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Research Article

Learning Sexuality and Consent: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Young French Adults

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Sexuality education (SE) in France presents crucial challenges, with significant room for improvement to better meet the needs of young people and contribute to the prevention of sexual violence. This inductive exploratory study aims to understand how French young people learn about sexuality and mobilize this knowledge during their first sexual encounters, particularly with regard to consent practices. To this end, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with young adults in the Toulouse and Paris regions. The interviews were analyzed using the IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) method. The results reveal that participants' main sources of information are their peers and pornography, widely favored for their accessibility and attractiveness. On average, participants reported having received only two sessions of SE, well below the 21 required by French law. With regard to consent, the majority described relying on implicit and contextual signals. However, five participants recalled experiences of non-consensual sexual gestures or intercourse, including two in the context of a couple's first relationship. These accounts highlight the limitations of current approaches focusing on the explicit communication of consent, particularly in situations of sexual coercion. In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need to reinforce SE in France, both in terms of frequency and content. We recommend targeting the development of complex psychosocial skills, such as emotion management, impulsivity, and empathy, for more effective prevention of sexual violence tailored to the realities of young people.

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Introduction

Sexuality education (SE) was introduced into French secondary schools half a century ago. Yet, a recent report from the General Inspection of National Education[1] underscores that the persistent lack of appropriate tools and resources continues to hinder this education from fulfilling its crucial role. This challenge is particularly pressing in today's context, where adolescents have unfettered access to pornographic content and are frequently exposed to

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conflicting information about sexuality[2][3][4][5]. Comprehensive sexuality education is critical not only because adolescence often marks the onset of sexual activity[6], but also because it is a period when individuals are most vulnerable to sexual violence, which is frequently committed by those within their close social circles[7][8].

Learning processes in human sexuality

Both general and specific knowledge about sexuality play a crucial role in shaping individuals' first sexual experiences, influencing the nature of these encounters—whether positive or negative. This learning process significantly affects the quality of their future sexual lives[9][10][11].

Meanwhile, studies conducted in several Western countries over the past decade suggest a growing demand among adolescents for education on sexuality-related topics. In France, for instance, 79% of the 11,000 participants in recent surveys[12] reported that the SE they received in school did not equip them to approach emotional and sexual relationships with confidence. Additionally, 73% felt that key concepts such as consent and respecting personal boundaries set by partners were inadequately addressed, if at all. Topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity were also seldom covered in French secondary school curricula on sexuality and affective life[12][13][14]. Similarly, studies from the UK and Ireland, involving cohorts of over 2,000 adolescents and young adults, reveal that the vast majority felt they lacked critical information when beginning their sexual lives[13][15]. In the USA, Rothman's[16] analysis shows that up to 45% of young people believe they did not receive adequate sexuality education, whether at school or from their families.

It appears, therefore, that the responsibility for providing practical knowledge about sexuality largely falls to students' families. Researchers have noted that when parents confront their children's sexual behavior—even when such behaviors are developmentally appropriate—they often respond by prohibiting these actions without offering explanations, sometimes merely labeling them as "dirty"[17][3][10]. Far from curbing sexual curiosity, these approaches may actually encourage children to seek information and experiment in secret, relying instead on less reliable sources[18]. Adolescents and young adults often cite their peers as one of their primary sources of information on sexual matters[19][16][15][20]. Pornography is also one of the main sources of sexuality education cited by adolescents and young adults. Indeed, in the past 20 years, access to explicit sexual content at an increasingly early age has been greatly facilitated by the development of the Internet and pornographic websites[21][22][23]. Globally, adolescents are exposed to pornography at an average age of 13 for boys and 16 for girls[13]. For instance, a significant proportion of older individuals, especially men, appear to rely on pornography to obtain information about sexuality, especially when it comes to practices and pleasure[13][16][15][20]. Particularly, pornography has been shown to shape the dominant sexual scripts of young users, thereby influencing their sexual attitudes and behaviors to some extent. [24][22][20].

Based on Bandura's social learning theory, media consumption and social interactions play a decisive role in how individuals learn about sexuality. According to this theory, people learn behaviors and norms through observation

and imitation[25]. However, both peers and media consumption can be considered inadequate sources of learning[26][2][5].

Sexual consent

Other than the general knowledge about sexuality, another important aspect of affective-sexual interaction is consent negotiation.

While sexual consent is a fundamental concept related to sexual violence, we found that a clear definition is lacking in both the French penal code and the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization. However, it can be inferred from their definitions of sexual aggression that consented sexual intercourse must be obtained without coercion, threats, or deception. Many definitions of consent have emerged from feminist activists, particularly in recent years following the #MeToo movement. Additionally, social psychology researchers, such as Muehlenhard et al.[27], have contributed to this discourse. They propose that sexual consent can be understood in three distinct ways: as an "internal state of willingness," as an "act of explicit agreement," or as a "behavior that someone else interprets as willingness." From this perspective, consenting to a sexual act involves both the individual who expresses behavioral cues and the recipient of those cues.

The scientific literature on consent communication indicates that, in most cases, individuals primarily rely on nonverbal and indirect cues to communicate with their sexual partners. However, these types of cues are considered the least reliable indicators of sexual consent, as participants in experimental protocols themselves frequently identify these signals as more difficult to interpret[28][27][29]. This observation highlights a paradox: while individuals instinctively choose less explicit forms of communication, which can lead to misunderstandings and ambiguity. The reliance on nonverbal signals undermines the very goal of consent, which is to ensure that all parties involved have a clear and shared understanding of willingness.

However, some scholars, such as Beres[30], challenge the widely accepted theory of miscommunication in consent negotiations. She argues that misunderstandings about consent are not merely the result of poor communication or the use of indirect signals. Instead, her research suggests that the concept of miscommunication can sometimes obscure deeper issues, such as power dynamics, gender norms, and the intentional disregard of verbal and nonverbal refusals. Rather than viewing consent as a communication problem, Beres[30] advocates for a more nuanced understanding that considers the social and cultural contexts in which consent is negotiated, emphasizing that clear communication alone may not always prevent sexual violence if broader societal factors are not addressed.

Meanwhile, pornographic material, which is widely used by male individuals even in their early teen years, seems to convey content that is contradictory to the adequate discourse about consent[20]. This suggests that relying on pornography as a primary source of SE may be problematic in this regard. For instance, an in-depth analysis of 50 pornographic films, randomly selected from the 150 top-selling films in 2015[5], reveals that the portrayal of consent communication in these films does not promote an assertive or clear model of sexual consent. In addition to failing to illustrate assertive consent, media representations frequently depict characters ignoring their partners' signals of

refusal or proceeding in situations that could impair their partners' ability to consent. The study of pornographic films highlights that not only is assertive consent absent, but these films often normalize the disregard of clear refusals or the continuation of sexual activity in contexts where consent may be compromised, such as through intoxication or coercion. Similarly, mainstream blockbuster movies portray similar patterns, reinforcing problematic notions where boundaries and consent are either ignored or downplayed[2]. These portrayals can further distort young people's understanding of healthy sexual interactions and the importance of mutual, enthusiastic consent.

The present study

This raises important questions about how young people in France access information about sexuality and whether their experiences align with patterns observed in existing literature. As exploratory work, this study serves as a preliminary step within a larger research project aimed at better addressing the SE needs of French youth, particularly concerning sexual consent. Thus, the aim of the present study is to better understand French adolescents' sexual knowledge and consent negotiation practices as they become sexually active.

Specifically, we aim to investigate whether the available resources adequately addressed their needs at the time of their first sexual encounters. Did they successfully translate their theoretical knowledge about consent into practical application during these experiences? Furthermore, we want to understand their level of awareness regarding consent and what practices they employed in the moment. Were they informed, and what was their approach to seeking consent? By examining these aspects, we can gain insights into the effectiveness of sexual education and the realities faced by French youth.

Method

This research is grounded in an inductive approach, inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis[31], allowing us to explore the subject matter from a naïve perspective. By consciously setting aside our pre-existing knowledge and assumptions, we aimed to foster an environment that encourages participants to actively contribute to the generation of knowledge through the sharing of their personal experiences. This constructivist approach prioritizes the participants' insights and narratives, enabling a richer understanding of their perspectives on sexuality and consent. By focusing on their lived experiences, we sought to uncover nuanced insights that may not be captured by traditional research methods, thereby highlighting the importance of individual narratives in shaping our understanding of these complex topics.

Materials

We conducted semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide. Participants were questioned about the beginnings of their interpersonal sexual lives, guiding them through a process of introspection aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes that occur during the initial stages of sexual experiences, particularly focusing on the processes of consent negotiation. Interviews were introduced by a main question formulated as follows: *" Now we're going to explore your memories and feelings about your first sexual experience(s) with another person. I'm going to invite you to tell me everything you remember, within the limits of what's comfortable for you. I'll try to intervene as*

little as possible to limit the influence of my presence on your answers. I encourage you to be as detailed as possible about your subjective experience, bearing in mind that what matters to me here is not the sexual sensations per se but the relational experience. As soon as you're ready, you can start."

To this main question were added 23 follow-up questions structured around 4 themes: context, emotions and cognition, consent, and sex education. Reformulations were used as well to refocus the discourse of the participants on the object of research or to clarify their remarks.

Procedure

Recruitment was conducted from June 2023 to August 2023 through social networks and dating applications. The main author invited potential participants to take part in an interview focused on the topic of their "first time." It was made clear to them that the interview would be used for scientific research purposes and that they would not receive compensation for their participation. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes (with an average duration of 45 minutes) and were carried out individually and face to face in the main researcher's office in the city of Toulouse. Three participants from Paris were recruited through social media announcements, and their interviews were conducted via videoconference. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Participants

As recommended by Antoine and Smith[31], we conducted this study on a small sample in order to facilitate an analysis based on a global vision of the corpus rather than a quantitative approach per occurrence.

A total of 14 individuals (aged 23-28 years; 7 women, 6 men, and 1 non-binary person) were interviewed. Among this sample, 11 (79%) identify as heterosexual, although 4 of them (36%) acknowledge some flexibility regarding their sexual orientation. For example, Michel (a pseudonym assigned to maintain anonymity), a 28-year-old cisgender man, stated: "I am heterosexual. Uh... straight for now, but I'm not sure about the future." Similarly, Iana, a 24-year-old cisgender woman, said: "I am heterosexual. Potentially bicurious, but it hasn't happened yet." Additionally, two participants who identify as heterosexual reported having had same-sex experiences during childhood. Lastly, three participants identify as bisexual, though their first sexual experience occurred in the context of a male/female relationship. Consequently, since all participants had their first penetrative sexual experience in a heterosexual context, we considered sexual orientation as an irrelevant variable in this analysis.

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: participants had to have had their first sexual intercourse before 2017, be under the age of 30, have completed their schooling in France, and be native or fluent French speakers. The year 2017 marked the rise of the #MeToo movement on Twitter, which significantly influenced societal discussions surrounding sexual health and consent. These criteria were established to ensure a relevant cohort that reflected contemporary generational perspectives on sexual health education within a French educational and sociocultural context. By limiting the sample to individuals younger than 30, the study aimed to provide insights into the experiences and attitudes of younger adults, while the requirements for French schooling and language proficiency ensured consistent exposure to the same educational and cultural frameworks.

Ethics

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Picardie Jules Verne. The data were stored and processed in accordance with the standards established by the Data Protection Officer (DPO).

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity and facilitate the sharing of personal information. Furthermore, they were informed of their rights in accordance with research ethics, and their informed consent for participation was obtained. Each participant was given the opportunity to consult the transcript of the exchange prior to publication and to propose modifications or withdraw their participation at any time before the article's publication.

After each interview, the researcher/interviewer took the time to debrief with participants regarding the content discussed and their emotional state, especially when acts of sexual violence were mentioned. In her capacity as a clinical psychologist, the researcher/interviewer provided therapeutic orientation or informational resources to participants as needed.

Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed according to the IPA method guidelines[31]. This method requires a multi-stage analysis: firstly, an in-depth, individual reading of each interview, combined with annotations. Then the emerging themes are identified and clustered into broader categories, reflecting patterns within the participant's narrative. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis is conducted to explore commonalities and divergences across participants, leading to the development of overarching themes that encapsulate shared and unique aspects of the experiences described.

Results

Learning about sexuality

Essentially, the participants in this study identify 4 main sources of learning about sexuality and intimate relationships: peers, media, family, and school:

Peers

Participants' discourse indicates that peers are one of their earliest sources of learning about sexuality, a role that persists over time. During childhood, it starts with peers of the same age or a little older, often of the same sex. These initiations often occurred as games in which the participants enacted sexual intercourse with friends by rubbing themselves in bed or caressing each other's genitals. Sometimes it consisted of simply showing each other's bodies or watching pornography and masturbating together.

During puberty, the role of peers in participants' SE becomes crucial. Initially, this learning process manifests as a complex form of social influence. Several participants indicate that they primarily learn about sexuality on a theoretical level by listening to the accounts of their friends' experiences. While this information exchange provides one of the few "interactive" ways to obtain knowledge about sex—beyond merely watching pornography—it also has negative consequences for some participants. Specifically, it leads to feelings of self-depreciation rooted in social comparison:

> *"You know when you're still a virgin and most of your friends aren't, you tell yourself: 'shit, I'm the last one, I'm a loser*[1]" (Bastien, 27-year-old cisgender man).

Conversely, some participants describe these exchanges with peers as crucial for their development, particularly in helping them become aware of problematic behaviors that they experience or impose on their sexual partners.

> *"I explained that I didn't know if we were good together, and there he managed to dig for more specific information, without me ever pronouncing the word "rape". But he ended up saying: "what you experienced is not normal". It was from that point that I began to question the relationship"* (Iana, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

> *"My buddies saved me from this [coercing his girlfriend into having sex], literally. And especially two friends who introduced me to feminism and the subject of consent, sexuality and everything. And one day, at 2 a.m., leaving their house, I told myself: 'Dude, you were so stupid'."* (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

Some male participants also regretted not having had more opportunities to discuss sexuality with their female peers. It appears, in fact, that conversations between friends about sexuality took place mainly in gendered spaces, and therefore were strongly impacted by the gender stereotypes internalized by adolescents.

> *"At 14, when you talk about sex, you talk about sex between guys; you will never talk about sex with a girl. Unless it's your girlfriend, and you plan to do your first time with her. I also think that the guys are dragging each other into a 'bro attitude'..."* (Camille, 23-year-old cisgender man).

> *"What I really missed was talking to girls [about sex] actually."* (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

Medias

This category brings together a wide spectrum of sources. The referred media included those which are explicitly informative, such as Instagram pages devoted to sexuality, podcasts, but also mainstream movies. Michel (27-year-old cisgender man) evokes, for example, the love scene from *Top Gun* as the first reference of what a sexual relationship is. Jean (a 24-year-old cisgender man) states that he has constructed his representations of the relationship between men and women around films such as *The Virgin Suicides*. He subsequently began actively seeking out scenes in classic cinema that would stimulate his sexual imagination. However, the most cited medium as a source of learning about sexuality is pornography. Within our sample, 78% of participants, including 100% of men, identified pornography as a source of learning. According to the participants, pornographic material was primarily used for masturbation and, in some cases, served as a means of virtually exploring practices that fueled their fantasies. While pornography was reported to be widely used by the participants as a sexual learning tool, half of them stated that they were able to recognize its fictional and exaggerated nature from the outset, thereby minimizing the potential influence its consumption could have on their interpersonal behaviors within the context of their sexuality.

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> *“Even at the time, I think that I had some perspective. I knew that pornography was not the reality. I knew that ‘real sex scenes’ didn't necessarily happen that way. For example, I was aware of the fact that I was watching two women making love didn’t necessarily imply that I wanted to make love with a woman. You know what I mean? I differentiated fantasy and reality a bit.”* (Pauline, 23-year-old cisgender woman).

Family

Familial space was frequently reported, whether through formal discussions with parents, informal ones with siblings, or by surprising a family member during intercourse. Overall, the participants’ discourses were ambivalent when it comes to their perception of this source. For instance, several participants identified in their parents a strong embarrassment associated with the subject of sexuality. Benoît (non-binary, 26 years old), for example, considered that the religious convictions of his parents were an obstacle to his sexual education. However, the participants who grew up in families that they perceived as open to discussion on this matter said that they did not wish to discuss sexuality in depth with their parents.

> *"We haven't talked about it much though. I know I could have, they were downright, well, rather open on the subject, on that there was no problem. I think it's just me who didn't dare bring it up too much. And the few times they wanted to speak about sex, I managed to escape the conversation”* (Aurélien, 28-year-old cisgender man).

> *" It was a very open family, they were... It's not really them who pushed for taboo or no discussion about it. It's just that we didn't specifically talk about it and it kind of stayed like that”* (Flicka, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

Overall, what emerges from the participants' discourse is that the subject of sexuality addressed in the family environment mainly concerned the issue of health (contraception, gynecological follow-up, sexually transmitted infections [STIs]) and prevention regarding pornography. Emotional life and pleasure were essentially absent from parental discourse.

School

Participants in the present study reported having received between one and three SE sessions throughout their schooling. For the most part, these sessions consisted of biology courses focused on human reproduction, during which topics such as contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were addressed. Overall, participants’ recollections predominantly revolve around the context of these sessions, with minimal detail regarding the content discussed*:*

> *“I remember, it was embarrassing. We learned about the reproductive system and how to put on a condom. We never talked about anything else”* (Iana, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

> *" I do not remember. I know I had the feeling that the teacher was a bit off the mark with what she was saying. [...] I think there was a description of the genitals, female and male. Like all students of my age, I remember the episode of the teacher putting a condom on a penis... a*

fake penis. And I don't think I can tell you anything else" (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

"I don't remember at all what she talked to us about, but I do remember that we put a condom on a banana. [Laughs] If I got anything out of it, it totally stayed unconscious because I don't remember anything at all" (Ingrid, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

Having had an active sexual life for more than 10 years, most of the 14 participants, at the time of the interview, easily identified the gaps in the education offered to them when they were adolescents. The lack of information about sexual consent, and more generally sexual communication/intimate interactions, was almost systematically brought up in their discourses. Also, they often mentioned that sexuality was considered "a sort of taboo" at school, which made their sexual education more complicated while they were growing up. Several participants reported that they would have wanted, above all, to have access to a space in which they could have openly discussed sexuality with well-informed and open-minded adults.

"I think it's important to dismantle all the shame [surrounding sexuality], which I find many people experience when they're young. There is so much pressure associated with sexuality. [...] Additionally, it would have made a difference if we had learned to communicate more effectively from the beginning. We should have been given tools to communicate with our partners and feel comfortable doing so. It's essential to deconstruct taboos instead of dictating what we should or shouldn't do. Ultimately, sexual education should aim to create an environment in which individuals can thrive on their own" (Bastien, 27 years-old cisgender man).

"I think that I clearly lacked... communication skills. [When we are teenagers] We're all super shy and we don't dare to talk about all these things because we feel like what we are going through is different and that we're all different [...] but in fact it would be so much easier if everyone would just talk about it honestly" (Flicka, 26 years-old cisgender woman).

Finally, according to the participants' discourse, issues related to the relational and pleasurable dimension of sexuality were almost absent from the SE they received at school. More importantly, pornography and its possible downsides, which most of them consumed at that time, were not discussed at all.

Sexual consent in the context of first sexual experiences

When participants were asked the following question: "Did you know if your partner was consenting or not when you first had sex?" they mostly answered in the affirmative without hesitation. However, when asked how they knew this, we found that most experienced difficulties identifying precisely how they knew it.

"I don't know, well... One just can feel these sort of things..." (Ingrid, 26-year-old cisgender woman).

"Just, we liked each other, and then after there was this sexual tension that happened between the two of us, I think, and then that brought us to that" (Bastien, 27-year-old cisgender man).

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We identified three distinct pathways through which participants entered sexual activity, each associated with different narratives around consent.

The first pathway involves being in a relationship with a peer of the same age, where sexuality is gradually explored through a process of mutual discovery. This scenario is the most common among our participants (8 out of 14). In this context, participants often refer to an intuitive understanding of consent, relying on non-verbal cues and the dynamics of their relationship rather than explicit discussions.

> *"We had, I think, very instinctive signals of when you want to have sex."* (Jean, 24-year-old cisgender man).

> *"Today, I realize that it's not enough. But it was a form of consent not necessarily expressed orally by the two of us, you know? It's... we know we want to, we do it. But while we were doing it, I wasn't asking her if she agreed to try this position either..."* (Aurélien, 24-year-old cisgender man).

By encouraging them to deepen their reflection, they nevertheless managed to identify elements that they consider to be signs of consent, mostly explicit non-verbal cues such as reciprocating gestures, taking initiatives, putting a certain intensity on gestures, etc. Some of the male participants also emphasized paying close attention to signals of pain or discomfort from their partner. When an explicit verbal exchange is mentioned, it mainly concerns feeling ready to "take the plunge" before the first penetrative intercourse.

The second pathway occurs within a relationship with an older partner (2 participants), and the third takes place outside of a committed relationship (4 participants). In these latter scenarios, initiation into sexuality typically involves direct engagement in penetrative intercourse. However, the issues associated with sexual consent reported by our participants are quite distinct in these two contexts.

Participants who experimented with sexuality outside a committed relationship mostly acknowledged contextual elements when evoking consent negotiation. Benoît, for instance, provided us with a range of contextual elements he relied on to interpret his partner's willingness: she invited him home, she was slightly older and had a strong personality, she complemented the mood with some music, etc.

> "*I had the assurance that she was older and therefore... she would dare to say no to me*" (Benoît, 26 years old, non-binary).

Passivity also emerged as a common theme, with participants using their partner's actions, or lack thereof, to infer consent. For example, allowing the girl to be on top during penetration or simply letting the partner take the initiative and lead were viewed as signs of consent.

Among our 14 participants, 5 of them (4 women and one man) reported sexual victimization at the beginning of their sexual life. One in a public transportation setting when he was 12, one as she was sleeping after a house party, one from an acquaintance, and two from their boyfriends in the context of their first sexual experiences. In the last three situations, participants reported that non-consensual intercourse took place despite having expressed negative signals to their partners.

> *"I had said several times "you know, actually, I don't really want to". And then I was tricked into it because I had ended up at his place, because I had been drinking, because we were at a party, because his buddy had said "come on, let's go over there".* (Clotilde, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

The interviews with the two participants who had their first sexual experience in a serious relationship with older partners are particularly insightful as to the limits of interpreting consent on the basis of behavioral and communicative cues alone. Iana and Flore both recall that their first boyfriends, without resorting to physical violence, regularly led them into having sexual intercourse that they did not desire, usually using various forms of sexual coercion, including emotional blackmail. In the context of these relationships, these two women describe having sometimes been very proactive and involved during unwanted relations, and even having initiated them so that they would end faster.

> *"During [intercourse] I was pretending more, precisely so that it would happen faster. And for it to end faster.. [...] Make more noise, show that I have a lot of pleasure, even if it's maybe less the case than some other times. Yeah, for him to finish and come faster. [...]. Sometimes, I knew he was going to pressure me until we had intercourse. Then, I would be super affectionate with him, super proactive, kiss him, touch him, making sure the sex was quick. Sometimes, as soon as I arrived, I would make sure that it happened quickly so that afterwards we could move on to something else.* (Flore, 24-year-old cisgender woman).

In addition, these young women reported using explicit verbal signals to refuse sex, signals that were often followed by negative consequences, such as verbal insults or criticism. In addition to suffering negative consequences for expressing these refusals, these participants were sometimes subjected to forced sexual acts, including unannounced penetration.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of how young French people learn about sexuality and how they put this knowledge into practice when they first have sex, particularly with regard to sexual consent practices.

With regard to the process of learning about sexuality, in line with previous research[1][12], participants reported having had far fewer sessions of SE during their schooling compared with the 21 sessions recommended by French law. On average, participants reported receiving only two sessions between the ages of 3 and 18 years old. In addition, the topics covered were generally limited to biology and STIs. Most participants indicated, in line with previous research[19][16][15], that they actively sought information on sexuality and intimate relationships primarily from their peers and through various cultural sources, including movies, podcasts, books, and pornography. This reliance on sexual information sourced from peers, mass media, and pornography is concerning, as research indicates that such sources can lead to biases in adolescents′ perceptions and behavioral approaches to sexuality[19][10][20][5][29], and may even lead them towards risky practices[26]. Furthermore, although parents are frequently identified as a source of SE, they are often perceived as uncomfortable discussing the subject, a phenomenon that Gagnon noted as early as 1965. Conversely, in families where sexuality is not considered a taboo topic, it is often the children

who express reluctance to engage in in-depth discussions with their parents, particularly regarding issues related to pleasure, intimacy, and violence.

The interviews conducted as part of this research underline the fact that consent practices are almost an intuitive process during the first sexual contacts. As reported in the literature[32][18][33], most of our participants began their sexual lives within a committed relationship through gradual stages. The perception of their partners' consent was perceived as axiomatic in this context. We note that few conscious efforts are reported in these cases to seek signals of consent from the partner. On the other hand, individuals who experimented with their first sexual intercourse with casual partners were able to produce more detailed narratives. They related both on nonverbal and contextual cues to interpret their partners' willingness to engage in a sexual activity.

Among our participants, 5 of them reported non-consensual sexual experiences. For two of them, it happened repeatedly within their relationship. In these specific situations, participants expressed that they lacked the necessary references and knowledge to clearly identify the problematic aspects of their partner's behavior. As a result, they endured these behaviors, developing the belief that they were part of normality. In addition, they report having developed coping strategies focused on submission, and even anticipation of their partners' desires.

Given these testimonies, how does one know if the person he/she/they are having sex with is indeed experiencing a state of internal desire? It would seem that the answer to this question lies in broader social skills than just the ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal cues. In fact, according to what our participants said, it appears that the most effective way of ensuring that the partners, whether they know each other well or not, engage in a consensual sexual relationship would be to establish a relationship in which each party feels free to express its refusal or discomfort at any time. This could explain why individuals who experienced their first intercourse in the typical context of progressive intimate interplay exploration as a couple would have more difficulty than others in specifically identifying the elements validating the consent of their partners.

Moreover, these interviews provide an in-depth understanding of the complexity of the link between internal consent and external consent[34][27]. In other words, they illustrate how a person who does not wish to have a sexual relation can nevertheless express many behavioral signs expressing consent. Communication around consent essentially seems to take place in an unconscious and intuitive way. This is particularly true for the participants who experienced their first relationship within a dating relationship and is in accordance with previous studies by Beres[30] and Willis et al.[5]. However, the content of the interviews indicates that, while most participants expressed a desire to establish more explicit and verbal consent interactions with their partners—believing such interactions to be more effective—they predominantly described relying on nonverbal, implicit, and contextual cues when discussing how they enact or recognize sexual consent in their sexual experiences. This paradox is frequently addressed in the literature concerning communication around sexual consent[28][27][5]. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that many individuals may find it challenging to establish explicit modes of communication, partly because their sexual imagination is predominantly shaped by cultural content that often omits direct verbal expression of consent[2][29]. Another potential explanation is linked to the notion that sexual behavior is

often driven by automatic cognitive processes[23]. Consequently, employing explicit verbal cues during intercourse might disrupt these processes by necessitating cortical engagement.

Furthermore, in accordance with[30] critiques of miscommunication theory, our data suggest that explicit sexual consent or refusal is not actually related to sexual violence. Our participants all demonstrated that they relied on nonverbal and implicit clues to interpret consent; furthermore, using explicit verbal cues did not prevent Iana and Flore's partners from using coercion. As a matter of fact, Camille, who acknowledged in his interview that he had used coercive behavior with his girlfriend, became aware of the violent dimension of his behavior through discussions with his friends, rather than by paying attention to his partner.

We emphasize that reducing sexual violence will largely depend on delivering SE that prioritizes the dismantling of erroneous beliefs regarding sexual violence. Adherence to rape myths has been associated with an increased likelihood of committing sexual violence[35], indicating that addressing these misconceptions is crucial. As highlighted by participants' discourse and supported by the scientific literature on consent communication, most individuals are quite adept at interpreting implicit and non-verbal cues[27]. Therefore, the most effective strategy for combating sexual violence is not merely to encourage the use of more explicit signals of consent but to reshape perceptions of sexual violence itself[36][37]. This entails assisting individuals in recognizing the behavioral and contextual factors that contribute to permissiveness toward sexual violence, thereby fostering a culture of respect and accountability. Here, we hypothesize that offering a proper in-depth SE to children and adolescents would provide them with better resources for understanding interpersonal dynamics in the context of intimate relationships and for acting in a more assertive way in the face of adversity[34]. However, as victims should not be held responsible for being assaulted, these programs should essentially focus on providing youth with efficient tools to build healthy interpersonal relationships and raise awareness about coercive behaviors.

Conclusion

This research has once again highlighted the role of peers and the media in young adults' acquisition of knowledge about sexuality. At the same time, it underlines the need to persevere with the educational programs offered by schools. As we know, acquiring knowledge about human sexuality is a prolonged and continuous process, which begins in the very first months of life[18]. Individuals typically rely on a variety of sources for information prior to entering their first intercourses, with a preference for those outside the family. However, these sources can sometimes perpetuate biased or problematic beliefs and attitudes[26][2]. The impact of formal SE on this learning process is generally minimal, primarily focusing on biological and medical aspects. Consequently, much of the practical learning about sexuality occurs gradually through experiences with partners, which can expose individuals to potential risks due to insufficient knowledge. This highlights a pressing need for improved SE programs in French secondary schools. Such improvements are necessary both in terms of the number of teaching hours and the breadth of topics covered. Addressing this need would better equip French adolescents to navigate the various stages of their complex sexual learning process.

With regard to consent practices at first intercourse, our findings are in line with critical approaches to miscommunication theory[30]. The challenge of negotiating consent is not for individuals to master communication. As our results underline, these skills seem to be intuitively mastered from the very first intercourse. In the context of preventing sexual violence, educational efforts should be put into mastering complex psychosocial skills such as managing emotions, impulse control, and assertiveness. These skills are essential for establishing healthy intimate relationships, ultimately contributing to a more respectful and informed approach to sexuality.

The data extracted from these studies and from the literature should inspire public policy-makers to develop programs with sufficient content in terms of quantity, but above all with relevance in terms of the objectives targeted.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, comprising only 14 participants. While this allows for a global vision of different individual experiences, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of French adolescents. Additionally, the participants were primarily recruited through social networks and dating applications, which may have introduced a selection bias. Those who are active on such platforms may differ in significant ways from adolescents who do not engage with these technologies.

Furthermore, the participants' accounts are retrospective, which can introduce recall bias as individuals may not accurately remember their early sexual experiences or the sources of their sexual knowledge. The interviews were conducted in French and subsequently translated, which may have affected the nuances of their expressions and the intended meanings.

Finally, the study's focus on experiences prior to the #MeToo movement means that it may not fully capture the current landscape of SE and consent discussions among adolescents today. As societal attitudes towards consent evolve, further research is necessary to understand how these changes impact young people's learning and behaviors regarding sexuality.

Notes

Running Head: Learning sexuality and consent

Abbreviations

- **SE:** Sexual Education
- **STI**: Sexually Transmitted Infections.

Statements and Declarations

Ethics

This study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Picardie Jules Verne. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individuals for the publication of any potentially identifiable

data included in this article, ensuring participant anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Availability

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because they contain sensitive qualitative interview data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author, Eléonor Gilles-Noguès (eleonor.gilles.nogues@u-picardie.fr), and will be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality.

Author Contributions

Initial conception of the study: EGN. Conception of the survey and writing of the questions: EGN. Recruitment procedure: EGN. Data analysis: EGN. First draft: EGN, GVC, OM. Final draft: All authors.

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Footnotes

[1] All interviews were conducted in French and translated with the help of a native English speaker.

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Declarations

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