



# Young People, Alcohol and Sex: What's Consent Got To Do With It?



**Exploring How Attitudes to Alcohol Impact on  
Judgements about Consent to Sexual Activity:  
A Qualitative Study of University Students**

**Summary of research findings and recommendations**

## Foreword

This latest research commissioned by the RCNI has arisen from a prolonged period of engagement and learning in the area of alcohol and sexual violence. We have sought to understand and respond appropriately to the phenomenon of alcohol harm as it has increased in terms of the experiences of survivors being supported in Rape Crisis Centres and the wider policy focus on the issue.

In 2004 RCNI commissioned a large scale study of the criminal justice response to rape in Ireland. The four year study resulted in the 2009 **Rape and Justice in Ireland (RAJI)** report. That seminal report set us a significant range of tasks. RCNI were pleased to have continued and sustained capacity to work on ensuring the implementation of the recommendations of the RAJI report through the support of Atlantic Philanthropies. The majority of those recommendations are now actioned. One set of findings in particular demanded attention; how to respond to the presence and harmful influence of alcohol before, during and after sexual violence crime?

RCNI set about a ground breaking programme of work. There were a number of stages to this work. Firstly, through an internal engagement and period of reflection we developed a language and the tools for the feminist, rape crisis sector to be able to safely bring alcohol harm into the heart of our advocacy work. Secondly, we engaged at policy and public levels to name and raise awareness of the associations of alcohol harm and sexual violence. We opened up a public discourse on alcohol harm by articulating a much wider set of harms than had previously been articulated. We continue to work to support the implementation of the Substance Misuse Strategy report under the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill.

This latest research was undertaken to address a gap in our evidence base regarding attitudes and sexual consent within a culture where alcohol is so central to socialising and mediating relationships. We very much welcome the findings and recommendations of Dr. Pádraig MacNeela and his research team. RCNI are clear that these are highly pertinent findings to a wide range of statutory and non-statutory agencies and professionals. RCNI aims to work to ensure the widespread understanding of these findings to enhance practice and policy responses and will be seeking funding to support work to ensure the implementation of these recommendations.

Fiona Neary  
RCNI Executive Director

# **Young People, Alcohol, and Sex: What's Consent Got to Do With It?**

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Judgements about Consent to Sexual Activity:  
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## **Summary of research findings and recommendations**

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This summary report arises from original qualitative research undertaken from March to December of 2013 commissioned by Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI). The study explored how university students' attitudes to alcohol use impacts on their understanding of consent to engage in sexual activity. Forty-four students took part in single sex focus groups and a further 143 in an online qualitative survey. They responded to hypothetical written scenarios designed to initiate discussion of alcohol use and consent to sex. This is a summary of findings and recommendations; the full report is available online at [www.rcni.ie](http://www.rcni.ie).

Young people who participated in this study reported being unprepared to negotiate sexual consent safely when challenging alcohol-driven situations arose, leaving them vulnerable to sexual violence.



# Main Findings and Recommendations

## For young people in this study:

1. Consent is understood to be predominantly unspoken.
2. Consent is expected to follow a highly gender stereotyped, heterosexual relationship model, with the male sex urge occupying an especially prominent position alongside a gate keeping female role.
3. Alcohol consumption is understood to be a facilitator of the majority of sexual hook ups.
4. Victims are expected to react in a highly uniform and passive way.
5. Sexual violence that was other than vaginal rape of a female by a male was difficult to name.

## Key Recommendations:

1. Improve preparedness for negotiating consent through youth targeted engagement strategies to encourage the knowledge and skills required for applying the understanding of consent to a range of relationships and types of sexual activity.
2. Promote a better understanding of alcohol as a source of risk and harm.
3. Improve knowledge and attitudes to reporting sexual assault and seeking professional support.
4. Support for a 'decision point' approach to managing consent to develop a skill-based approach for managing problematic consent situations.



# Introduction

The findings demonstrated that non-consenting sexual activity was quite unacceptable to the students who took part in the study. This was the case for male students as much as for females. Despite their clarity on this principle, consent emerged as a grey area in practice for students. Several critical factors drove this uncertainty and lack of confidence.

**Section 1** describes findings on the grey area of consent, an ambiguity characterised by:

- A. A tacit, unspoken approach to negotiating and communicating consent,
- B. Uncertainty expressed about the capacity to name sexual violence, based on lack of familiarity with accurate legal definitions of different forms of non-consenting sexual activity, including sexual assault and rape,
- C. Continual doubt as to whether the Gardaí would be supportive of claims made, considerable anxiety regarding the credibility of a legal case, and a lack of confidence in the ability of young adults to engage in the legal and judicial process.

The opacity of consent, as a concept, practice, and a basis for seeking redress and support, was underlined by its interaction with two other significant issues –

- gender expectations, and
- expectations concerning alcohol use.

These two contextual factors represented the key social knowledge resources that study participants relied on to understand and interpret the scenarios.

**Section 2** examines research findings regarding beliefs and expectations

- A. of the impact on survivors, and
- B. the perceptions of options and appropriate reactions.

**Section 3** Summarises study participants' reflections on consent in contemporary youth society and suggestions for action.

**Section 4** outlines the research recommendations.



## Section 1: Findings

### Sex Without Consent is Wrong, but it's a Grey Area

**There was a strongly held belief that non-consenting sex is wrong. Little evidence was found of a gender difference in this belief. There was also an acknowledgement of the serious, long-lasting consequences of sexual assault for victims.**

Despite this clarity, consent nonetheless emerged as a grey area in several important respects. Students were felt to be largely comfortable managing consent, but there was an underlying lack of preparedness to make sense of and respond to the applied consent situations described in the scenarios. The factors feeding into lack of preparedness are discussed below - the tacit nature of consent, lack of knowledge about the legal meaning of rape and sexual assault, the social complexity arising in applied scenarios, and uncertainty concerning disclosure and reporting.

#### A. Consent is a Tacit, Unspoken, Process

Expectations for sexual activity were structured through a cognitive and social script, facilitated by alcohol, in which physical intimacy progresses to the point of intercourse. The male gender role was to push the progression onward through successive stages, while the female role was described as acquiescing, showing willingness, or acting as gatekeepers to halt progression. The process for negotiating consent in this way was largely implicit and unspoken. Similarly, the communication of consent and non-consent was described as typically tacit, that is, non-verbal. It was seen as weird or amusing to consider consent as something that would be explicitly negotiated.

This exchange from a male focus group is illustrative of the importance attached to reading non-verbal signs and signals:

**RESP 5:** *You know, a visual...a lot of it's visual, you know, you'll...you'll...you'll probably build the courage by the...by their...their demeanour too like, you know?*

**RESP 6:** *Yeah, you know when you know. It's...*

**RESP 5:** *Yeah.*

**RESP 2:** *What's that saying? That eh...seventy percent of conversation...*

**RESP 6:** *Eighty percent.*

**RESP 2:** *...eighty percent is through body language. (Male Focus Group 1, M1)*



Here a female focus group discuss a hypothetical scenario where the victim experienced a black out. They agree on the need for active, continuing consent yet come to the conclusion that it is satisfactory for this to be communicated non-verbally:

**RESP 2:** *I mean they were get...they were quite physical anyway. ... kissing and genital contact ... her consent was right up to that point so the next stage if there...if they were quite eh...physical, then the next step would be intercourse. So, whether...I mean, you know, I...how...it would be easy for him to have the wrong signal then, you know, if she was willing to participate right up to a point and then she blacks out. And just before...prior to intercourse. I don't know, it just seems a bit...*

**RESP 3:** *I don't know, I think there should be consent at every stage.*

**RESP 4:** *Yeah, I think so too.*

**RESP 1:** *Yeah.*

**RESP 2:** *You mean like outright asking or...?*

**RESP 3:** *No...*

**RESP 2:** *How do you mean?*

**RESP 3:** *...I mean like she should be like an active participant, not just like lying there nearly passed out. Then you know that yeah, okay, this isn't a yes, I should stop now. (Female Focus Group 3, F3)*

## B. Non-Consenting Sex is Difficult to Name

The ability to name the forms of non-consenting sexual activity is an essential step toward recognizing and differentiating forms of sexual violence. At the level of formal definitions, research participants were uncertain as to how rape and sexual assault are to be defined and differentiated. Pre-existing expectations largely conformed to the rape myth stereotype, in which a stranger uses premeditated violence to force a woman to have vaginal sex. The scenarios presented were not consistent with this, and required extensive interpretation and explanatory work by the students in the study. Contextual factors that made the naming and differentiation of sexual violence difficult were found to include:

- Intoxication,
- Being in a relationship with the aggressor,
- Non-verbalization of consent and non-consent,
- Sex acts other than vaginal penetration.

In this extract, female focus group members discuss the nature of assault described in one scenario, in which the male aggressor is depicted as forcing the female victim's head down onto his penis for oral sex:

**RESP 3:** *But it's...but it's the fine line of defining rape again because there was nothing done to her physically like.*

**RESP 4:** *But at the same time she couldn't get away if he had her head.*

**RESP 2:** *Yeah.*



**RESP 3:** Yes, yes, yes I...yeah, I'm not saying that I...that I'm saying that it's not...but it's...

**RESP 4:** Yeah.

**RESP 3:** ...again, how do you...

**RESP 2:** What is rape?

**RESP 4:** Yeah.

**RESP 3:** ...define what rape is?

**RESP 2:** Yeah.

**RESP 3:** It's because something was done to me, it was an invasion to me...

**RESP 2:** I think that's why I said ... rapey as opposed to rape, you know? It's kind of like

**RESP 1:** ... I would say that is an invasion...

**RESP 5:** Yeah, I think it is too.

**RESP 1:** ...because there's something going into her body. It just doesn't happen to be ... the other end like. Eh...yeah ... we keep coming back to this difficulty with defining rape. (F2)

“  
rapey as  
opposed to  
rape, you  
know?”

### C. Doubts About Reporting

Serious doubts were raised as to whether any of the victims would be likely to report the incidents described in the scenarios. These doubts were underpinned by uncertainty concerning the legal meaning of rape and sexual assault. Each scenario was viewed as having complicating factors, which introduced ambiguity and discomfort with regard to reporting to the Gardaí. Personal alcohol consumption cut across all the scenarios as a factor believed to undermine victim credibility. Lack of knowledge extended to the limited information held about non-statutory support services. The Rape Crisis Centres (RCC) were referred to on several occasions, but even in this context there was some doubt raised as to whether RCC support could be accessed if the assault did not constitute what was understood as 'rape'.

In this example, male focus group members concur that going to the Gardaí is a 'last resort'. The hypothetical scenario that they are referring to involved a stranger forcing the victim to masturbate him:

**RESP 2:** I think, kind of, Irish culture would like, you only go to the Gardaí in a real...

... **RESP 2:** ...what you'd see as a really serious situation

... **RESP 5:** Yeah, it's almost ... a last resort.

**SEVERAL RESPONDENTS:** Yeah.

**RESP 2:** ... if he went and started having sex with her like, like definitely that's like, you'd go to the guards but not everybody would. ... what, I think, people portray rape as is penetrative...penetrative sex.

... **RESP 8:** And I guess, unfortunately, you might be ... potentially would be like embarrassed to go to the guards about something like that [the forced masturbation described in the scenario]

**SEVERAL RESPONDENTS:** Yeah.





**RESP 8:** Even if...even if you really wanted to like.

... **RESP 5:** Well you'd wonder would the guards take it serious like ... when you were drunk.

... **RESP 5:** Like, "You're a mess. Go home."

**SEVERAL RESPONDENTS:** Yeah.

**RESP 5:** Like, I don't mean that in a bad way but like...

**SEVERAL RESPONDENTS:** Yeah, yeah.

... **RESP 8:** You would be afraid of that attitude like.

**RESP 5:** Yeah, even if you weren't met with that like, is that a fear that you'd have?

**RESP 8:** Yeah. (M2)

“  
You're  
a mess.  
Go home.”

## D. Complexity Arising from Social Context

The incidents of sexual assault depicted in the scenarios were viewed as embedded within a social context. Expectations and assumptions for age, relationship forms, gender roles, and alcohol use among young people were the most prominent social-cognitive resources used to interpret the scenarios. Although access to these resources meant that they could make sense of the scenario characters, the consequence was that their understanding of non-consenting sexual activity was framed and coloured by pre-existing social knowledge.

Of the social knowledge resources available to them, alcohol and gender expectations were particularly important, comprising the core framework for constructing interpretations.

### Gender stereotyping

The agentic male. Consent was firmly placed in a gender stereotyped, heterosexual relationship model. In this model, males occupied an agentic role (you keep going until they say no) based on breaking down female resistance (men go out looking for sex, women to avoid having sex). Traditional gender stereotypes were drawn on extensively, with the male sex-seeking urge occupying an especially prominent position. In the case of aggressors who were viewed as having a bad character, the urge was viewed as being acted out in an unacceptable manner with sinister motives. Alcohol, gender, and character combined in these cases: drinking was a situational enabler, translating sexual urges into antisocial, self-serving actions that fundamentally disrespected the rights of the woman.

In this extract from a male focus group, the participants describe the reasoning that might have led a sexual aggressor in one scenario to force his girlfriend to perform oral sex, drawing on their understanding of how sexual frustration and drinking can interact:

**RESP 6:** He's thinking with his willy.

**RESP 3:** ...frustrated and...yeah, exactly. Just wanted it like.

**RESP 2:** Yeah, "Been days and a month, come on", you know? Maybe he was thinking that.

**RESP 2:** Yeah, yeah. Not that that's an excuse by any means.



**RESP 6:** Yeah, that's it at the end of the day. Quite a lot...a lot of lads get in trouble because they think with their...their eh...

**RESP 2:** Genitals.

**RESP 6:** ...their genitals instead of their brains.

... **RESP 6:** And drinking added to that again, you know, because it's...

**RESP 3:** Yeah.

**RESP 6:** ...it seems lads em...have a mission when they go out drinking. Especially young kids. (M1)

The imprint of traditional gender roles was illustrated by the difficulty that students had in overcoming their expectations for the male victim portrayed in one scenario. As a consequence, that victim was attributed considerable responsibility, despite having been pressured into having sex. He attracted the most extensive discussion of all the victims, indicative of the attentional focus that was applied to the male as the ultimate 'doer' and agentic figure in the sexual act.

The students felt that the female aggressor in that scenario had pressured the victim for sex by using the male stereotype against the victim (he should be 'always up for it'). Ironically, in discussing the case, the respondents themselves drew on stereotypical expectations to make sense of the male victim's behaviour. His preference not to have sex was explained by positioning him as an untypical man – a male who would pass up an opportunity for sex and who was too weak to stand up to her pressure. At another level, he was classified as a typical male, who ultimately assumed the position of the active agent in the sexual encounter, and was as a result attributed significant responsibility for the sexual act. In consequence, the male victim was in an impossible position, seen as an agentic figure in the sexual encounter, who could have chosen differently, but also as deficient or weak compared with other men. This was the only scenario where the victim was the focus of personalising scrutiny of this kind, and notably all other scenarios involved a female victim.

“  
lads em...  
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“  
I think ninety nine  
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drink involved.



## Alcohol and consent

The discussion of alcohol use at the beginning of each focus group made it clear that drinking is embedded as an integral part of the student experience.

The pivotal importance of alcohol is illustrated by this discussion in a male focus group:

**RESP 4:** *Yeah, I think it's...it's key to everything. Eh...just a class party organised, if there's anything organised at all it's based around drink so...*

**INT:** *Yeah.*

**RESP 5:** *I think it's key to everything that's organised, especially with socialising in college.*

**INT:** *Okay.*

**RESP 6:** *People use...people actually say the week before, they'll say they have a hundred quid, that they make sure they have their drink money before they have their food money. (M1)*

The functionality of alcohol was founded on the assumption that drinking permits young adults to lose their inhibitions in an environment that appears safe – just for a temporary period and in the company of peers. Applied to the sexual domain, this temporary loss of inhibition was said to enable hook ups to occur, facilitate the escalation of nascent relationships, and played a role in sex in committed relationships as well. Sexual expression was one specific facet of the underlying association made with drinking as a facilitator that opens the door to new experiences.

Here alcohol use is acknowledged as the primary impetus for getting with someone:

**RESP 2:** *I think it's the main reason why people would get together is because they're drunk. ... I think ninety nine percent of the time that I've been with a boy it's usually been because of drink involved.*

**RESP 1:** *Yeah.*

**RESP 2:** *Unfortunately, but that's the way it is.*

**RESP 1:** *It is. I think it's a lot to do with confidence as well. (F3)*

In the context of non-consenting sex, the reduction of inhibition inspired by alcohol spiraled into a loss of control. Aggressors were perceived as losing control over sexual urges and victims lost control over the ability to resist sexual predation. A critical point that arises here is whether intoxication is interpreted as the underlying reason for this loss of control, or as an explanation that does not in itself excuse the aggressor. The selection of a narrative in which the person was acting 'in character' (facilitated by alcohol) or 'out of character' (induced by alcohol) was informed by context. An 'in character' narrative was the predominant choice in explaining the actions of three of the four scenario aggressors. These actions arose in the context of being a stranger to the victim, evidence of premeditation, the use of force, and psychological pressure. The only exception to the predominance of the 'in character' narrative was the scenario where both parties were intoxicated and the victim had no memory of events in the morning. In this case the aggressor was more likely to be seen as caught up in a 'messy situation' fuelled by alcohol, with a reasonable chance that the behaviour was 'out of character'.



The view in this female focus group is that the sexual aggressor was a 'normal boy' who had too much to drink and had the foresight to use a condom:

**INT:** ... So how will he explain his behaviour?

**RESP 5:** It depends what type of a guy he is.

**TWO RESPONDENTS:** Yeah.

**RESP 1:** Em...I'd say he was just like a normal boy...like, it's just like...

**RESP 3:** It depends on how drunk he was as well.

... **RESP 5:** He may have not seen...though that she was that drunk. Especially if...

... **RESP 2:** Well he had the cop on to use a condom.

**RESP 3:** That is true.

**RESP 2:** Which says a lot about his morals because most blokes wouldn't bother if she was completely unconscious, you know? He had the...

... **RESP 2:** Yeah. They don't think about those things I think ... when they're horny. (F3)

Thus, the cost of the desired state of lowered inhibition is the risk of loss of control and the possibility of sexual assault. Loss of control took on different meanings. On a cognitive level, loss of control meant mental impairment. The inability to maintain normal self-regulation exposed males to the risk of losing the ability to regulate their sex drive, thus becoming insensitive to signals of non-consent. It involved females risking losing control in the ability to monitor what was happening to them and to engage in the active gatekeeper role they were expected to perform in the progression toward sex script.

Loss of control due to alcohol was meaningful on a social level too. Victims were viewed as losing control over their ability to approach the Gardaí as credible complainants. Even within the judgements of students, the presence of alcohol made it more difficult to achieve straightforward interpretations of the scenarios. By being associated with alcohol use, victims entered an interpretive limbo. This was particularly the case in the scenario that featured a victim who had a 'blackout'. Although not legally in a position to give consent, it was felt that the very intoxicated victim might have given the aggressor non-verbal signals that made his behaviour more understandable.

Respondents who endorsed a 'conscious but drunk' interpretation of the victim's 'blackout' did not give sufficient weight to the impact of extreme drunkenness on the capacity to give consent for sex. The threshold of being non-competent to give consent was set very high, for example, that the sexual partner can still talk. This was thought to become unacceptable if one partner was significantly less drunk than the other, in which case it would be a case of taking advantage of the person. However it was largely deemed acceptable in practice if two drunk individuals were to negotiate consent for sex non-verbally during a hook up, without the benefit of having built up trust or knowledge of the other. The notion of self-imposed drinking limits was not easily related to, and, like consent, was regarded as a tacit, implicit concept.

In one scenario the aggressor left the victim on the couch after sex and went to his own bed. This act is appraised negatively here, however the male participants subsequently identify



with the potential for drunk sex to be non-consenting:

**RESP 6:** *And most of us all said we'd...we'd either lie on the couch with her or bring her into bed.*

**SEVERAL RESPONDENTS:** *Yeah.*

... **RESP 2:** *Would you still have sex with her though?*

**RESP 6:** *...none of us said we wouldn't have sex with her. [Laughing]*

**RESP 2:** *But you think you'd still have sex with her though. The thing is I think with all the definitions of blackout everyone has kind of misconceptions about what's happening in the story so...you know what I mean like?*

... **RESP 4:** *But that grey area is...is reality like. There's no...just because it's not defined like, that might be a...that might be a case...*

**RESP 6:** *That could happen to any one of yous like.*

**RESP 4:** *...like, that girl literally wouldn't be able...might not be able to tell you if she had a blackout physically or mentally so I suppose...*

**RESP 2:** *Like you'd know if it was a physical blackout if she was...if she was like closed eyes and everything limp like. (M1)*

This is particularly pertinent given that blacking out and subsequent memory loss is a common experience among Irish university students. In a recent survey of over 1,000 students, over 80% indicated that they had been drunk to the level of not remembering later what they had said or done (McCaffrey et al., 2014). It is a mistake to believe that an individual can give informed consent when intoxicated to this point. Given the mainstream nature of this phenomenon, female students are exposed to significant risk for being denied clear-cut social credibility if they experience unwanted sex while drunk.

Two other findings regarding alcohol consumption of the victim and attitudes to consent which are further elaborated on in the full report, were that

- Altering the degree of intoxication, whether self-administered or surreptitiously administered, of the victim did not change the respondents' assessment of the hypothetical situation.
- There was a consensus that where the aggressor and victim were equally intoxicated was a more benign situation than when the aggressor was less intoxicated than the victim.



## Section 2: Impact on Victims

The research participants gave the greatest attention to interpreting the motives, roles, and actions of the sexual aggressor in each scenario. An important implication arising from the attentional focus on the aggressor was that victim blaming had a rather low profile.

There was little indication of character-based analysis of the women in the scenarios. This is despite findings in the international research literature concerning the attribution of considerable responsibility to victims (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). It can be regarded as a positive development that victim blaming was not a strong feature of the findings. Despite this, the rather passive role attributed to women in the scenarios can be critiqued. As a result of the aggressors occupying centre-stage in the interpretive work by students, victims received comparatively little elaboration or individualization. Victim perspective-taking was rather uniform, based on the discussion of distress and long-lasting negative consequences. In addition, there were subtle indications of social judgement, illustrated by the view that victims might experience regret, consider limiting their drinking and alter their behaviour in the future.

There was a degree of uniformity in the inferences made about how the three female victims would react following the scenario. The immediate reactions of the women were presumed to be anxiety, distress, and feelings of having been violated. Subsequent to this, it was presumed that the women would also come to experience shame and lowered self-esteem arising from being subjected to a sexual assault. Although these perspectives were elaborated in a distinctive manner for each of the female victims, the common expectation for initial distress and later shame was more unitary than the reactions attributed to the male aggressors.

This extract from a female focus group describes the reaction likely to be experienced by a scenario victim who was forced into giving her boyfriend oral sex. Other groups gave quite similar responses:

**RESP 1:** *I suppose if he's that sort of person and he gets away with it, then maybe he'd do it again, which I suppose is where, you know, the girl who reports it, like, although like she has to face the consequences for herself, she does maybe help somebody in the future, or stops it from happening to someone else. Em...I don't know, the consequences are...*

**RESP 2:** *Yeah, poor Michelle.*

**RESP 4:** *I know. She's still upset days later so it seems like it is going to have a pretty negative impact on her life.*

**RESP 2:** *Yeah, she seems like she's really vulnerable.*

**RESP 4 & 1:** *Yeah.*

**RESP 2:** *And that it might affect her trust of people a lot I'd say.*

**RESP 3:** *Yeah.*



**RESP 4:** Yeah, definitely.

**RESP 2:** And maybe here...she...like, she mightn't want to drink, do you know, if she's had this kind of a bad experience as well like, that might...

**RESP 1:** Yeah. She's definitely emotionally scarred anyway. (F1)

The certainty with which attitudes about the consequences of sexual violence were held raises questions as to the impact of standard expectations on victims, particularly for those whose emotional reactions do not conform to the stereotype. The relatively clear-cut expectations for post-trauma reactions may be disempowering for survivors. Promotion and public awareness of the wide range of reactions of victims may be necessary to combat this stereotype.

Similar to the expectations held for female victims, it was typically suggested that the male victim would most likely experience shame and regret for drinking too much. One key difference was that, while female victims could expect empathic responses from peers and friends, it was thought that the male victim would receive little sympathy from his peers, except perhaps from his closest friends. Some focus group participants saw him as sharing in the responsibility for the event, in the belief that he could have simply prevented the assault by leaving the bedroom or seeking help. He could anticipate being told by his male friends that he had nothing to complain about because he had got sex.

This exchange from one of the male focus groups illustrates the reactions typically voiced by both genders when asked to imagine how peers would react to the male victim:

**RESP 2:** ...because again, not that I'm being sexist or equality issues but, you know, he's a man, he could have been at like...you know...there's people downstairs.

**RESP 6:** He could have walked out.

**RESP 2:** He could have been like, yeah, open the door a little bit, and then shout.

**RESP 6:** And that's what I'm saying...

**RESP 2:** "Come on, will someone come get me", you know like? He could have...

**RESP 6:** ...someone referred to it earlier, he probably has confidence issues.

**RESP 1:** This bitch is nuts.

**RESP 6:** He's probably scared that she's going to turn around saying to all her mates "Ah Jesus, Jim wouldn't even..." ... "Jim wouldn't even have sex with me." So this guy is obviously clearly...like, as opposed to another guy like, a confident guy walked in and goes "Here, your one's upstairs fucking gagging for it off me", you know?

**RESP 2:** Yeah, yeah.

**[General Laughter]**

**RESP 6:** That's the two different types of blokes. (M1)

“  
Yeah. She's  
definitely  
emotionally  
scarred  
anyway



## Available Options and Appropriate Reactions

For each scenario, the focus group participants were asked to suggest what options were open to the victims. In each instance, it was felt that reporting the incident to the Gardaí was an option, but one that was unlikely to be taken up, as victims were presumed to have limited credibility in a legal context. Thus, although there was consensus that what had occurred in each scenario was totally unacceptable, it was also generally agreed that victims would be unlikely to feel sufficiently empowered to seek legal redress.

Another point of commonality across scenarios was the recommendation that the victims needed to obtain social support. Talking things through and feeling supported were viewed as essential. For the most part, friends were identified as the primary resource to draw on. Family members were noted on many occasions as a key resource, although in some cases it was felt that victims would be ashamed to disclose what happened to their families.

Here the members of a focus group discuss the scenario involving forced masturbation, suggesting that peers would be more effective at talking to the victim whereas a family member might become judgemental:

**RESP 6:** *I think her friends would have calmed her down and said "Look, you didn't get raped."*

**RESP 5:** *Yeah, yeah. It's...*

**RESP 6:** *Some scumbag came in and...*

**RESP 5:** *Ejaculated on ya.*

... **RESP 6:** *As bad as it sounds like, I think her friends would convince her not, probably, because that's the way girls would think like, going...*

**RESP 5:** *Yeah, yeah.*

... **RESP 2:** *Yeah but you know like, they...most people...like, if she told her mother her mother would be like "See, I told you not to drink so much."*

**RESP 1:** *Yeah, exactly.*

**RESP 3:** *Yeah, exactly.*

**RESP 2:** *And she'd be blaming the...the...girl...*

... **RESP 2:** *...when clearly it's one hundred percent not her daughter's fault.*

... **RESP 1:** *"What...what were you doing on your own?"*

... **RESP 5:** *"Where were your friends?"*

... **RESP 2:** *Yeah, they look at it the completely wrong way. (M2)*

“  
That's the  
two different  
types of  
blokes





Beyond informal supports, there were frequent references made to seeking help through helplines and the Rape Crisis Centres. Yet these were general comments, which suggested that participants did not have specific knowledge of the supports available. The other points of formal support indicated were the university counselling service and the Students' Union Welfare Officer.

The male victim elicited distinctive reactions in this context as well. He was seen as the victim least likely to access social support and to speak about what happened. This was not alone through lack of sympathy from peers. A relational problem was predicted too, as in his social network he would be associated with a relationship he did not want with the female aggressor. It was thought that female peers might react against him, using a gendered reading of what happened to surmise that he led the female aggressor on or behaved badly for leaving before she woke. On the other hand, males in his network might think that she is a 'freak' in being a sexually aggressive woman. Both male and female study participants suggested prescriptive advice, to learn that men can say no, and in one phrase from a focus group, that the male victim needed to 'grow a pair'.

“  
So this guy  
is obviously  
clearly...like,  
as opposed  
to another  
guy like



## Section 3: Young People's Reflections on Consent

**In the discussion of consent that took place following the scenarios, focus group members described uncovering more grey areas than anticipated, for example in defining consent and in making distinctions between sexual assault and rape.**

Defining and applying an understanding of consent was viewed as challenging, due to limited exposure to education and under-articulated social norms. The non-verbal negotiation of consent was acknowledged as promoting ambiguity. However, the prospect of taking part in a formal process for articulating or negotiating consent was viewed with humour.

The young people who took part in this study identified the optimal conditions for negotiating consent as including feeling self-confident and feeling comfortable to engage in good quality communication in a relationship. They felt it was important to feel safe and comfortable about saying no, yet said that it was challenging to achieve these outcomes in young adulthood. Even when consent was verbal, it might be given following pressure or manipulation, and therefore lack authenticity. Drunkenness was viewed as impairing the ability to give consent, raising the possibility of non-consenting sexual encounters. In addition, alcohol was perceived to contribute to victim blaming, through self-blame, the assumption that victims will experience feelings of regret about their own behaviour, and the weakened position that victims were presumed to occupy when seeking legal redress.

### Young People's Recommendations

One of the main recommendations made was for more widespread use of scenarios such as those used in the study, as a means to promote discussion and critical thinking. This was described as useful for students at second level as well as those in college. Applying their understanding to a complex real-world scenario was felt to be an important method for involving people in knowledge generation. It was seen as suitable for young people because it is active and engaging rather than didactic. It was viewed as important to work through the ambiguous and contextual nature of non-consent that was likely to be encountered by students.



Other strategies discussed in focus groups were as follows:

Population Public Health prevention strategies:

- Encourage men to achieve a better understanding of women's perspectives on consent, for instance by challenging the idea that 'not saying no' means 'yes' and reinforcing the need to check that it is ok to progress further in the sexual script,
- Work with young people on attitudes while in secondary school. There was a perception that sex education in schools is overly focused on a functional perspective, with more emphasis needed on the relational, social, and emotional domains of sexual expression,
- Target first year university students in the orientation programme and through relevant events such as Sexual Health Week,
- Challenge norms about the acceptability of drinking to excess, for example in promoting alternative methods of socializing that are not predicated on alcohol use (such as student-led university societies).

The students also suggested stay safe tips that are commonly prescribed to potential victims (predominantly females) such as:

- Utilise the existing networks in friendship groups to look out for one another,
- Use the varied communication channels available to people on a night out – such as messaging using social media, in taxis, toilets, etc.



## Section 4: Research Recommendations

**Study participants suggested several strategies for better informing young adults about non-consenting sexual activity, all of which implicate the influence of alcohol. These have been noted above and are put in the context of the research literature below, to form the set of recommendations that arises from the study:**

### Recommendation 1

**Improve preparedness for negotiating consent.** Situations in which consent becomes problematic or threatening arise in complex, real-world circumstances. Students in second-level and third-level education should be targeted using an engagement strategy to encourage the knowledge and skills required for applying the understanding of consent to a range of relationships and types of sexual activity.

### Recommendation 2

**Promote a better understanding of alcohol as a source of risk and harm.** In the context of this study, alcohol was viewed as a liberator to a greater degree than it was seen as a threat to well-being. Nevertheless, while alcohol made possible valued interactions, it threatened catastrophic loss of control. Strategies to engage students in critical thinking on this issue should make use of several active themes in the alcohol research literature, as these have not been sufficiently linked with the literature on sexual violence.

Firstly, binge alcohol consumption is increasingly framed as a source of anti-social behaviour and 'harm to others' (Casswell et al., 2011). The meaning of alcohol as a harm in the sexual domain can be considerably elaborated through novel health promotion initiatives. Secondly, research on 'protective behavioural strategies' has emerged in recent years as a more positive angle on promoting positive behaviour, rather than focusing exclusively on young people as risk-takers who endanger themselves (Palmer et al., 2010). Regular binge drinkers typically evidence fewer protective behaviours, and there is considerable scope to highlight the connection between adopting protective strategies and subsequent avoidance of sexual violence. Finally, online strategies to reduce harmful drinking among university students have made extensive use of the 'binge drinking' concept to focus student self-evaluations of drinking behaviour (Hustad et al., 2010). Threats to sexual health should be incorporated more explicitly within these systems.



### Recommendation 3

**Improve knowledge and attitudes to reporting sexual assault and seeking professional support.** The services and supports available through statutory agencies such as the Gardaí and HSE, and non-statutory bodies such as Rape Crisis Network Ireland, were not well understood by students who took part in this study. Messaging and information campaigns should address this lack of knowledge. There is also a more fundamental attitudinal shift required in how the police, legal, and judicial systems are perceived, to overcome the current picture of uncertainty, lack of confidence, and fear. The subject of help seeking among young adults has attracted considerable research, which can be used as a resource for understanding how to help overcome normative perceptions of stigma about seeking formal help (McCart et al., 2010).

### Recommendation 4

**Employ novel means to involve and inform adolescents and young adults.** The research strategy employed in this study, using real-world scenarios, was evaluated positively. A number of students in focus groups and via the online survey suggested that the methodology should be used as a basis for engaging young people in thinking about consent and applying their understanding. The scenarios proved to be non-threatening, did not require personal information to be disclosed, and were an effective tool to elicit vibrant discussion. With adaptation, the scenario methodology could be used as a strategy for encouraging personal empowerment in relation to consent.

### Recommendation 5

**Support for a ‘decision point’ approach to managing consent.** Research participants typically identified critical choices and points at which decisions were made in each scenario (i.e., decision points). The concept of decision points potentially affords the development of a skill-based approach for managing problematic consent situations. By accommodating the idea of active decision making in their own approach to managing consent, students could become more critically aware of the points at which their behaviour, or the behaviour of their partner, could threaten consent.



## Conclusion

This study provides an insight into the interaction of attitudes to consent to sex and alcohol use, among the current generation of university students in Ireland. The study found that there was a cross-gender consensus on the unacceptability of non-consenting sexual encounters and on the importance of avoiding victim blaming. Yet there were subtle attributions of responsibility to victims, reflected in advice about changing drinking behaviours and in assumptions about victim regret and self-blame.

For the most part, the sense-making and interpretations of the hypothetical scenarios focused attention on the aggressors. Particularly when there were scenario features that recall the rape stereotype (such as use of force, premeditation, or stranger status), dispositional and unequivocally negative attributions were made of the sexual aggressor. In these circumstances, alcohol was seen as providing the explanatory background to an event, rather than an excuse.

Nevertheless, alcohol was seen as complicating the scenarios and restricting the options open to victims of sexual assault or rape. Gender expectations were, along with beliefs about alcohol use, used to frame consenting sexual activity as a script in which progressive levels of intimacy take place. There were numerous ways in which this process could become problematic – due to the overriding nature of male agency, female passivity, unspoken consent, and impaired decision making due to intoxication. In response, more socially aware, communication-based approaches are required, capable of empowering youth to think through the applied meaning of consent. Young people should be regarded as partners to health professionals, peer educators, and others in achieving change in the status quo. The use of active, stimulating methods of engagement should help youth move from principles to practice in their critical thinking about consent.

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