018.1470121
- Jozkowski, K. N., Peterson, Z. D., Sanders, S. A., Dennis, B., & Reece, M. (2014). Gender differences in heterosexual college students’ conceptualizations and indicators of sexual consent: Implications for contemporary sexual assault prevention education. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *51*, 904-916. doi:10.1080/00224499.2013.792326
- Kosenko, K. (2010). Meanings and dilemmas of sexual safety and communication for transgender individuals. *Health Communication*, *25*, 131-141. doi:10.1080/10410230903544928

Lambda Legal. (2020). #DontEraseUs: A Campaign to End Anti-LGBT Curriculum Laws.

Retrieved from <https://www.lambdalegal.org/dont-erase-us>

Lee, B. H. (2018). #Me Too movement: It is time that we all act and participate in

transformation. *Psychiatry Investigation*, *15*, 433. doi:10.30773/pi.2018.04.30

Lindgren, K. P., Schacht, R. L., Pantalone, D. W., Blayney, J. A., & George, W. H. (2009).

Sexual communication, sexual goals, and students' transition to college: Implications for sexual assault, decision-making, and risky behaviors. *Journal of College Student*

*Development*, *50*, 491-503. doi:10.1353/csd.0.0095

McBride, K. R., Sanders, S. A., Hill, B. J., & Reinisch, J. M. (2017). Heterosexual women's and

men's labeling of anal behaviors as having "had sex." *The Journal of Sex Research*, *54*,

1166-1170. doi:10.1080/00224499.2017.1289362

Middleton, A. V., McAninch, K. M., Pusateri, K. B., & Delaney, A. L. (2016). "You just gotta

watch what you say in those situations": A normative approach to confidant

communication surrounding sexual assault disclosure. *Communication Quarterly*, *64*,

232-250. doi:10.1080/01463373.2015.1103290

Muehlenhard, C. L., Powch, I. G., Phelps, J. L., & Giusti, L. M. (1992). Definitions of rape:

Scientific and political implications. *Journal of Social Issues*, *48*, 23-44.

doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb01155.x

O'Sullivan, L. F., & Byers, E. S. (1992). College students' incorporation of initiator and

restrictor roles in sexual dating interactions. *Journal of Sex Research*, *29*, 435-446.

doi:10.1080=00224499209551658

Peterson, Z. D., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (2007). Conceptualizing the "wantedness" of women's

consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences: Implications for how women label

their experiences with rape. *Journal of Sex Research*, 44, 72-88.

doi:10.1080/00224490709336794

Pineau, L. (1989). Date rape: A feminist analysis. *Law and Philosophy*, 8, 217-243.

doi:10.2307/3504696

Pitts, M., & Rahman, Q. (2001). Which behaviors constitute “having sex” among university students in the UK? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 30, 169-176.

doi:10.1023/A:1002777201416

Planned Parenthood. (2020). State of sex education in the USA: Health education in schools.

Retrieved from <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/for-educators/whats-state-sex-education-us>

Pugh, B., & Becker, P. (2018). Exploring definitions and prevalence of verbal sexual coercion and its relationship to consent to unwanted sex: Implications for affirmative consent standards on college campuses. *Behavioral Sciences*, 8, 69. doi:10.3390/bs8080069

RAINN (2019). Consent laws: North Carolina. Retrieved from

[https://apps.rainn.org/policy/policy-crime-definitions.cfm?state=North Carolina&group=9&\\_ga=2.182842082.575858457.1555862625-1632562956.1554418996](https://apps.rainn.org/policy/policy-crime-definitions.cfm?state=North%20Carolina&group=9&_ga=2.182842082.575858457.1555862625-1632562956.1554418996)

Walker, S. J. (1997). When “no” becomes “yes”: Why girls and women consent to unwanted sex. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 6, 157-166. doi:10.1016/S0962-1849(97)80003-0

Weiss, S. (2018). Arguments against affirmative consent, debunked. *Bustle Digital Group*.

Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/articles/119012-5-common-arguments-against-affirmative-consent-why-theyre-actually-bs>

West, R. (2002). The harms of consensual sex. In A. Soble (Ed.), *The philosophy of sex: Contemporary readings* (pp. 317–322). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Willis, M., & Jozkowski, K. (2019). Sexual precedent's effect on sexual consent communication. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 48*, 1723-1734. doi:10.1007/s10508-018-1348-7