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Consent During the Growing Age of Virtual Sexuality

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Consent during the Growing Age of Virtual Sexuality

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Background

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 has resulted in limited social and sexual interaction. Strict COVID-19 guidelines and social distancing orders have made meeting potential sexual partners difficult. To engage with others in a safe manner, individuals have turned to virtual methods which have drawn attention to issues surrounding consent in a virtual context. While virtual interactions allow for physically safe communication with others, it is important to recognize risks associated with online sexual interactions such as miscommunication, coercion (Ross et al., 2016), unwanted sexual solicitations (Naezer, 2017), anxiety and sexual compliance (Drouin et al., 2014), aggressive tendencies and hostile attitudes (Andrighetto et al., 2019), and fear of personal information and explicit messages or images being released.

A survey was conducted by the Binghamton Human Sexualities Research Lab to better understand the content of conversations online and what leads to frequent discomfort or aggression. An additional component focused on how individuals look for signs of consent with potential sexual partners online and if they suggest obtaining consent as a way to alleviate pressure and establish safe interactions.

The purpose of this study was to understand attitudes about consent in virtual encounters in emerging adults. Due to a lack of conversation and education about consent in virtual spheres, data collected from this study can be used to make sexual assault prevention initiatives more comprehensive on college campuses.

Research Questions

1. When engaged in a virtual interaction what behaviors make you uncomfortable as the recipient?
2. What does consent mean in the context of a virtual sexual encounter?

Methods

Participants:

Participants (N=293) were undergraduate students from a mid-sized northeastern university. The sample was collected during their Fall 2020 semester from September 28th to October 16th. Responses were omitted for individuals whose surveys contained incomplete or missing data on a post-question basis. Participants were recruited through the SONA subject pool and each participant received credit for their completion of the survey. The survey was given out during the COVID-19 pandemic as there were a large uptick in virtual interactions.

- The mean age of the participants was 18.8 years of age.
- The gender of the participants were 17.2% Male, 81.0% Female, and 1.8% other.
- The participants were 70.5% white, 16.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.3% Black, 4.5% mixed race, and 2.5% other.
- The participants were 8.4% Hispanic/Latinx and 91.6% not Hispanic/Latinx.

Procedure:

Participants filled out a survey through Qualtrics about their attitudes and behaviors in regard to an online dating format. Each provided basic demographic information and answered a series of scaled, checklist or open-ended questions. Codebooks were developed for open-ended questions and coders outside of the primary research team volunteered to analyze the data in order to minimize bias. For the purpose of this poster, two questions were analyzed to view sources of discomfort in virtual encounters and definitions of consent in a virtual context.

Survey Questions:

Virtual interactions were defined as " ...any use of social media, dating apps, texting, direct messaging, etc. all for the purpose of finding a partner to hook up with or get to know more intimately."

Participants were then asked to define their virtual interactions through the following questions:

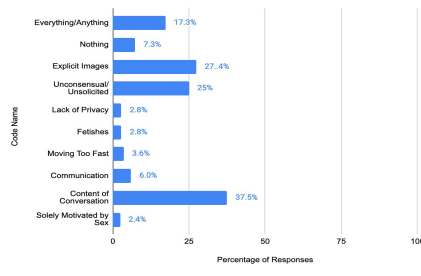
1. "Have you ever felt uncomfortable in an virtual interaction? [Possible Answers: Yes/No/Maybe]
2. "When engaged in a virtual interaction what behaviors make you uncomfortable as the recipient?" [Select all that apply]
3. "Have you ever felt threatened during a virtual interaction in any of the following ways..." [Select all that apply]
4. "What does consent mean in the context of a virtual sexual encounter?" [Open-ended]

Analysis for this poster focused on questions two and four.

Results

Question 2: "When talking to someone virtually that you are interested in, what sexual behavior would make you feel uncomfortable?"

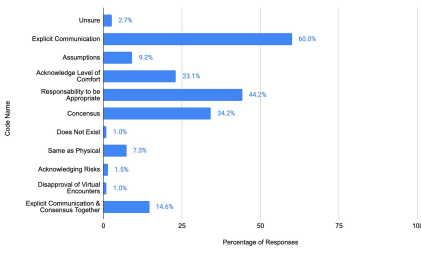
Sources of Discomfort in Virtual Encounters



- The most frequently mentioned source of discomfort in virtual encounters is the content of conversations (37.5%), this includes dirty talking, objectification, pressuring, inappropriate jokes, and disrespectful or aggressive speech.
- Explicit imagery (27.4%) and unsolicited behaviors (25%) were also highly identified as uncomfortable.

Question 4: "What does consent mean in the context of a virtual sexual encounter?"

Components of Virtual Consent Definitions



- One of the most frequently mentioned components of participants' definitions is explicit communication, which includes verbal/written permissions, asking questions, and communications of intentions about relationships.
- Responsibility to be appropriate (44.2%) and consensus among partners (34.2%) were also highly regarded as components of defining consent.

Discussion

Given the gaps in the literature about consent in virtual sexual encounters, our research aims to better understand what individuals find uncomfortable in their interactions and how they navigate safe practices by interpreting their definitions of consent in this context.

When asked what behaviors made them uncomfortable in a virtual setting, participant responses included the exchanging of unsolicited nude photos, sharing messages without permission, and pushiness.

The question about discomfort in virtual encounters was administered before the direct question about consent in the context of virtual encounters. Given this sequencing, 7.3% of participants showed a concern or wish for consent without the survey priming them on this concept, further suggesting a desire for more direct communication and safer practices in the virtual sphere.

Dating apps feature user agreement policies in an attempt to discourage unsolicited behaviors. Tinder's community guidelines read, "Do not engage, or encourage others to engage, in any targeted abuse or harassment against any other user. This includes sending any unsolicited sexual content to your matches" (Tinder, n.d.). Our participants, however, still encountered content and forms of conversations that made them uncomfortable.

According to participants' definitions of consent in the context of virtual encounters, 60.0% of individuals mentioned a desire for explicit communication of intentions, including the importance of asking questions about comfort level and sexual behaviors before engaging. Participants found it crucial to act responsibly in online interactions (44.2%), with frequent responses stating, "not harassing someone," "allowing an individual to say no and not feel pressured," or "not sharing private content."

Additionally, upon review of the Student Code of Conduct for this northeastern university, regulations for consent in a virtual sexual encounter are nonexistent. We feel that institutions ultimately hold the responsibility of ensuring safety for its members, and their teachings impact perceptions of consent, thus leading us to call for the revision of university codes of conduct to include virtual sexual encounters. Changes like this are not unheard of, as we are aware that affirmative consent has been added to regulations in recent years, and are therefore feasible in the foreseeable future.

Future Research

Due to the gap in the literature and in policy regarding consent in virtual settings, more research is needed to establish how individuals find safe ways to interact online. Another iteration of the survey will be released to ask more questions about the role of consent in a virtual space. This survey will address how participants work towards making their partners feel comfortable in a virtual setting and how they define consent in virtual interactions.

The study of this behavior is important in order to build on societal regulations. Additionally, our research focuses on young adults, and therefore can contribute to a cohort bias. Due to the possibility of cohort bias in our study, it may be valuable to examine a more diverse population of emerging adults, possibly by including these questions in a nationally distributed survey. With the increase in online sexual interactions, it may also be beneficial to study which forms of contact are most welcomed for individuals who regard consent as an important part of virtual sexual interactions.

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