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International Journal of Adolescence and Youth

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rady20

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To cite this article: Nompumelelo Gloria Mfeka-Nkabinde, Relebohile Moletsane & Anna Voce (2024) *'There is a No that means Yes!'* – Coercive and aggressive sexual behaviours in adolescents' heterosexual relationships in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 29:1, 2297572, DOI: 10.1080/02673843.2023.2297572

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2023.2297572

Published online: 30 Dec 2023.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENCE AND YOUTH
2024, VOL. 29, NO. 1, 2297572
https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2023.2297572

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'There is a No that means Yes!' – Coercive and aggressive sexual behaviours in adolescents' heterosexual relationships in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined sexual negotiation in heterosexual romantic relationships of rural adolescents in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Participatory visual research methodology alongside focus group discussions were employed with 18 and 19-year-old adolescent boys ($n = 10$) and girls ($n = 12$) to understand how sex is negotiated in heterosexual relationships. Findings suggest adolescent boys and girls had little understanding of mutual sexual consent, and lacked the skills for exercising it. Adolescent boys' coercive and aggressive sexual behaviours in romantic relationships were embedded in hegemonic masculinity characterized by male dominance, hypersexuality and multiple partners; and included boys pleading for sex, buying gifts, threatening to dissolve the relationship if sex is not initiated, screening pornographic films and rape. Sexual violence prevention strategies commencing during early adolescence are needed and should focus on developing adolescents' understanding of mutual sexual consent, incorporate skills for autonomous sexual negotiation, and emphasize gender transformative and equitable norms.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 May 2023
Accepted 15 December 2023

KEYWORDS
Sexual consent; sexual coercion; rape; adolescents; heterosexual relationships

Introduction

The perpetration of intimate partner sexual violence against adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) is a great concern in South Africa (SA) (Ajayi et al., 2021; Decker et al., 2014; Gibbs et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2010; Shai & Sikweyiya, 2015). Consequences on AGYW's physical, mental and reproductive health include unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, substance use and abuse, and mental health issues (Decker et al., 2014; Gordon, 2016). Due to under-reporting, the accurate magnitude of intimate partner sexual violence among AGYW remains a challenge, however a high prevalence has been consistently shown among AGYW from rural areas, poor households and those with lower education (Mthembu et al., 2021; Wado et al., 2021). Even with a rights-based national constitution, South Africa is a highly patriarchal society with entrenched gender norms that construct a male-dominated sexuality, where adolescent boys and young men (ABYM) are more likely to determine the conditions under which sex takes place (Bhana, 2014; Harrison et al., 2005; O'Sullivan et al., 2006; Varga, 1997). AGYW in heterosexual romantic relationships may be

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

expected to be sexually available to their partners, while exhibiting coyness and resistance to sexual advances (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Varga, 2003). Traditional gender scripts that dictate men should be sexual initiators while women set boundaries and constrain their sexuality (Byers, 1996; Gagnon, 1990; Wiederman, 2005) tend to exacerbate conditions for sexual violence. In rural northern KwaZulu-Natal, the context for this study, the masculinity of Zulu young men is often linked to the notion of *Isoka*, which draws from the cultural practice of polygamy and associates manhood with multiple concurrent female partners *(ubusoka)* (Hunter, 2003; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2022). The expectation for AGYW is to maintain culturally-scripted sexual behaviour of safeguarding virginity (Behrens, 2014; Scorgie, 2006; Vincent, 2006). As a result, adolescents hide their heterosexual relationships from parents and adults (Harrison 2008). It is within these hidden relationships that male coercive and aggressive sexual behaviours often take place.

Intricacies of sexual consent

Hickman and Muehlenhard, (1999) define sexual consent as the '"freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity"'. Humphreys (2007) highlights two critical aspects of consent: 1) the inward voluntary willingness, and 2) the outward communication to another person. The latter involves the outward verbal and/or non-verbal interaction and dynamic between individuals in deciding when and how sexual intercourse will take place (Varga, 1997). Aligned with respect for individual autonomy, this understanding of sexual consent centres the ability to choose when, how and with whom to engage in sexual activity (Singleton et al., 2021). However, sexual consent can be practically and conceptually complex. For instance, several behaviours may signal sexual consent, yet individuals involved may not have the same understanding of the verbal and non-verbal cues being communicated (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). In a study in KwaZulu-Natal, for example, adolescent boys believe girls are sexually aroused when dominated by a man. This was accompanied by the boys' assertion that girls say 'no' to sex when they mean 'yes' (Mochaoa Rogers et al., 2019). The miscommunication model, marked by the misinterpretation of verbal and non-verbal sexual cues (Tannen, 1991), can be appropriated by young men to absolve themselves of acquaintance rape (O'Byrne et al., 2008). Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) also draw our attention to the distinction between 'wanting' sex and 'consenting' to sex. For them, consent is not a question of *wantedness* but of *willingness* (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007) as girls may consent to unwanted sex out of fear of losing partners (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Pugh & Becker, 2018). Hence, in efforts to address sexual violence in American colleges, the affirmative consent policy was first legislated in 2014 to ensure that sexual consent is 'explicit, voluntary, affirmative, conscious, there is agreement (from all individuals involved) to engage in sexual activity, that it can be revoked at any time, that a previous relationship does not constitute consent, and that coercion or threat of force cannot be used to establish consent' (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Ortiz, 2019). The success of this policy is premised on clear and continuous verbal sexual communication, where sexual initiators will respect sexual refusals (Pugh & Becker, 2018). However, what the affirmative consent policy has not accounted for is the impact of gender and power, where men may continue to be sexual aggressors while women acquiesce to sexual dictates of male partners (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Pugh & Becker, 2018).

In this paper, we understand all forms of non-consensual sexual encounters to constitute sexual violence (Singleton et al., 2021). From this perspective, sexual consent is the key distinguisher between respectful and pleasurable sexual relationships and sexual violence (Beres, 2007; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Yet in the current South African legal framework and education system, little

emphasis is placed on how mutual sexual consent should be constructed, communicated and enacted. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how adolescents negotiate sex in heterosexual relationships.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

From a feminist standpoint, sexual consent emanating from coercive tactics or aggression, including incapacity or the inability to refuse sex due to threats or intimidation, is not freely given (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Hence our analysis in this article draws on Connell's social theory of gender and power, and DeGue and DiLillo's, (2005) conceptual framework that locates coercive sexual behaviours within the broader discourse of male sexual violation of a non-consenting female.

We employ Connell's social theory of gender and power to analyse gender power dynamics in heterosexual adolescent relationships (Connell, 1987). Connell posits gender identities are socially constructed and held together by society's ideals and norms considered appropriate for a specific sex. Connell conceives gender relations are arranged hierarchically to create a gender order through which power relations between masculinities and femininities are formed (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity is the cultural model of idealized manhood, and is constructed in relation to femininities and other masculinities, which are subordinated. No femininities are dominant over the other, yet all femininities are subordinate to masculinities (Connell, 1987). This results in the creation of a gender hierarchy and an acceptance of gender power differentials, which operate in heterosexual relationships and at a societal level.

DeGue and DiLillo (2005) define male sexual coercion as non-physical tactics, such as verbal pressure, manipulation, deceit, and arguments employed to gain sexual contact with a non-consenting female. They contrast this with sexual aggression or rape, where the threat or use of

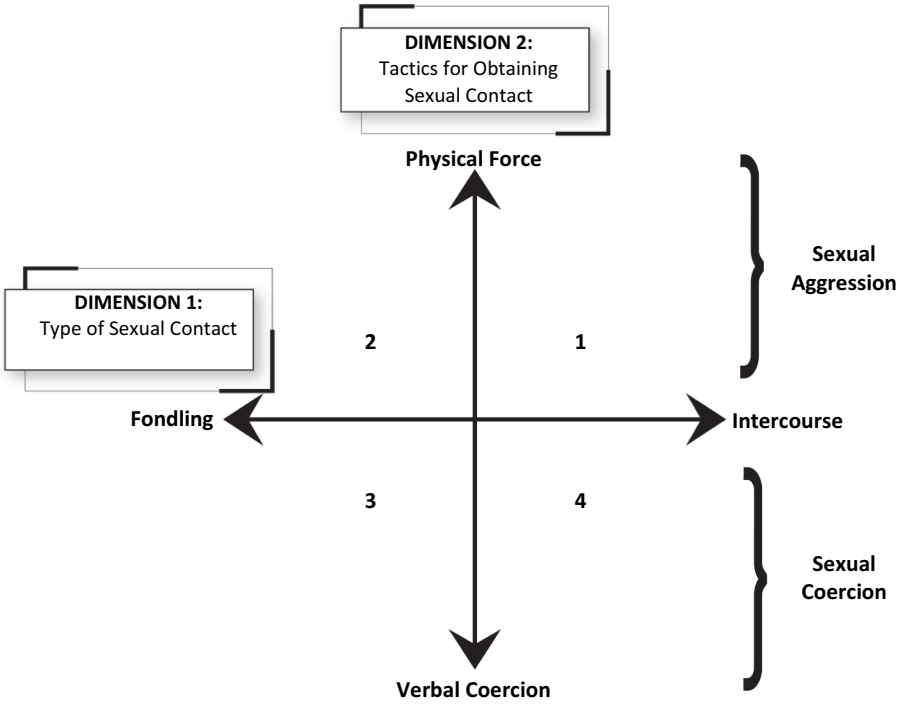

Figure 1. A conceptual framework of sexual misconduct (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005).

physical force is employed to gain sexual contact (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005). Other tactics may include targeting an intoxicated person who, due to their reduced insight and defiance, is unable to consent. Contrasting male coercive behaviours and rape serves to illustrate that non-physical coercive tactics are widespread, tend to be accepted as a societal norm, and are less likely to be criminalized (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005; Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood et al., 1998). As Figure 1 above illustrates from a sexual misconduct perspective, in the first dimension, different ***types of sexual contact*** may occur with a non-consenting female, ranging from fondling to invasive acts such as sexual intercourse. In the second dimension, sexual coercion and aggression occur on a progressive continuum, with coercion advancing to more aggressive acts of sexual violence. On this continuum, perpetrators use a variety of ***tactics to obtain sexual contact*** with a non-consenting female, ranging from verbal behaviours, such as bribery, lies, guilt and threats of ending of the relationship; to more aggressive actions such as forced undressing or oral penetration, and may involve brute physical force.

Methodology

Located within the critical research paradigm, this study seeks to understand how adolescents negotiate sexual intercourse within romantic relationships in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal. To generate data grounded in the perspectives of adolescents, the study employed participatory visual methodology (PVM), which included visual and arts-based methods such as drawings and cellphilm-making (Prosser, 2007). Drawings facilitate the expression of one's ideas, experiences, and communicate conscious and unconscious issues (Mitchell et al., 2011). Cellphilms, pioneered by (Dockney & Tomaselli, 2009), involve participants using cellphones or tablets to create short films. PVM proved invaluable when engaging adolescents and in examining a sensitive topic that is often taboo to talk about, especially with adults, and expressing their perspectives freely (Lomax, 2012).

Study setting

Participants for the study were recruited from a high school in Jozini municipality, a rural sub-district of uMkhanyakude district in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. KwaZulu-Natal is the epicentre of HIV & AIDS epidemic in South Africa, and unplanned adolescent pregnancies remain high in this province. UMkhanyakude district is one of the most socio-economically deprived districts in South Africa (Statistics South Africa Community Survey, 2016). Statistics South Africa Community Survey (2016) depicts the district's population as youthful, with 50.7% (349 279) of the population younger than 18 years. In Jozini municipality, 89% of the population live on land under the leadership of traditional authorities *(amakhosi)*, while more than half of the households (54%) are headed by women (STATSSA 2016).

Participant selection

Participants aged 18 and 19 years were purposively sampled from a local high school in Jozini municipality. Twelve adolescent girls and ten adolescent boys were recruited from the Grade 12 Life Orientation class following an introduction to the study. Eligibility criteria for participation included: adolescent boys and girls who are 18–19 years old, interested in issues of adolescent sexuality and fertility, keen to use visual methods and to participate in focus group discussions to share their perspectives, and willingness to participate in data generation sessions during school holidays.

Data generation

The[1] study used a workshop approach to generate data with PVM. Six sessions took place over two weeks in classrooms at the local high school. Participants were separated into mixed-sex groups to generate data on sexual negotiation in heterosexual relationships. Participants were introduced to the idea of drawings and cellphilm-making using materials provided by the research team. The visual artefacts were later used as entry points into focus group discussions (FGDs). The PVM sessions and six FGDs were conducted in isiZulu, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

In session one, the drawings workshop, participants were separated into two mixed-sex groups, each consisting of 11 participants who worked on their own in a group setting. This involved each participant creating a drawing responding to the prompt: *Make a drawing that helps us understand how adolescents negotiate sex in romantic relationships*. Participants were provided with A3 paper and colour pencils to create their drawing in 15 minutes. This was followed by an exhibition during which explanations and analysis of the drawings took place. In session two, two FGDs were conducted in which drawings were used as prompts. In session three, the cellphilm workshop, participants worked in three mixed-sex groups to create a short film responding to the prompt: *Create a 2–3-minute film (cellphilm) that helps us understand how adolescents negotiate sex in romantic relationships*. Participants worked in groups to create a story board, role play and video-record with an entry level tablet a particular issue they sought to highlight based on the prompt given (Mitchell et al., 2017; Treffry-Goatley et al., 2017). Each group screened their cellphilm to the whole group of research participants and the research team, and reflected on their particular film.

In session four, participants were requested to shoot 'speaking-back' cellphilms to counter the injustices depicted in the first set of cellphilms they produced (MacEntee et al., 2016; Mitchell & Moletsane, 2018). The prompt was: *Create a 2–3-minute film (cellphilm) that helps us understand what sexual negotiation should look like*. Participants struggled to produce a storyboard and to shoot the 'speaking-back' cellphilms to generate any confrontation to the challenges identified in the first set. In session five and six, two FGDs were conducted respectively, during which the tenets of mutual sexual consent were deliberated. FGDs focused on some key principles of mutual sexual consent and were based on areas of concern flagged in previous PVM sessions and FGDs, namely sexual consent must be explicit, stopping sexual contact at any stage of the sexual act, consideration of partner's feelings and body language, and alcohol and drugs affect sexual consent.

Data analysis

Analysing the arts and digital artefacts arising from drawings and cellphilms occurred in three phases and commenced during data generation. Following the convention of participatory research, drawings and cellphilms were analysed first by the participants who created them. The creators presented and explained their own drawings or cellphilms to the group. This involved writing a caption for the drawing and verbally explaining their own drawing or cellphilm to the group. Secondly, the audience (other participants) commented and enquired about the ideas emerging from drawings or cellphilms, and the creators' explanations of them. In addition, we used the drawings as prompts for FGDs to gain deeper insights of ideas emerging, allowing for further data generation and analyses. In the third phase, the researcher (first author) and the research supervisors (co-authors) analysed the drawings, cellphilms, and the possible ideas that were being communicated. The short films were transcribed in the form of a play, and these were read and themes emanating from the video-making process were identified. Through this iterative process, understandings emerging from the analysis were confirmed with the participants to assess whether true meanings of their ideas have been captured. A three-step process was employed to manually analyse data

from the focus group discussions. Firstly, transcripts from the focus group discussion were read in IsiZulu, and major themes and sub-themes were identified through the development of a coding system by the researcher (first author). Secondly, a comparison between the different themes was done by the authors and further grouped into coherent categories. Lastly, the analytic process involved participants in validating data through member checking.

Findings

The findings capture the perspectives and experiences of 12 adolescent girls and 10 boys regarding sexual negotiation in heterosexual relationships. Three major themes were identified from the drawings, cellphilm and FGD data and have been reported below as: 1) the pressure to have sex; 2) coercive sexual tactics; and 3) poor understanding of mutual sexual consent.

The pressure to have sex

Adolescent boys in this study held a conceptualization of romantic relationships that must include penetrative vaginal sex. Boys experienced tremendous internal and external pressure to initiate sexual relations with girlfriends. For boys, sex demonstrates heterosexuality, affirms manhood, and gains them peer approval. A boy who does not initiate sex with his girlfriend can endure homophobic and derogatory name-calling, such as, '*uyisitabane!*' (You are a gay!) or '*uyinyoni!*' (You are an idiot!). Thubalethu, an adolescent father elaborated:

> The reason why boys have sex with their girlfriends is to prove a point to their friends.

Philani, a 19-year-old male concurred and added:

> We are over-joyed after sex, we feel like men! If you don't do it, other boys say you are gay or an idiot.

Adolescent girls described their experiences of pressure from friends and partners to initiate sex in order to preserve romantic relationships and friendships. According to Busani, an 18-year-old adolescent male, a girl who refuses to give her partner sex may be blamed for driving him into the arms of another girl.

> Busani: When she refuses sex, she influences me to look for another girl who will agree.

Similarly, sexually-experienced girls jibe at their inexperienced peers for not having sex. Amahle, a 19-year-old adolescent mother, explained:

> Amahle: If your friend says, 'Hey! If you don't dish up for him (give him sex) someone else will? Or your friends tease you, 'Oh you are a virgin, so you are not getting serviced (having sex)!'

Some boys understood being in a romantic relationship as consenting to sex. Mandla, an 18-year-old male, confirmed this by stating, '*Sex is part of the relationship. If you are not ready for sex, how are you ready for a relationship?*' Boys were eager to initiate sexual intercourse soon after the romantic relationship had begun. Within two weeks to a month of commencing the relationship, some boys profess 'love' to a girl in order to get sex. '*First week I show you I love you. Second week you must also show that you love me,' stated* Busani.

In preparation for their cellphilm, Philani, Thubalethu, Mandla, Sbongile, Ulwazi, Ntandokazi and Amahle designed a storyboard in Figure 2, illustrating how love can be used as a tool to get sex. Below, a portion of the cellphilm is written as recorded by participants.

Description of the cellphilm – Make her feel loved!

Scene 1	Narrator: *We find Philani and Thubalethu betting that Philani sleeps with his girlfriend.* Thubalethu: *When will you stop standing under trees with your girl and take her to your room?* Philani: *Challenge accepted. I will have sex with her. All I have to do is make her feel loved.*
Scene 2	Narrator: *Philani bought chocolate to bribe his girlfriend, Sbongile.* Philani: *Let's go to my room, its cold outside and your mother is going to see us standing under the tree. I'm begging you, I love you*. (Gives her chocolate) Sbongile: *We are just fine here, and you know I don't go to your room.*
Scene 3	Narrator: *Philani and Sbongile meet on a different day. Philani asks her again to go to his room as he has something to show her. They walk to Philani's room.* Philani: *What do you say my love?* Sbongile: *You know I'm a virgin, there is no need for us to have sex.* Philani: *Virginity testing can wait, you will see that later.* Sbongile: *What about disappointing my parents? No, I can't!* Philani: *Oh, my love please* (begging). Sbongile: *No, I can't shame. I'm going home now!* Philani: (Disappointed) *Please don't go!*
Scene 4	Narrator: *Sbongile is by herself deliberating whether she should have sex with Philani.* Sbongile: *This is the hardest decision to make. I can't have sex with him, what am I going to say to my mother? She has just confirmed she will be doing my coming-of-age ceremony (umemulo) in December. How can I disappoint her now? But maybe Philani needs just one chance and then things will be fine between us. Because I love him.*
Scene 5	Narrator: *We find Philani's girlfriend saying yes to having sex because she loves him otherwise he will find other girls and leave her if she does not.*

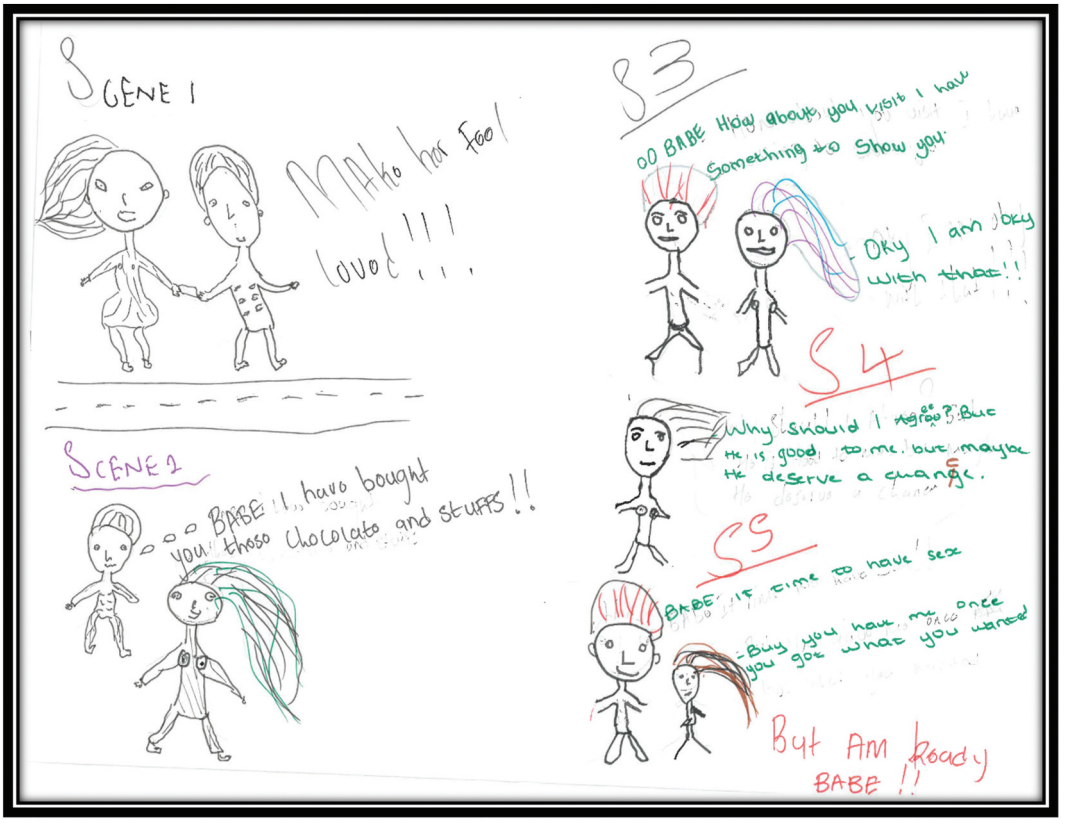

Figure 2. Storyboard – *Make her feel loved!*.

As depicted in the cellphilm description, girls reflected deeply on romantic notions of love and their readiness for sex, perceived as relinquishing their virginity, dignity, and possibly their future should they become pregnant. Some cited the fear of pregnancy, HIV infection and the need to complete schooling as reasons for delaying sex. Girls also linked the culturally-valued *umemulo* (a traditional coming-of-age ceremony conducted for Zulu young women) to sexual debut. This highlights the importance of cultural practices and parental influences on girls' sexuality. Participants acknowledged it is possible for a boy to wait for sex until the girl he loves has *umemulo* (coming-of-age ceremony for girls). However, while the boy waits for a particular girl he claims to love (his Star), he has sexual relations with other girls. Furthermore, in a setting where sex with a virgin is highly valued, virgin girls are desirable to boys and hence waiting for her could be worth it at the end. However certain boys were hesitant about waiting as a girl could lie about her virginity status or cheat while he waits for her. As Philani explains:

> If you love a girl, you will wait for her until umemulo. But the rest you are covering score for your Star (main girlfriend) who is not giving you any sex. But some girls can lie and claim virginity or cheat on you while you wait for her.

Boys resisted monogamy and enacted the hegemonic masculinity of *isoka*, with multiple concurrent sexual partners. Mthoko, an 18-year-old adolescent father, deferred to culture and socialization to justify *ubusoka* as a practice historically performed by his forefathers, and one that will continue for future generations of Zulu young men. Mthoko explains:

> We are Zulu, we like proposing love to girls and we have many girlfriends *(ubusoka)*! Our forefathers had many girlfriends before us, I will have many girls as well, and so will boys who come after me.

Coercive sexual tactics

Adolescent girls in this study articulated boys' coercive tactics to include purchasing gifts, persistently pleading for sex, threatening to end the relationship if sex is not initiated and intimidation. When boys provided gifts, they assumed girls would give them sex. Busani proclaimed, '*You ate my pizzas, you ate my lunch bars but you are refusing to give me sex? No ways!*' Other boys were domineering, monitoring the girl's movements and expecting her to be available when he summoned. Out of fear of losing partners, girls often oblige to please the boy, including having sex.

In this rural region, it is common for in-school adolescent boys and girls to leave their families and live in rented lodgings *(emqashweni)* closer to available high schools. The displacement of adolescents from their families brings certain vulnerabilities to girls. A boy living *emqashweni* can invite a girl into his room with the aim of having sexual intercourse, even if there was no prior communication or expression of willingness from the girl. For the boy, an invitation into his room is the introductory step to initiating sexual relations. Once the girl is in the boy's room, he pleads for sex until the girl feels unreasonable for withholding it, and is accused of taking him for granted or not loving him. These rooms can also be rented to friends by the hour or during weekends so they too can initiate sexual relations with their partners. This dialogue from a FGD elaborates on tactics boys employ to manipulate girls to having sex in rented lodgings:

> Busani: Sex is the reason for inviting her to your room, but indirectly so you can get her.
>
> Female participants talking to each other: *When you go to his room he asks you for sex./And can these boys beg! Do you know beggars?* (Girls laugh)*/You start feeling sorry for him, as if you are taking him for granted!*
>
> Ntandokazi (18, female): *Boys tell us, 'If you don't have sex with me it means 1. You don't love me, 2. We are in a romantic relationship just for a kiss? 3. It is better for us to quit.' At that moment you are so in love with him* (emotional excitement) *it is going to be hard to end the relationship and you eventually give in.*

Figure 3. Drawing- 'You don't want to have sex with me because you don't love me!'.

In her drawing, Figure 3, Yibanathi illustrates a common manipulative tactic employed by boys to persuade girls to have sex. She titled her drawing, 'You don't want to have sex with me because you don't love me!'

In the description of her drawing, Figure 3, Yibanathi states:

> These two are in a relationship, and the boy lies to the girl and asks her to come to his room to just chill. The girl arrives and sits. Then the boy starts begging her for sex. You can even see the girl's facial expression, she is thinking, 'I can't do it!' She is not okay with this request, she is even standing up and the situation is tense. The boy says to her, 'You don't want to have sex with me because you don't love me!' The girl starts to feel guilty that she does not love him and is making him a fool. They start kissing and the boy tells her he will be gentle, but the girl has not said yes to sex. The boy keeps bringing himself closer to the girl, taking off her clothes, but inside she does not want to have sex. But she is feeling horny, you can see her breasts(Everyone laughed). Even the boy, you can see he has an erection (Everyone laughed loudly). Now they are both having these feelings, but for the girl it's like there's a wall (uncertainty).

Chaos breaks out as male participants argue: '*But she wants sex!*'/'*How can you say she does not want it?*' To which Yibanathi responds,' Yes *she has sexual feelings because if you put your hands on certain parts of her body you are exciting certain feelings, but she is not ready.*'

In the description of her drawing, Yibanathi refers to the lack of explicitly expressed voluntary consent by the girl to engage in sexual activity. Her drawing illustrates non-verbal cues seen in the girl's body language and tense dynamic between partners- conveying an unwillingness to sexual contact in spite of sexual desire. Yibanathi further highlights the idea of readiness for sex, which was important to girls and contested by boys. While the physical evidence of the girl's sexual arousal is undeniable in her drawing, and as Yibanathi states, she is *'feeling horny'*, boys could not distinguish this from a genuine readiness for sex, nor did they recognize that explicit consent should still be granted. For them, sexual desire implies sexual consent.

As some boys understood a girl accepting an invitation to his room as implied sexual consent, if she refuses to have sex with him, a boy could lock her inside his room, wet her clothes and threaten to let her walk home at night unaccompanied; thus, ensuring she spends the night in his room, during which sex will take place. When boys were challenged for assuming sexual consent and coercive sexual behaviours, they simply blamed girls for visiting their rooms. During a heated FGD, the following exchange ensued:

> Busani: You cannot leave your house, carry your big head coming to my room and get here to refuse sex? (Standing up and with emphasis in his voice)
>
> Yibanathi: If she visits your room it does not mean she wants to have sex with you. She wants to be with you, talk, cuddle, and kiss. Intimacy doesn't mean sex.
>
> All male participants shouting: Then why do you come to my room?
>
> Busani: If she refuses I would dump her clothes into water. (Boys laughed)
>
> Uluthando: Some boys have the audacity to lock you inside their rooms and put the key in their pockets! And it is wrong of you to fetch us at night and refuse to take us back home.

Other coercive schemes included boys playing on girls' romantic notions of spending quality time by watching romantic movies, which included pornographic films. They claimed to watch pornography as an educational tool and to get an idea of what they need to do during sex. In addition, boys reported watching pornographic movies with girlfriends in the hope of sexually arousing them. As Khoni confirmed:

> Khoni: That is so stimulating! They know they are going to get sex, sure case. You can't watch 50 Shades and think it's going to be okay. It's going to be lit!

Poor understanding of mutual sexual consent

Reflective of the traditional sexual script, both boys and girls did not think girls should initiate sexual communication or the sexual act itself. Societal norms dictate males should initiate sex. A girl who initiates sex compromises her dignity, and boys commonly refer to her as *isifebe* (slut). As Thubalethu explains,

> It's not easy for a girl to approach a boy saying, 'Let's have sex'. Girls are raised to believe that a man must see that it's time for us to have sex.

Participants were divided on the necessity for explicit, verbal sexual consent. Girls preferred boys to be transparent about initiating romantic relationships in order to have sex, while boys disagreed, stating this would limit their prospects with girls. During a FGD, girls explained the lack of explicitness about sex is harmful to them as they often emotionally over-invest in romantic love, which could be manipulated to get sex. Girls were also more concerned than boys about the consequences of coercive sex, such as pregnancy, as many of these sexual encounters were condomless.

> Uluthando: He must explain that he wants to have sex with me! I need to know the end-point is sex. (Other girls echoed her sentiments.)
>
> Bandile: He can't be upfront, you will say no to his love proposal!
>
> Uluthando: I need to get into a relationship knowing what to expect than for things to change unexpectedly and there is all this pressure to have sex.

Amahle: This is wrong guys, because the girl is serious about the relationship and you are playing her. Now she is going to do something she is unprepared for and end up pregnant.

For boys, a girl who has sexual negotiation and decision-making power can dictate when sex happens in the relationship. The exchange below illustrates,

Busani: So basically, she is in control in the relationship?

Mthoko: Why must she tell me what to do??

During the drawings workshop, 18-year-old Busani presented his drawing, titled - ***'There is a No that means Yes!'*** In the description of his drawing, he suggests that female resistance to her male partner's sexual advances does not warrant as sexual refusal. Musa agrees with his perspective and further proposes that if the girl does not articulate sexual refusal emphatically, she actually wants sex. In this context, it is incumbent upon the girl to articulate clearly and assert her refusal to have sex, with utterances such as- *'If you don't want to have sex, you must just tell him straight!'* [Sbongile, 18 female] being common even among girls. However, due to unequal gender power dynamics it is not possible for girls to constantly assert the sexual boundaries in the relationship and resist boys' coercive tactics and physical force. As illustrated in Figure 4.

In the description of his drawing, Busani states:

Frame 1: *Here is a guy calling his girlfriend asking if he can see her.*
Frame 2: *They are happy to see each other, but the girl tells him she can only stay for 2 minutes.*
Frame 3: *The guy begs her to stay while they walk to his room.*
Frame 4: *When they get inside the room, the situation becomes tense and rough and he could not control himself. The girl tries to stop him saying 'No, I thought . . . ' and he was already inside her. She tried saying 'I don't like . . . ' and she couldn't finish her sentence while he was enjoying himself. He then tells her, 'but you look happy and are enjoying it.' They went on and did it.*

Facilitator: Is that how it happens?

Figure 4. Drawing – *'There is a No that means Yes!'*.

Busani: Sometimes girls act as if they don't like it. She wants it. Her facial expression contradicts her words. The No that is sexy. (Other participants laughed)

Facilitator: So even if the girl says it out loud 'NO I DO NOT LIKE IT', would you continue?

Busani: I would continue because I am reaching climax.

Musa agreed and confirmed this by stating:

A girl must tell you strongly if she does not want sex, not sweetly and with a smile as if she is enjoying. She must be assertive so I also come to my senses.

Alarmed by their views, Uluthando quickly responded: '*That is rape! No means No. Even if it is a No that is mixed with emotions, you stop.*' While there was general consensus among adolescent girls that Figure 4 depicted premeditated rape, some boys in this study did not conceptualize this as sexual violence. For them, the lack of consent did not constitute rape, and this categorization was even less likely as the victim and the perpetrator were dating. In efforts to trivialize the perpetration of rape, Mandla defended this stance by stating, *'It's not rape, its manipulation!'*

Girls indicated that they did not mind if a boy makes sexual advances as long as he stops once she signals 'no'. However, for boys, assuming or expecting 'yes' until he is told 'no' to sexual intercourse was frustrating, hence female sexual refusal was often met with anger. Girls claimed they wanted to feel desired by boys, to explore and experience intimacy (kissing and touching) without penetrative vaginal sex. Boys perceived this as sexual teasing.

Hlengiwe: I want you to touch me, I am going to feel bad if you don't.

Yibanathi: We want boys to romance us but not to have penetrative sex!

Bandile: You want us to desire you but refuse sex? Are you not exploiting my feelings?

Other boys articulated that once sexual contact had begun, they cannot be expected to stop. However, Smiso, an 18-year-old adolescent male expressed an alternative view- '*If you really love a girl, when she says no, you stop because you respect her and the relationship continues.*' (Girls clapped their hands in agreement.)

Girls in this study generally saw their sexual encounters as coerced, and yet, according to Uluthando, '*Siya sikhala njenge ambulance!*' *['We run to them (boys) wailing like an ambulance!']*. Meaning, as an ambulance hastens to a scene of danger, so girls run to coercive relationships. Some girls explained that they tolerate coercive relationships because of love.

Ayanda: As girls we love boys. We desire love, and we love deeply.

Sbongile: Even when he says or does something you don't like, you accept it because you love him.

Amahle: Boys have ways of begging us, then you refuse to sleep with him because you are not ready. But the way they convince us we end up falling for them.

Slindile (sounding frustrated): No, but we are the ones sacrificing here.

Nonto: If he can't wait he is free to go! Otherwise if he thinks he can convince me, he will starve (sexually)!

With so much at stake for girls, they claimed to resist sexual coercion by asserting their wishes and setting clear restrictions on sexual behaviour in the relationship. Other girls terminated the relationship if her partner was unwilling to wait until she is ready for sex, while others claimed to avoid visiting boys in their rooms.

Discussion

This study contributes to scholarship exploring understandings and performance of sexual negotiation among South African youth (Duby et al., 2023; Jewkes et al., 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2006;

Waxman et al., 2016; Wood et al., 1998). Using Connell's social theory of gender and power, as arranged hierarchically to create a gender order through which power relations between masculinities and femininities are formed (Connell, 1987), we analyse how adolescents understand and negotiate sex in heterosexual relationships. For young Zulu men, masculinity is often linked to the notion of *Isoka*, which draws from culture and tradition, and associates manhood with multiple concurrent female partners *(ubusoka)* (Hunter, 2003; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2022). By enacting hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2018), boys experience tremendous pressure to have sex with female partners. In the young man's mind, this requires that he dominates sexual negotiation processes while the girl takes a subordinate role. South African research illustrates that in settings where male dominance is normalized and men are expected to initiate sex and dictate when and how it takes places, there may be little partner communication about sexual consent, the sexual act itself, or mutual pleasure (Harrison et al., 2001, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2006; O'Sullivan et al., 2006).

During the PVM workshops and FGDs, adolescents cited that male sexual coercive behaviours are widespread in their heterosexual relationships and included boys pleading for sex, buying gifts, threatening to dissolve the relationship if sex is not initiated and screening pornographic films; and these could escalate to more aggressive rape (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005). Coerced or forced sexual encounters were often condomless, placing AGYW at risk for unplanned or unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Gordon, 2016). ABYM in this study resisted being verbally explicit about sexual consent. This aligns with research conducted among youth in Sub-Saharan Africa, which illustrates sexual consent is often implied through a set of circumstances suggestive of an interest in sex, such as, being alone with a partner, receiving gifts or money, and the willingness to be in a romantic relationship (Singleton et al., 2021). Perhaps, similar to research among young Australian men, remaining vague about sex provides ABYM the opportunity for plausible deniability when accused of sexual violence (O'Byrne et al., 2008). ABYM further misinterpreted wanting sex as consenting to sex and disregarded non-verbal sexual cues of female partners (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). This was as evidenced by assertions of - *'But she wants sex!'*, which, if the girl is sexually aroused, was employed to downplay non-consensual sex. Hence, inciting sexual desire in female partners through touching and screening pornographic films were some of the tactics of obtaining sexual contact.

While AGYW in this study knew the type of sexual contact they desired from their partners – *'I want you to kiss me and touch me, but not penetrative sex';* the traditional sexual script compelled them to take on a passive position and kept ABYM at the centre of sexual negotiation in romantic relationships. Notions of love, intimacy and trust were important to girls, who consented to unwanted sex to retain partners and following provision of gifts. This aligns with transactional sexual relationships, which are common between adolescent girls and much older men in this rural community, please see (Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023). For girls in this study, sexual encounters often seem unplanned, where girls are caught off-guard, are unprepared and are hesitant about sex. With the exception of a few girls, the inward willingness to have sex was often framed with reference to the culturally-eminent coming of age ceremony for young women *(umemulo)*. Whether girls refuse sex to keep up the pretence of sexual innocence expected of girls in this community is unclear. Literature suggests female sexual coyness constructs an unsafe sexual identity where male sexual coercion may be acceptable, and even be justified as a sign of love (De Vries et al., 2014; Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Varga, 2003; Wood et al., 1998). Some girls in this study claimed to resist sexual coercion by setting clear restrictions on male sexual behaviour, others terminated relationships if male partners were unwilling to wait until she is ready for sex; while others avoided being alone with boys in private spaces. This places the responsibility of resisting boy's sexual advances and rape prevention on girls (O'Byrne et al., 2008), and presupposes that girls are in control of whether sex takes place and are always capable of resisting coercive sex and rape (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). As evident in the drawing, *'There is a No that means Yes!'*, ABYM could construct sexual refusals as vague, even in the face of

an explicit 'no' to sex, and explain these as ambiguous or as token refusals, which served to trivialize rape, blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator (O'Byrne et al., 2008).

Conclusions

Adolescents' understandings of sexual negotiation highlight the urgent necessity for sexual violence prevention strategies, which must begin during early adolescence for all genders (Jewkes et al., 2011). These must include skills training on mutual sexual consent, the reading of verbal and non-verbal cues, develop empathy and mutual respect in intimate relationships (Hatcher et al., 2014), and adopt a similar approach as the affirmative consent policy (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Furthermore, these must be clearly formulated in the South African legal framework, education system and the Adolescent and Youth Health Policy. Addressing gender power disparities impacts sexual behaviours in romantic relationships and society at large, and attention must be given to the socialization of men as sexual initiators and aggressors, with greater emphasis placed on shared power and developing agency in girls. Context-specific strategies to improve engagements with boys at grassroots level by using an interconnected approach at male medical circumcision camps to challenge male coercive and aggressive behaviours, and facilitated by male mentors displaying egalitarian masculinities.

Note

1. The first author, aided by a male and female isiZulu-speaking research assistants, was responsible for data generation and interactions with participants. Co-authors were involved in the third phase of data analysis and developing this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

The authors deeply appreciate: 1) the participants who shared their views on this project; 2) Discovery Foundation and University of KwaZulu-Natal UCDP fund for financial support; and 3) research assistants, Mr Lloyd Mpanza and Ms Zama Khanyile, for their incredible contribution during data-generation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Discovery Foundation, Ref 038206, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal UCDP fund.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by UKZN Biomedical Research Ethics Committee, **BREC Ref No BE249/19.** Gatekeeper permission was requested from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education. Prior to data generation, participants completed and signed an informed consent form. Informed consent form outlined the participants' rights, expectations of participating in the study and that they could withdraw at any time, without negative consequences.

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