






Article

Consent beyond Sexual Cues—Pre- and In Situ Interactions between Men Influence Men's Approach towards Sexual Consent

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Abstract: The existing literature on sexual consent is extensive, but a new social approach to this topic is emerging, necessitating further research. This article addresses a gap in understanding how men's interactions with other men, who are not their sexual partners, both before and during sexual encounters, influence their approach to consent beyond sexual cues. The study involved sixteen interviews and two focus groups with men aged 18–25. Conducted within the framework of the Consent project (PID2019-110466RB-100), this research aims to analyze how communicative acts, beyond verbal exchanges, shape relationships where either consent or coercion prevails. The findings reveal that when men engage in coercive interactions with non-sexual male peers, these interactions can encourage the violation of consent in their sexual relationships. Conversely, some men reject this coercive behavior, take a stand, and support others in avoiding situations that compromise consent. These results underscore the importance of addressing norms of masculinity and male interactions to ensure that all individuals can autonomously make decisions about their sexual lives.

Keywords: consent; sexual relations; masculinity; men studies; interaction



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1. Introduction

One of the primary objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals is to eradicate violence against women, a pervasive, long-standing, and devastating violation of human rights [1]. Statistics reveal that at least one in three women will experience gender-based violence in their lifetime, with one in four facing it before the age of 24 [2]. This violence occurs across all social spaces and types of relationships [3–5], posing a serious threat to both physical and mental health [6].

Addressing gender-based violence requires ensuring that all individuals can make autonomous decisions about their sexual lives, and to this end, consent stands as a central reference to differentiate between freely made and forced decisions [7]. Consent has been defined as the voluntary, uncoerced willingness to engage in sexual behavior [8,9].

Extensive scientific literature underscores that men's involvement is crucial to achieving gender equality and eradicating gender-based violence, making it essential to focus efforts in this direction [10]. The European Union's strategy also emphasizes the importance of preventing violence by engaging men, boys, and examining masculinities [11].

The present study examines how pre- and in situ interactions between men who are not sexual partners influence men's approaches to consent in their sexual relationships.

Importantly, the analysis does not absolve individuals who violate consent of responsibility; those who commit such violations are fully accountable for their actions. Instead, this study explores how interactions with other men can either encourage or mitigate these behaviors.

1.1. The Role of Communicative Acts in Shaping Consent

Campaigns such as “No means no” and, more recently, “Yes means yes” have marked significant progress in promoting sexual consent. However, research indicates that consent is often communicated through various methods, including direct and indirect verbal cues, as well as direct and indirect non-verbal cues [12]. Among these, non-verbal communication is the most common way consent is conveyed and interpreted [13]. Therefore, it is critical to consider non-verbal cues when determining whether affirmative consent has been given. A passive attitude that does not actively resist a partner’s advances should not be mistaken for consent [8].

The communicative acts approach to sexual consent, as proposed by Flecha, Puigvert, and colleagues extends beyond analyzing verbal and non-verbal acts [14,15]. Developed by CREA (Community of Research on Excellence for All) within the framework of the dialogic society theory [16], this approach integrates insights from theories of language, interaction, and human communication to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that shape relationships [17]. The theory of communicative acts includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, as well as contextual factors by encompassing verbal and non-verbal cues (such as gestures, tone, and facial expressions) while also taking into account the context, intention, and effects of communication [15].

Consent is valid only when an individual has genuine freedom to decide [7]. To determine whether a decision is free or coerced, it is essential to consider all elements that make up communicative acts, as some communicative acts ensure that consent is respected, while others undermine it [18]. The environments shaped by communicative acts can either protect or limit an individual’s freedom. This analysis includes assessing whether coercion is present in interactions or within the broader context, as coercion can manifest through physical power, or interactive power, exerted in interactions (through words, gestures, tone, intention, etc.), or through institutional power, where individuals in unequal hierarchical positions—such as in companies, institutions, families, or groups of friends—may exploit their position to achieve something that could only be obtained through the implicit threat enabled by their power [9]. This is why a verbal “yes” does not necessarily equate to true consent, as it can be heavily influenced by coercive interactions, either prior to or during the situation, or by a coercive context where the aggressor exerts pressure without direct interaction, taking advantage of the situation to undermine free decision-making. For instance, in scenarios with a power imbalance, such as when one person is in a position of authority over another, the context is shaped not only by the verbal and non-verbal elements present in the moment but also by situational factors [19].

Several studies have analyzed sexual consent in relationships through the lens of communicative acts. One study [15] focused on the sexual and emotional trajectories of young women, particularly the early stages, where coercive communicative acts were frequently identified, often perpetrated by peers. Another study [9] demonstrated that egalitarian dialogues between researchers and young people, both male and female, based on scientific evidence, helped them identify elements of consent and coercion not only in verbal acts but also in non-verbal acts. This facilitated a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes consent in sexual relationships. Additionally, another study [20] found that in social media debates about television series and movies, participants identified coercion exercised through both interactive power and institutional power, in verbal and non-verbal acts alike. Moreover, the majority of participants opposed situations where consent was absent.

1.2. *Diverse Norms of Masculinity*

Research indicates that men can and should play a crucial role in combating gender-based violence. Addressing the prevailing norms of masculinity and engaging men in the fight against such violence can significantly improve conditions for securing consent [21]. This is because beliefs associated with different models of masculinity profoundly impact each man's approach to consent [22].

Since the 1980s, when men's studies emerged as an empirical research field, evidence has demonstrated the existence of various forms of masculinity and their potential for transformation [23]. However, the scientific literature presents diverse perspectives on masculinity, contributing to a broad and ongoing debate [23,24]. In this debate, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has faced criticism for its portrayal of social dynamics [24]. Although it acknowledges the possibility of change, critics argue that it ultimately reinforces the idea that current dynamics primarily perpetuate domination and oppression, leaving little room for alternative narratives [25].

In response to this, the Inclusive Masculinity Theory argues that while hegemonic masculinity remains strong in many contexts, it is on a decline, as an increasing number of masculinities are moving away from it and becoming more inclusive [26]. There is a line of research that highlights changes in masculinities and suggests that these changes have led to reductions in violence [27]. However, this theory has also been criticized for presenting an overly optimistic view of these changes, potentially diverting attention from the ongoing issues of domination and oppression. Critics also suggest that it undermines the continued importance of feminism, which has been a driving force behind these positive changes [28]. Additionally, some studies emphasize that many of these changes have been more superficial or stylistic rather than substantive, and as a result, they have not significantly impacted power dynamics or relationships of domination [29].

For its part, the framework proposed by Flecha, Puigvert, and Ríos [30], which underpins the present study, asserts that some forms of masculinity perpetuate gender-based violence, while others contribute to overcoming it. Specifically, it distinguishes three types of masculinity. (1) Dominant traditional masculinities: these perpetuate chauvinism and use violence. (2) Oppressed traditional masculinities: although they do not employ violence, they uphold a double standard that values men who are aggressive and dismisses "good guys" as unattractive for sexual relationships. (3) New alternative masculinities: these embody ethical principles and attractiveness, characterized by egalitarian values and a strong commitment against violence, reflecting confidence in their position.

This line of research highlights that societal pressures from peer groups, families, and media often glorify violent masculinities while devaluing non-violent ones [31]. Such pressures create a disconnect between healthy relationships and excitement, sometimes even portraying individuals who commit crimes as more appealing [32].

1.3. *Interaction with Other Men Influences Men's Approach to Sexual Relations*

The scientific literature reveals that men's approach to sexual relationships is significantly shaped by their interactions with other men who are not sexual partners. Human beings are influenced by their interactions with others [33], internalizing these dialogues and incorporating them into their decision-making processes [34]. These interactions help form ideas about societal values and expectations [35]. In the context of sexual relations, peers play a crucial role in shaping men's choices [36]. Indeed, friends are often the primary source of information about sex for men [37], and peer influence is particularly strong among adolescents [38]. Some studies indicate that among young men, their male peers are the primary audience for their masculine performance [39]. This underscores the importance of anti-rape campaigns that focus on male interactions to promote consent in sexual relationships [40].

Men often face pressure to conform to certain masculine norms depending on the nature of their friendships. Those with friends who endorse traditional masculinity may experience increased pressure to engage in coercive behaviors, such as forced sex.

In contrast, men with more prosocial friends are less likely to be involved in violent sexual encounters [41].

Dominant traditional masculinities often seek to impose their model on others through power dynamics and coercive interactions, characterized by mistreatment rather than mutual trust and support [42,43]. On the other hand, positive interactions with supportive peers can counteract this coercive pressure, fostering solidarity and facilitating sexual relationships based on mutual consent [32]. Supportive friendships have been shown to protect against sexual aggression [44] and contribute significantly to overall well-being, whereas lacking quality relationships is as detrimental to health as other factors such as smoking, obesity, or pollution [45].

In the field of men's studies, research has been conducted on male homosociality—the non-sexual bonds that men form with each other—which clearly shows that relationships between men who are not sexual partners significantly influence how these men approach sexual relations [46]. Studies have predominantly highlighted how male homosociality is rooted in the norms of hegemonic masculinity and reinforces the domination of women. For example, in one study, male homosociality fueled fantasies involving sexual harassment of women [47]; in another, it was used to excuse narratives about sexual assault [48]; and in yet another, male homosociality encouraged boys to pressure girls into sending intimate images, which the boys then shared among themselves as a form of currency to gain prestige among their male peers, severely harming the girls' well-being [49]. These are examples of what is defined as vertical homosociality. However, there is an alternative perspective that argues that limiting homosociality to this vertical type oversimplifies the concept. This perspective suggests the existence of horizontal male homosociality, which is centered not on the domination of women, but on non-sexual intimacy within a framework that is compatible with gender equality [46].

Regarding the scientific literature that specifically analyzes masculinities and consent, research also highlights that different masculinities approach sexual consent in varying ways. Some men view consent as a hurdle to be overcome [50], using persuasive techniques such as the pick-up artist approach to bypass it [51]. In certain environments, there is pressure to achieve social status through sexual conquests, sometimes encouraging the violation of consent [52] or engaging in sex against one's will [53]. Conversely, other men regard consent as essential and take responsibility for ensuring it [50]. This body of research underscores the diverse ways in which masculinity influences attitudes towards sexual consent and highlights the need for continued examination of these dynamics.

1.4. Present Study

There is substantial evidence linking the quality of sexual relationships to both the nature of interactions among men and the type of masculinity they embody. Research shows that different models of masculinity approach sexual consent in distinct ways. At the same time, an emerging approach is examining how communicative acts influence consent in sexual relationships. The development of this communicative acts approach highlights the need for further research into the interactions and contexts surrounding sexual relationships, as these environments play a crucial role in either supporting or undermining consent. In this context, a gap exists in the scientific literature regarding how both interactions that occur during the formation of a sexual relationship (in situ) and those that take place beforehand (pre-interactions) among men who are not sexual partners influence their approach to sexual consent, and how different models of masculinity affect this process. This article seeks to explore this gap through the following research questions:

RQ1: Do interactions with other men who are not sexual partners coerce men into unwanted sexual relations with potential or actual partners?

RQ2: Do interactions with other men who are not sexual partners encourage submission to traditional dominant masculinities?

RQ3: Do interactions with other men who are not sexual partners encourage men to coerce their potential or actual sexual partners into unwanted sexual relations?

RQ4: Are there interactions with other men who are not sexual partners that help prevent situations that violate consent?

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of the current study is to analyze whether interactions among men who are not sexual partners influence their approach to sexual relationships, and if so, how these interactions exert that influence. This research is part of a larger project called Consent (PID2019-110466RB-100), which investigates how communicative acts beyond verbal interactions shape relationships involving either consent or coercion among young adults. To achieve its specific objectives, the present study conducted interviews and focus groups with men aged 18 to 25, utilizing the communicative methodology, which has been recommended by the European Commission for its effectiveness in achieving social impact [54]. Building on the H2020 ALLINTERACT (N 10.13039/501100011033) project, the current study facilitated collaboration between researchers and participants to generate scientific knowledge about sexual consent. The aim was to maximize the social impact of research by providing scientific evidence on consent to the young people who participated in the study, while also drawing on their valuable insights derived from personal experiences. Research indicates that egalitarian dialogue, rooted in arguments rather than power interactions and generated through interactions between scientific evidence and community contributions, leads to impactful outcomes that improve lives in ways that would otherwise be unattainable [15].

2.1. Sample

Participation required only that individuals be men aged 18 to 25. Recruitment was facilitated through third parties, who provided initial information. Interested individuals received further details and an informed consent form, which they had to sign before participating. When participants were recruited through teachers, it was essential that these teachers did not assess the students in that course or subsequent ones. The snowball sampling technique was used, with several participants referring others to the study.

The sample comprised 26 men aged 18 to 25 from various socio-cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations. We successfully recruited participants from Catalonia (10), the Basque Country (8), Madrid (5), Valencia (2), and Galicia (1), ensuring geographic diversity across Spain. Educationally, 15 participants were university students, 8 had completed secondary education, and 3 had obtained a university degree.

2.2. Procedure

Sixteen individual interviews and two focus groups (each with four participants) were conducted via videoconference. The combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the topic [55]. Interviews provided detailed, personal insights, while focus groups facilitated a range of perspectives and collective recall. The interviews and focus groups started by reviewing the criteria and safeguards implemented during data collection. The goal was clearly explained: to identify coercive elements and those related to consent in sexual relations. Participants were asked about their understanding of consent and how it was practiced, how boundaries were established in sexual relations, whether certain individuals were frequently pressured into having relations, if they were aware of situations that people did not want to repeat, and whether they observed different behaviors among men in these situations.

The interviews, conducted by trained researchers from the Consent project, adhered to ethical standards established by Regulation (EU) 2016/6791 and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) [56]. They were conducted in Spanish, Catalan, or Basque, based on participants' preferences, and lasted between 20 and 50 min for interviews and 60 and 80 min for focus groups.

2.3. Analysis

The recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded, and analyzed based on categories derived inductively from the data. Interactions that impeded consent were classified as exclusionary, while those facilitating consent were considered transformative. Coding was performed independently by four researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through egalitarian dialogue. The analysis followed an epistemological approach based on egalitarian dialogue, emphasizing argument validity over power dynamics [55]. Four categories were established in the analysis, with categories 1, 2, and 3 identified as exclusionary elements and category 4 as a transformative element: (1) Men who are not sexual partners coerce other men into unwanted sexual relations with their potential or actual partners; (2) peer pressure compels submission to dominant traditional masculinity norms; (3) men who are not sexual partners encourage other men to coerce their partners into unwanted sexual relations; and (4) peer support for consensual relationships helps avoid situations that violate consent. The first category addresses RQ1, the second RQ2, the third RQ3, and the fourth RQ4.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data [57,58]. The process involved the following steps: (i) immersing in the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (ii) developing a coding framework based on the emerging themes and literature; (iii) classifying codes into thematic categories; (iv) refining major themes through iterative review; (v) naming and defining each theme; and (vi) synthesizing the information to draw inferences from the research results. Initial coding was conducted independently, followed by collaborative comparison and theme generation, with several iterations to finalize the themes.

3. Results

The present study sheds light on the pre- and in situ interactions among young men who are not sexual partners and how these interactions shape their approach to consent in sexual relationships (see Figure 1). Some interactions involve coercive pressures where men try to force others into unwanted sexual encounters, conform to dominant traditional masculinity norms, or even encourage coercion of their potential or actual partners. In contrast, other interactions serve as protective factors, as these men resist such impositions and support each individual’s right to make genuine choices about the relationships they wish to pursue or avoid.

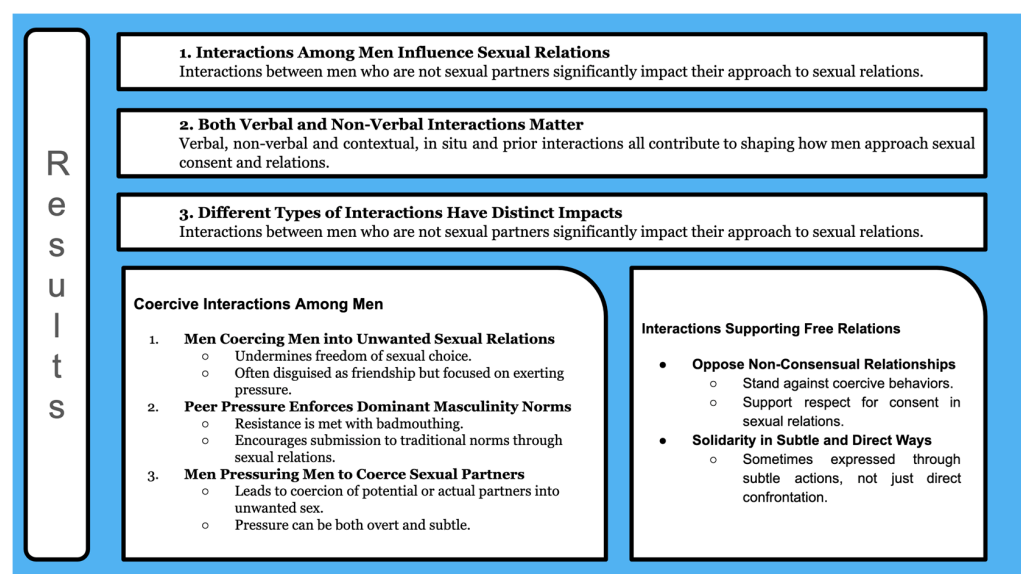


Figure 1. Results Summary.

Building on the framework proposed by Flecha, Puigvert, and Ríos [30], which categorizes masculinity into three distinct types, we can link each type to sexual consent as follows. (1) Dominant traditional masculinities: these masculinities often exert pressure on other men who are not sexual partners, coercing them into unwanted sexual activities, enforcing conformity to dominant masculinity norms, and pushing them to coerce their sexual partners. (2) Oppressed traditional masculinities: while they do not engage in coercion or non-consensual sexual relations; they also fail to stand up against the coercive behaviors of dominant traditional masculinities. (3) New alternative masculinities: these men do not engage in non-consensual relations, actively oppose coercion, and demonstrate solidarity with others—sometimes through direct actions and other times in more subtle or indirect ways.

3.1. Men Coercing Men into Unwanted Sexual Relations

The men interviewed provided a clear depiction of the coercive dynamics at play within certain male interactions. In these situations, some men, under the guise of friendship, attempt to undermine the autonomy of others regarding their sexual decisions. Rather than respecting their peers' choices, these men sometimes manipulate them into unwanted relationships. Pedro articulates this clearly: "Many times, we felt obligated by our friends who tried to convince us when maybe we didn't want anything".

This peer pressure also occurs in situ, as Aimar's account illustrates—a scenario echoed in almost every interview we conducted:

I have sometimes seen that at first, someone doesn't want to, and then friends get involved and change their mind. For example, one of my friends says, 'I don't want to go with this girl'. And then the people around him start pressuring: 'What do you mean? You have to go ahead if you have the opportunity'. That person feels that pressure (Aimar).

Aimar explains that through the interactive power of peers, men often coerce other men by pressuring them to engage in unwanted sexual relations. The pressure exerted by these men, who can be characterized as embodying the dominant traditional masculinity, arises when they notice that another man is reluctant to engage in a sexual relationship that, under different circumstances, he might pursue. The goal of this pressure is to push for every possible sexual encounter to occur, regardless of whether all parties involved genuinely desire it.

3.2. Peer Pressure Forces Submission to Dominant Traditional Masculinity Norms

These coercive interactions among men are closely tied to the norms of dominant traditional masculinities, where sexual conquest is prioritized above the free will and desires of those involved. As Antón succinctly puts it, "If something doesn't happen, it's like you're a disgrace!". Eneko further illustrates this pressure with a crude expression used in his city: "In my city, there's a term—it's very ugly, but it's used. The word is 'lefaseca' [dried sperm in Spanish slang]. If you haven't been with anyone for a year, it's like, what a pain! What a 'lefaseca'! It's used a lot".

Men who fail to meet these imposed standards are depicted as failing to embody true masculinity, which is equated with the dominant traditional masculinity model. Paul explains this expectation: "You have to show how manly and macho you are, don't you? (...) Now it's more like this: You complain that you don't have a girlfriend, but you don't go for it either". Similarly, Adrián, like many other interviewees, acknowledges the dominance of traditional masculinity norms and highlights an additional characteristic—opposition to the freedom of choice in sexual relationships, stigmatizing homosexuality: "When a boy doesn't want to hook up, I've seen criticism from both boys and girls: 'He's not man enough. You're a faggot'".

These discourses perpetuate the idea that becoming a "man" according to dominant traditional masculinities is contingent upon conforming to these norms, which involve

disregarding one's desires and the consent of others involved. As we will discuss further, this disregard for consent is a key aspect of these interactions.

When a young man is confident enough to resist this pressure, maintain his self-respect, and refuse to conform to the dominant traditional masculinity model, those who promote coercive interactions often resort to other tactics, such as badmouthing him behind his back, frequently using homophobic slurs. Aimar describes this dynamic:

When a guy's friends tell him to go for it, and he keeps saying no, they'll say to his face: 'Are you stupid or what?' Then, behind his back, they make comments like: 'I don't know what's wrong with him; maybe he's asexual, or is he homosexual?' There's a lot of that kind of talk behind his back (Aimar).

A key pillar of dominant traditional masculinities is the expectation of losing one's virginity by a certain age. Failing to do so results in immense pressure to have sex, which can lead to stigmatization. Eneko, along with many other interviewees, confirms this: "There is a kind of stigma".

This involves imposing the norms of dominant traditional masculinities not only through direct, in situ pressure, as previously discussed, but also through interactions that occur before a sexual relationship is initiated—and often in subtle, indirect ways. One such method is by elevating the desirability of men who conform to these norms while diminishing the appeal of those who do not. Xavi provides an example: "Obviously it's not something explicit, but when you talk about these things, the one who has sex is always seen as cooler than the one who hasn't".

When men fail to meet the expectations set by dominant traditional masculinities, some feel pressured to lie about their experiences, as Arnau describes:

Especially when you're 16 or 17, for example, if I've gone out with a girl and for some reason didn't kiss her, then when I'm out with friends, I've never been one to admit it. But if possible, you omit details because you feel the pressure, like when she rejects you, and you feel embarrassed. Then you say: 'No, no, it's just that she had to go or whatever'. You lie a little bit. Because you don't know what they'll say or if they'll laugh at you. So yeah, you are a bit conditioned (Arnau).

Arnau explains that it is common to feel peer pressure to engage in sexual activity, and as a result, he has resorted to lying to protect himself from that pressure. According to the interviewees, this is a widespread practice.

3.3. Men Pressuring Men to Coerce Their Potential or Actual Sexual Partners

Coercive interactions among men who are not sexual partners often encourage men to pressure their potential or actual sexual partners into unwanted sexual relations. These pressures can be very explicit, occurring both in situ and during earlier interactions leading up to a sexual relationship. For instance, Antón recounts how peers pressured him to take advantage of women in vulnerable situations, such as those under the influence of alcohol: "I've definitely felt that peer pressure, like: 'You have to do this, take advantage, that girl is right there'. I've even heard nonsense like: 'Take advantage, she's had a couple of drinks'".

In this case, Antón explains that some peers pressure him to engage in sexual relations, even suggesting that they sometimes do so when it is unclear whether one of the potential participants can freely make a decision due to alcohol consumption.

Similarly, Mikel describes how it is common for peers to pressure a young man who has already been rejected by a girl to persist, despite her clear lack of interest:

"Among the guys, we tend to be pretty tough on each other. We tease each other a lot. I know of some cases where a guy tries to start a relationship and doesn't succeed. Then his friends, instead of accepting it, start provoking him: 'You didn't get anywhere. You had to do this or that. Try again'. They push him to keep trying. When it's just one person pushing, it's one thing, but when several are doing it, it really depends on how strong you are".

Mikel's account reveals that the goal of pressuring a man into a sexual encounter is not to ensure that consent is obtained from all parties involved. In these situations, the refusal to engage in sexual activity is clear, whether expressed verbally or through non-verbal communicative acts. Instead, the aim is to coerce the man to pressure the woman into giving in and having an unwanted sexual encounter. This coercion is exercised through interactive power—power exerted through social interaction.

Pressure to violate others' consent often occurs indirectly, through subtle comments and non-verbal cues that can encourage such behavior. Eneko describes this dynamic:

It makes him more insistent. Maybe he hasn't been with a girl for a long time and feels a lot of pressure from his friends. You don't always see it, but a comment or a gesture can make you feel pressured. They're signaling that maybe it's my turn to flirt, maybe I should be with this girl, or maybe I need to step up my game. I'm going to be alone otherwise. The pressure is there, and it can push you to put pressure on her too. So, okay, it's done. I haven't been with anyone for eight months, and my friends keep getting in my head. Maybe it's time. Maybe I need to make a move. Maybe I have to push the girl (Eneko).

Eneko's account highlights a subtle, often unspoken pressure that can drive young men to prioritize having sex over respecting the autonomy and desires of their potential partners. The pressure Eneko refers to does not occur at the specific places and moments when a sexual encounter is decided, but rather in the broader context. However, according to the interviewees, these communicative acts can be as influential, if not more so, than if they happened at the exact time and place of the encounter.

There are also instances of explicit pressure where the interviewee admits to having participated in pressuring others into unwanted relationships. For example, Xabier recounts a situation where he and others coerced a girl, who, despite not verbally objecting, clearly communicated through her body language that she was not interested. When the girl and the boy were alone, she expressed her desire to go home. Xabier describes it as follows:

A friend hoped to hook up with a girl one night. We were all hanging out together in bars, including the two of them. Both her friends and his friends encouraged them. I spoke to her as well. The friends asked her, 'Something's going to happen with this boy tonight, right'? Then I said to her, 'Last weekend it happened, so it will happen again this weekend, right'? Her friends confirmed they thought it would happen again, even though she didn't say anything. Later, she told him she wanted to go home (Xabier).

3.4. Peer Support of Free Relations Contributes to Avoiding Situations That Violate Consent

Some men take a stand against coercive interactions from other men who are not potential or actual sexual partners. These interactions with men who support free and consensual relationships help others engage only in relationships they truly want and ensure respect for their partners' wishes. Eneko illustrates this contrast between men who respect consent and those who do not:

Among boys, there are those who respect consent and those who don't. Some boys can accept a 'no', and others can't. Some are easily coerced, and others aren't. I like to feel comfortable and connect with the other person. For me to be comfortable, the other person has to be comfortable too. If you can't handle a 'no', maybe you need to learn (Eneko).

In this perspective, men who respect consent are seen as more attractive and mature. They are the ones who enjoy the relationship, feel comfortable, and connect with their partner. In contrast, those who do not respect consent are portrayed as weak, overly influenced by peer pressure, and lacking maturity.

Solidarity is a fundamental component among men who support free and consensual relationships. They actively help others exercise their freedom to make decisions about

their own sexual relationships. Unai recounts an incident where they supported two girls who were being harassed by two boys:

Two boys were relentlessly following two girls, clearly ignoring that the girls wanted nothing to do with them. The boys wouldn't stop, so we had to step in. This kind of situation happens a lot when we're out. We asked the girls if the boys were bothering them, and they said yes, thanking us. We then told the boys to leave, and they did (Unai).

Solidarity, however, does not always require direct confrontation. Sometimes, it involves subtle actions to help someone out of a difficult situation, as Carles describes: "When you see your friend is uncomfortable, you might take her by the hand or say to the guy, 'Hey, she's my girlfriend', or something like that".

These acts of solidarity by men who support free and consensual interactions can sometimes lead to reprisals, as Adrián recounts:

A boy invites a girl, the girl isn't interested, and the group tries to insist. I end up in the middle, telling them to stop because I don't want the girl to have a bad time. But yes, you do face consequences—people start giving you dirty looks. Maybe no one says anything, but their attitude changes (Adrián).

This same solidarity is also aimed at supporting other men to protect themselves from actions that may be harmful to them, as Juan explains:

If a friend keeps pestering another friend, saying, 'Come on, meet my girlfriend's friend', and you see he's uncomfortable, you might step in and say, 'He can't go—he has plans with me', to save him from an unpleasant experience. Sometimes that friend feels bad saying no, so you help him out (Juan).

Juan's story emphasizes how solidarity can be tied to friendship, making it more appealing and accessible.

These supportive interactions often rely on shared, unspoken codes that make communication easier:

That's kind of the code—it's understood that when your friends leave and you say, 'I'm staying', it means you're interested in something. But if you go along with them, it's like saying, 'Thank goodness you saved me' (Carles).

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that pre- and in situ interactions among different models of masculinity significantly influence men's behavior towards sexual consent, extending beyond sexual cues alone. In addition to reinforcing the well-established evidence for the existence of diverse masculinities [23] and supporting research that identifies different attitudes among men concerning sexual consent [50], these findings highlight the critical role of interactions between men who are not sexual partners in fostering a non-coercive environment around consent. This study confirms that men play a crucial role in ensuring that sexual relationships are grounded in the free will of each participant. The results suggest that an individual's ability to make autonomous decisions about their sexual life is largely influenced by the prevailing masculinity norms and the interactions developed within that context. This aligns with the approach to masculinities presented by Flecha, Puigvert, and Ríos [30], which underpins the model used in this study.

The findings support the perspective that engaging men in the fight against gender-based violence is essential [58], and they underscore the importance of addressing harmful masculinity norms [21]. From the analytical approach used, it can be concluded that interactions with men who embody dominant traditional masculinities create environments that undermine the conditions necessary for consensual sexual relationships. These coercive contexts can lead to men having unwanted sex or violating the consent of their potential partners, with such violence being perceived by traditional dominant masculinities as fulfilling "what is expected of a man". Consequently, this study contributes to the growing

body of research examining how interactions with men who uphold dominant traditional masculinities can negatively impact sexual relationships [42].

Conversely, this study also provides evidence that interactions with men who support free and consensual relationships help prevent coercion. These interactions empower men to make decisions based on their own will and encourage them to engage in sexual activity only when all parties involved have given affirmative consent. Such actions classify these men as embodying new alternative masculinities, according to the typology used in this analysis. This study thereby adds further evidence to the research exploring how new alternative masculinities contribute to overcoming gender-based violence [30]. Interactions with these men serve as a protective factor against such violence [43], a finding that is also evident in this study. Additionally, the results align with research highlighting the importance of positive relationships and solidarity among men in fostering free and healthy sexual lives [41,59,60], thereby contributing to the body of work suggesting that fostering good relationships enhances life quality trajectories [39].

Regarding the debate on hegemonic masculinity [23,25,26,28,30], this study does not allow for the generalization of its results and cannot determine the prevalence of each type of masculinity concerning sexual consent. However, the study provides evidence suggesting the significant influence of dominant masculinities on sexual consent, as these forms of masculinity hinder individuals' freedom to make autonomous decisions about their sexuality. On the other hand, this study also highlights the existence of a model of masculinity that opposes gender-based violence and supports relationships based on consent. Therefore, these findings position this type of masculinity not as a minor or superficial issue but as a crucial factor in the challenge of overcoming the dominance exerted by traditional dominant masculinities.

In the debate on the nature of male homosociality [46–49], this study provides evidence that the norms of masculinity oriented toward domination significantly impact sexual consent in relationships, as they either prevent or greatly hinder the conditions necessary for individuals to freely decide about their own sexuality when interacting with traditional dominant masculinities. This holds true even when such masculinities are not present in the relationship or potential relationship, as men's interactions with other men who are not sexual partners influence how they approach sexual relations. At the same time, this study also shows evidence of interactions between men who are not sexual partners that not only do not contribute to domination but are instead oriented toward overcoming it. Therefore, the evidence presented in this article aligns well with the approach that distinguishes between vertical and horizontal homosociality [46], as both forms are reflected in this study.

Moreover, this research underscores the need to examine consent not only through in situ verbal and non-verbal communication, which is crucial [12,13], but also by considering the broader context in which a relationship unfolds, including past interactions and present contextual elements [15]. This study aligns with the approach to consent that argues for the consideration of all elements involved in communicative acts to determine whether a sexual relationship is genuinely consensual [14,18].

Eradicating violence against women is a key priority within the Sustainable Development Goals [1]. Achieving this requires that everyone has the freedom to make autonomous choices about their sexual lives [7]. While extensive research has identified verbal and non-verbal communication cues to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual interactions, a new approach suggests analyzing consent through the lens of communicative acts. This approach considers not only verbal and non-verbal signals but also the contextual elements that shape the relationship, recognizing that coercive factors may hinder autonomous decision-making. This study demonstrates that to ensure truly free sexual relationships, it is essential to address masculinity norms and the interactions between men who are not sexual partners.

Regarding the potential implications of these findings for policy and practice, the evidence presented in this article suggests that it is crucial to incorporate men's anti-violence participation within the broader context of community and social action aimed at

ending violence, in line with ongoing initiatives [30,61]. These findings also have significant implications, particularly in the field of education. This line of research [14] highlights the importance of making two key objectives central: first, raising awareness about the harmful consequences of traditional masculinity norms while simultaneously promoting models of masculinity that clearly oppose gender-based violence and support consensual sexual relationships; and second, implementing educational practices that foster egalitarian dialogue centered on scientific evidence about consent. This approach helps to ensure a comprehensive understanding of what consent truly entails, emphasizing that it is not only about words but encompasses all elements of communicative acts. It also underscores the influence of communicative acts that occur around sexual or potential sexual relationships, including the critical role of interactions among men who are not sexual partners.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample consisted of a limited number of men aged 18–25 living in Spain, so the findings cannot be generalized.

5. Conclusions

The evidence presented in this study suggests that approaching sexual consent requires a perspective that extends beyond verbal interactions. Non-verbal elements significantly impact the conditions that either enable or inhibit autonomous decision-making in an individual's sexual life. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of considering the broader context in which sexual consent is negotiated, not just the verbal and non-verbal interactions that occur in situ. The context preceding these interactions, as well as interactions in different settings, exerts a substantial influence on how consent is understood and practiced.

This study provides evidence that both in situ and prior interactions among men who are not sexual partners, within their specific social contexts, shape their approach to sexual consent. Therefore, it is highly recommended to deepen and expand interventions that focus on the interactions between men and the prevailing norms of masculinity to address the challenge of ensuring sexual consent. Such efforts are crucial for contributing to the fight against gender-based violence. In this regard, it is important to continue investigating male interactions concerning consent, as well as to conduct extensive research on how all forms of communicative acts within different contexts influence sexual consent.

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