

## RAPE MYTHS, SEXUAL COERCION, AND DATING VIOLENCE

During our in-depth interviews, we asked participants what they thought about women who were scantily dressed, like some of the women they may have seen in the media. Eleven of our in-depth interview participants mentioned a woman who wears revealing clothing is communicating she is interested in being sexually propositioned or is interested in having sex. Chelsea said girls "wear scandalous things" so they can have sex with guys, and Tiffany said that a girl wouldn't dress like that if she wasn't willing to have sex. Three participants referred derisively to women who wear such clothes. Keith and Karly said such women are considered "sluts," and Scott said they would be called "whores." Although Grant and Roy hesitated "to be judgmental" or "to promote a stereotype," they concluded women who wore revealing clothing could be perceived as essentially telling men they wanted to have sex.

These attitudes reflect one myth about rape, which is that women who are scantily clad are asking to be raped. Most people find it difficult to make sense of rape or sexual assault because they fear such violence can or will affect them personally. Similar to other phenomenon they have difficulty understanding, people create myths or beliefs to help explain sexual violence (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In the academic literature, such beliefs are referred to as rape myths, and they include prejudicial, stereotypical or false beliefs about

rape, rape victims, or perpetrators (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Such myths shift the blame of rape from the perpetrators to the victims and minimize the seriousness of sexual violence (Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Vandello, 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). "The power of rape myths lies in their utility to protect us from uncomfortable truths about the victims and perpetrators of sexual assault," according to Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello (2008, p. 791). Common myths about rape victims include beliefs that women who are scantily clad are to blame if they are raped and that women lie about being raped. Prevalent myths about rapists include beliefs that men who rape are scary, deviant strangers. Such myths, which are widely held among individuals in the United States, make it harder to reduce sexual violence. According to Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello (2008), rape myths "support social and criminal justice systems that are inclined to dismiss the victim, protect the perpetrator, and encourage men's assaulting behavior" (p. 791).

Like other sexual scripts, rape myths are created and reinforced through gendered interactions and are disseminated through gendered institutions like the mass media. Although sexually violent content was once restricted to R or NC-17 movies, rape has since emerged as a common plotline on television (Brinson, 1992; Cuklanz, 2000). Since the 1980s, televised depictions of sexual violence have increased (Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). Content analyses have indicated news (Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Vandello, 2008; Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cephress, & Vandello, 2008; O'Hara, 2012) and entertainment media content includes myths about sexual violence (Cuklanz, 2000; Magestro, 2015; Projansky, 2001). Further, a significant body of research has linked exposure to the media with the acceptance of rape myths (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012; Emmers-Sommer, Pauley, Hanzal, & Triplett, 2006; Foubert, Brosi, & Bannon, 2011; Fox & Potocki, 2016; Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cephress, et al., 2008; Hust, Marett, Lei, Ren, & Ran, 2015; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Kahlor & Morrison, 2007).

### Blaming the Victim: She's Dressed for It

The majority of our participants also expected men would respond to scantily-clad women by making sexual advances. Phillip said men will see a girl's revealing wardrobe "as an invitation to go start flirting or just openly hit on them [make sexual advances]." Farah's reports of her experiences at college validated Phillip's sentiments. She said the same guys who ignore her when

they see her walking on campus while wearing a skirt will approach her at a party if she's wearing short shorts. Although participants acknowledged some women would appreciate the sexual advances that likely result from wearing revealing clothing, they also discussed that some wouldn't enjoy how men would treat them. Karly said sometimes women complain about guys taking advantage of them, but "it's like well, you're dressing like that, they think that you're that kind of person. ..." Karly, who eschewed many of the other rape myths (i.e. women lie about rape) believed men interpreted women's revealing clothing as sexual availability, and she placed the blame for this interpretation on women rather than men.

Like Karly, some of our other female participants believed men's sexual gaze was ever-present and this influenced how these participants chose to dress. Tiffany thought dressing modestly would protect her from men's sexual advances. Similarly, Farah confided she doesn't often wear short shorts because she is not interested in garnering men's sexual attention. Willow also was careful of how she dressed around boys. In fact, Willow said her father expected her to dress conservatively, especially when she went to visit her close friend Timothy. She said once she was wearing a V-neck t-shirt and getting ready to visit Timothy, when her dad asked her to change her shirt. He told Willow the T-shirt was too low cut and Timothy would be able to see her breasts. Willow changed her shirt. She said she thinks it is natural for guys to look at girls, and that media and movies, in particular, "portray guys looking at girls kind of in that creepy way." It's worth noting that Willow didn't question whether Timothy, whom she said is just a friend, would look at her body as a sexual object. She, like her father, took for granted that Timothy would look at her that way simply because he's male, and that's simply how she and her father expected men to behave.

Furthermore, some participants said girls who wear revealing clothing are inviting sexual attention that is likely unwelcomed, and they blamed these girls, at least in part, for the men's behavior. These young people seem to have bought into the myth that young women who are scantily clad are to blame if they become sexual violence victims, and these participants dress modestly as a way to protect themselves from similar fates. Tiffany thought that a woman who was scantily clad would be "an easier target" for men to approach than a woman who was modestly dressed. Willow said it is easy to understand how a guy may say a girl is "asking for it." "I don't think guys should say they're asking for it," she said, "but I can see more where guys would be like, 'she was already, you know, half-dressed, you know.'" Similarly, Rachel said some of her

friends wear really short shorts and then wonder why guys whistle at them. Rachel rather matter-of-factly said men whistled at the girls because of how the girls were dressed. When we probed further, she was quick to clarify her view. She said that while a really short crop top and low rise jeans were not the "most appropriate" thing to wear, she would never say a girl's clothing was why a girl was raped. Rachel accepted a woman's clothing choices could result in men's unwelcomed comments or harassment from afar, but believed such clothing does not excuse men assaulting women.

Our analyses indicate many of our participants believe in the rape myth that a woman's choice of clothing is, at least in part, associated with her victimization. In a recent experimental study, Johnson, Ju, and Wu (2016) found young adults perceived that a woman wearing revealing clothing was interested in sexual activity. Similarly, a number of experimental studies have found that participants who perceived a woman's dress was revealing were more likely to blame her for a sexual assault (Johnson et al., 2016; Schult & Schneider, 1991; Whatley, 1996, 2005; Workman & Orr, 1996). Such beliefs, however, are reflective of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts that blame women for exhibiting sexual agency. Sexual harassment and sexual assault is never excusable, regardless of what a woman chooses to wear.

### Identifying the Perpetrator: The Monstrous Rapist

Many of our participants perceived that rape was prevalent among their peers, and this increased their perceived susceptibility for sexual assault and rape. For example, Karly and Phillip said sexual violence against women is common. Phillip said that at his college orientation he was told a lot of people, women in particular, are scared that they will be raped. Rachel described a time when she was scared she was going to be raped. One day she was walking home after babysitting a child who lived around the corner from her home. It was getting dark, when she saw a man, who "looked kind of scary," walking down the street. She stayed a while longer at the child's house in an attempt to avoid interacting with the man. As she walked home, however, she saw him standing near her neighbor's house. "So I, like, kind of freaked out and, like, came and, like, ran and hid behind our car," she said, "because I did not want him to see, like, which house I was going in to. So then I waited a minute," she said, "and he started walking and he left." Rachel acknowledged the man was perhaps just out for a walk, but her first thought was that he could be dangerous. Rachel said she always thinks of the worst possible things that

could happen to her. "I've watched a lot of Law and Order, like SVU, so I always think he (referring to a non-specific he) is going to kidnap me or he's going to rape me." Although Rachel's fear may seem irrational, it may be explained, at least in part, by her heavy viewing of crime dramas (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Parrott & Parrott, 2015). A content analysis of fictional crime drama television programs found they most commonly portrayed rape victims as White women (Parrott & Parrott, 2015).

Some of our participants suggested women should avoid situations in which they could be sexually assaulted and should avoid men they perceive could be sexual aggressors. Clarissa said women could avoid being raped if they simply didn't put themselves in certain positions, such as being alone with someone they don't know or going places with people they don't know well. Many women we spoke with discussed going to parties or events with other women so they could help look after each other. Chelsea and Rachel thought they could identify a sexually aggressive man. Rachel said sexual aggressors were likely men who "got saggy pants, like chains, like, you know that, like, have tattoos everywhere. I mean, I guess not the tattoo part, but I mean if he looks like, of scary, you know." These young women's comments indicate they believe in the "monstrous rapist" myth that suggests rapists are crazy strangers who ambush women on the street. In fact, they have internalized this script to such a degree they think they can identify whether a man will be a rapist simply by looking at him, which is not possible. Although we cannot know for sure whether the man Rachel saw was going to approach her or not, it's likely he was just walking in the neighborhood. Scholars have argued the monstrous rapist myth actually endangers women who believe in the myth, especially since the majority of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Similarly, our findings suggest these young women may not recognize a risky situation because they trust they can easily identify who is or isn't a sexually aggressive man.

### Making Sense of Media Portrayals of Sexual Harassment

Portrayals of men's sexual aggression are fairly common on mainstream television, particularly on programs like *Jersey Shore*. Previously, scholars have analyzed and evaluated the content of the incredibly popular *Jersey Shore* (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Flynn, Morin, Park, & Stana, 2015; Sherry & Martin, 2014). Flynn et al. (2015) found the program emphasizes ideal and objectified bodies

of men and women. Bond and Drogos (2014) found a sexual instance, which included sexual talk and sexual behavior, occurred every minute on the popular program. "One of the primary storylines of the show involves cataloguing their casual sexual encounters with strangers and with each other," according to Sherry and Martin (2014, p. 1275). Although both men and women on *Jersey Shore* are depicted as sexually active, the sexual double standard in which men are rewarded for their sexual conquests while women are shamed for theirs is prevalent on the program (Sherry & Martin, 2014). Further the men in the program often exhibit dominance, sexual aggression, and hypermasculinity (Sherry & Martin, 2014). In their content analysis, Anderson and Ferris (2016) identified that *Jersey Shore* also depicted a number of physical altercations, especially between the main characters. One study that examined the effects of watching the sexual and aggressive content in *Jersey Shore* found viewing the show was associated with permissive sexual attitudes such as endorsing premarital sex or having multiple sex partners (Bond & Drogos, 2014).

Our college-aged focus group participants watched a clip from *Jersey Shore* in which Mike, also known as "The Situation," and his friends partied at a night club. While at the club, Mike danced with a number of women and then he physically picked one girl up and pushed her against a wall while she asked him to stop. He then tried to dance with his best friend's girlfriend, and when that didn't go well, he moved on to dance with his friend Snooki. When Snooki refused to leave with him, he slapped her in the face. Overall, Mike was sexually aggressive in the clip, and he displayed assaultive behaviors that included physically picking up a woman without her consent and hitting another woman in the face.

Many of our focus group participants believed the *Jersey Shore* clip was realistic, and they told us they had experienced similar events in real life. Preston said: "This happens at parties all the time. There's always that one guy that's had too much at the party or what not and, uh, so this has happened before." Roy said he had seen people who have "gone too far over cockiness or level of aggression." Kevin said he had seen men act similarly at parties he attended. Although Kevin said he had seen men be aggressive, he said in real life he hadn't seen someone be as sexually aggressive as Mike was. Some of our female participants also said they hadn't seen men act so aggressively at the clubs or parties they attend. A few women, however, said they had been in situations where their female friends had been bothered by men's sexually aggressive actions.

The majority of participants identified that Mike was being sexually aggressive, and they attributed his aggressiveness to masculinity. Our participants

identified that Mike was trying to establish his masculinity, relative to that of his peers, through his sexual aggressiveness. For example, Lorne said that Mike was trying to be the "alpha male." When asked what he meant by "alpha male," Lorne said: "Um, I'm pretty sure the alpha male, it's usually like is a big guy, who is very aggressive, very dominant. ... People kinda like look up to you, and you're just, like, I don't know—the big man on campus, the alpha male." Owen said Mike was "thinking he is the top player." Similarly, Matt said Mike was "trying to get as many girls as possible." Our female participants also identified that Mike was trying to establish his masculine dominance. Gretchen pointed out she didn't think Mike's behavior had anything to do with getting girls. She said instead, "I think it has everything to do with proving himself he's a man. ..." Naomi expressed similar sentiments. She thought Mike was trying to show that he was confident and able to get girls. In a different focus group, Evelyn identified that Mike may have tried to adhere to the acceptable sexual scripts for men. She said:

I think he [Mike] tries to be, like, what he believes, I guess, a man should act, like, by being dominant and, like, being aggressive and just going after women. And I think that's why, he, like, he believes, I feel like he believes that by being aggressive a woman's gonna like that. That a woman wants to be, like, dominated, and wants a guy to just go for it. So but he, like, he's going about it the wrong way, I guess. Like he's just being like sexually aggressive, and it's, like, not the aggressive a woman is looking for I guess.

These participants identified Mike's sexually aggressive behavior and accepted his behavior as common among men. They additionally perceived his behavior would convey his adherence to masculinity, which would then improve his status among his peers. However, as Evelyn noted, such aggression may not always be well received by women.

Although many of our participants accepted Mike's behavior as typical for men trying to establish masculine dominance, 10 participants voiced displeasure about his actions. College women Cynthia and Ursula, who attended the same focus group, said Mike was so aggressive his actions seemed "rapey." "He's like crossing the boundaries," Cynthia said, "and that kind of seemed like he was going to rape someone, because he was like pushing her against the wall and that sort of stuff." Roy said he didn't like that Mike hit Snooki. Turner called Mike's behavior "disgraceful," and Phillip said Mike was acting "pretty childish." Kevin expected Mike would stop his aggressive behavior when the women he was interacting with told him to stop. "He just like kept

going," Kevin said, "and was way too persistent." "Like, when a girl is like telling you, begging you, like, stop—like, that's when you usually stop," Kevin said. Although the participants largely agreed Mike was being sexually aggressive, they didn't call his behavior violent (even though he hit Snooki), and with the exception of Cynthia and Ursula, they did not identify his behavior as sexual harassment or assault.

Some of our participants found Mike's behavior to be funny, and they did not seem to take it seriously. In one of our male focus groups, the participants laughed and discussed whether they would call Mike's action against Snooki a "slap" or a "tap." After some discussion, they agreed it was more like a tap, which they didn't think was as serious as a hit. In addition to downplaying Mike's violence against Snooki, some participants also blamed the women he interacted with, at least in part, for his sexually aggressive actions. Preston, a college male, said the *Jersey Shore* clip was "ordinary." "That's probably wrong," he said, "but, in the night club, they [the girls] probably wanted that, probably wanted that to happen to them but not to excess. That's what, that's when they start saying, uh, 'no' and 'stop.'" Oscar, in a different focus group, pointed out that the girls may not have wanted it, but they also didn't do anything about it. Focus group participant Rodney, in our third college male focus group, said the girls were probably too intoxicated to really pay attention to what the men in the club were doing. Scott mentioned that no one else in the bar stepped in to stop Mike's behavior. "No one else around did anything," Scott said. "So it seems like when there's a guy there that other people just back off. They don't even care," Scott said. Scott's perception was that the people at the club were complicit to Mike's actions.

College female Evelyn questioned how the girls had interacted with Mike. "Well, I mean it only shows the part where he picks her up," she said, "but, like, for all we know, she could have been, like, winking at him, like, smiling at him, like, you know." Evelyn further suggested the girl may have smiled and beckoned Mike to talk to her, but maybe "he, like, took it the wrong way, like, it all depends on how she interacted with him as well." Evelyn suggested a viewer cannot judge Mike's interactions as aggressive or assaultive without knowing what the woman did to invite the behavior, which suggests she may believe a woman is partially responsible for a man's sexual aggression or sexual assault.

The participants' discussion suggests they have tried to make sense of the content by comparing it to their own experiences and by applying the sexual scripts they adhere to. Rather than seeing Mike's behavior as violent and

criminal, some of our participants viewed it as common and excusable. Our analysis suggests these participants believe in rape myths that suggest women ask for or invite sexual assault, men can't resist being sexually aggressive, and sexual assault results from miscommunication between men and women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Other participants, primarily men, were critical of Mike's behavior in the *Jersey Shore* clip, because he was unsuccessful in dating or sexually interacting with any of the women he saw at the bar. Some of these participants, however, viewed Mike as beneficial to the other men he was around, because women would turn to them as a way to avoid Mike. A conversation among our male college-aged participants is illustrative:

- Moderator: "Alright. Um, so are there any messages in this scene, and if so what are they?"
- Lorne: "It's OK to swoop your friend's girl." (*inaudible chatter and laughter*)
- Matt: "It's OK to treat women like crap."
- Moderator: "OK."
- Kevin: "I don't know. It might be, like, it's not OK treat a woman like crap, because he's, like, being an asshole and, like, he's not getting any. And, like, he's treating them like crap. It's not doing anything for him, and he is not gaining anything from it. So the people that are, like, treating them nice or actually having fun are getting the girls so."
- Noah: "If you hang around someone like him, they're going to think he is an asshole and then you can sweep in like Pauly."
- Kevin: "He's the perfect wingman. He looks like an asshole and it makes you look a whole lot nicer."

In this focus group, Lorne and Matt identify the most straight-forward message of the *Jersey Shore* clip—that it is okay to treat women poorly. Kevin, however, demonstrates a more critical and nuanced view, which suggests he may be more media literate. Kevin identified that the only men in the clip who were rewarded with women's interest were those men who were treating women well. Therefore, he suggests the clip is actually promoting the idea that if you treat "women like crap," you are not going to "get the girl." Based on social cognitive theory, viewers' who perceive that Mike is punished for being sexually aggressive will have greater motivation to avoid such behavior. Our analyses, however, indicate the majority of our participants did not view the media this critically. Instead, they focused on the most basic message in this clip, which was that it promoted the idea that violence and sexual aggression against women is acceptable.

## On-line and In-person Sexual Harassment

Many of our female participants discussed having men (and sometimes women) make sexual comments, online and in-person, about them and their bodies. Physical and verbal sexual harassment is fairly common in high schools (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Jewell, Spears Brown, & Perry, 2015; Lacasse, Purdy, & Mendelson, 2003), and girls report they have come to expect it (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Some scholars have argued sexually harassing behavior has become so normative among young people that they do not identify it as sexual violence (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Hlavka, 2014; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003). Two of our female participants described specific incidences of harassment that they experienced at school. For example, a boy at Tiffany's school often winked or blew kisses at her when she saw him at school. Chelsea said boys often talked about her body or whistled at her when she walked down the school hallway.

Scholars additionally have identified that social networking sites have provided another mechanism for sexual harassment to occur (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). When Chelsea signed up for a mobile social media app where people can post anonymous messages, she said she received a number of messages about her body and her physical attractiveness. It didn't bother her at first, but then she started thinking about people staring at her, and so she deleted the app. Willow signed up for the same app, and she received just one message. An anonymous poster asked her, "Will you have sex with me?" she said. It scared her, so she deleted the app from her phone. That Willow and Chelsea deleted the app rather than ask the posters to stop posting sexual and objectifying comments is telling. Neither girl felt she could effectively stop such behavior, and so disengaging from the app all together was the easiest and most effective tactic at eliminating the harassment. Willow and Chelsea felt stopping the posters was impossible because the posters could remain anonymous, which scholars have identified often creates an environment in which individuals more freely express harassing thoughts (Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Although both girls deleted the app, they acknowledged they are unable to stop boys from looking at or talking about their bodies in real life. "I just kind of accept it," Chelsea said. "Like, that's their thoughts. I'm not going to acknowledge it, but I just can't stop it." It is disconcerting Chelsea and Willow think they are powerless to stop boys' sexually harassing behavior. Tolman et al. (2003) suggest the pervasiveness of boy's sexual harassment "may be a slippery slope

from incidents of sexual harassment, which are normalized, to violence in simultaneously occurring early teen dating experiences (p. 162)."

Some of the men we interviewed, however, told us they would never interact this way with women. Although Grant thought an attractive woman who was scantily dressed may want men to whistle at her, he said he would be too embarrassed to do something like that. He also noted whistling at her would be a derogatory response because "it's not really making any real interaction or any real attempt at an interaction." While surfing the internet, Phillip had stumbled on a video about catcalling. Although the video included interviews with people who didn't like catcalling, it also included an interview with a man who thought it was okay to whistle at women who were walking by. Phillip thought the man was "creepy," but he also said perhaps the man, who was older, just didn't understand how catcalling made women feel. Similarly, Grant acknowledged it's possible some men catcall women because they are uncomfortable expressing themselves.

## Sexual Consent Negotiation

Non-coercive sexual interactions privilege consent from the individuals involved. Our participants talked about sexual consent negotiation after they watched Caleb ask Hanna, "Are you sure?" after they had kissed in the *Pretty Little Liars* clip we showed during our focus groups. All of our participants agreed Caleb was asking Hanna if she was okay with having sex. Some of our participants assessed Caleb's actions. Omar and Payton, men who attended the same focus group, assumed Caleb was sexually experienced because he wasn't nervous about asking for Hanna's consent. Peyton said, "I don't really think if it was his first time too, he would ask that." Omar, on the other hand, thought that Caleb would still ask even if it was his first time to have sex, but he would have been more nervous about it. Several participants, men and women, perceived Caleb was a "good person" for asking Hanna if she was okay with having sex. Patrick and Keith, who attended different focus groups, said they thought Caleb was being respectful. Owen and Liam, who also attended different focus groups, thought Caleb was courteous. Owen said, "He already asked out of courtesy if it was okay, and she even asked if he had a condom so it [their agreement to have sex] seemed very mutual." Some of our participants considered Hanna's response to Caleb's question as her consent. A few, like Owen, noted Hanna also asked him if he had protection, and they viewed this as an expression of her willingness to engage in sexual activity.



Our teen female focus group participants equated Caleb's verbal consent seeking as an expression of affection. Agatha, for example, took Caleb's question as an expression of love. "That's true love right there," Agatha said, "when you know that he, like, really wants to know, like, what's your opinion about that. Do you really want to do it? Like, he wants to know." She further explained if Caleb didn't like Hanna, he wouldn't have asked for her consent. Other girls thought Caleb's actions were romantic. For example, Elsa said, "I think it was really sweet how the guy, like you could tell, he really wanted to make sure that she was comfortable." Brandy, a college-aged female, appreciated that Caleb was subtle in his approach. She noted he didn't ask her blatantly, "Is it okay if I have sex with you?" because she thought that would have been awkward. Although Brandy did not say so specifically, her comments suggest she thought a blunt request for consent to engage in sexual activity could possibly interrupt the romantic moment (i.e. "kill the mood"), and she liked that Caleb was able to ask Hanna for her consent while maintaining their romantic connection.

A few of our participants noted that asking for sexual consent makes sure the individuals involved actually want to have sex. Evelyn noted Caleb took a moment to pause after he asked her for consent so Hanna could consider her response. Betty also thought Caleb's request indicated "He wanted to make sure that she [Hanna] didn't have regrets either." Evelyn's and Betty's comments suggest they understand sexual consent seeking can serve to protect individuals from later regretting sexual activity. Keith identified that such a question conveyed the man wasn't going to force the girl to do anything sexual. Further, a couple of participants noted that some types of men will not ask for consent. Chelsea identified men who consider women to be sexual objects would likely not ask a woman for consent. Other participants simply noted that a "bad guy" wouldn't ask a woman for her consent. Our analyses indicate a difference between women who perceived a sexual consent request to be romantic and those who viewed such a request as mandatory to establish consensual sexual activity.

Some of our male participants, however, suggested Hanna had "consented" to sexual activity simply by going overnight camping with Caleb. Lorne said, "I mean like, I think they are already out there like camping together it's kind of the decision's already been made." Similarly, Owen said if two people stay overnight together, it's implied they will have sex. As Lorne noted, "I don't know just given the context of, like, where they were and what they were doing, like it's pretty obvious that they're going to hook up. That's just, like,

how the progression of that goes." Thus, these male participants thought Hanna's consent for sexual activity took place long before Caleb and Hanna were even sexually intimate. Their comments suggest Hanna should have assumed Caleb would expect her to have sex with him, simply because she agreed to go camping with him. None of the women in our focus groups, however, made similar suggestions. Although women noted that by choosing to go camping, Hanna may have placed herself in a vulnerable position (i.e. that Caleb could force her to have sex). They did not consider that she was consenting to sexual activity simply by going camping with Caleb.

During his focus group, Lorne was critical of Caleb's physical appearance. He didn't like that Caleb had long hair, because he thought it was too feminine. Further, he said, "I thought it was kind of feminine how he [Caleb] asked her, 'Are you sure?' I don't know." Lorne then acknowledged that in real life he wouldn't have asked for consent. "I mean, if I was hooking up with a girl, I wouldn't be asking are you sure?" Lorne said. The other male participants laughed at Lorne's comment, and then a number of them made comments about how Caleb and the program *Pretty Little Liars* were feminine. Lorne's comments indicate he views sexual consent seeking as non-masculine. His comments suggest he adheres to traditional gender norms.

Sexual consent negotiation often follows a pattern of gendered behavior scholars have identified as the traditional sexual script (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Conroy, Krishnakumar, & Leone, 2015; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014; Katz & Schneider, 2015; Ryan, 2011). Research suggests exposure to media's traditional sexual scripts, for example, is associated with men's intentions not to adhere to their partner's sexual consent decisions (Hust, Rodgers, Ebreo, & Stefani, 2016; Hust et al., 2014, 2015). Thus, the negotiation of consent is a gendered interaction in which the internalization of male dominance and female passivity is rejected or accepted (Hust, Rodgers, & Bayly, 2017). One way men can enact this dominance is through repeated requests for sex. Men are far more likely than women to use repeated requests to try to convince their partner to engage in sexual activity (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003).

## Sexual Aggression and Coercion

Although our participants thought they could identify who would be a potential sexual aggressor, sexually aggressive men cannot be identified by their

clothing, tattoos, size, or demeanor. They can be physically attractive, clean cut, charming, and likable, just like Braden, who talked with us at length about his strategies to entice women to have sex with him. Braden was adamant he would never force a woman to participate in sexual activity because he was confident there would be a later opportunity with a different girl. "I'm one of those guys that you know," he said, "I know there'll be some other girl, (one) will come around, at some point, maybe next week, maybe next year, so I really don't care." Although he would not force a woman to participate in sexual activity, he said "there's actually a science" to getting a woman "into his bed," and it begins even before he first approaches her. Braden did not identify himself as sexually aggressive, but his strategies, as described below, demonstrate such behavior.

Braden and his friends were aware that women often attended parties and events in groups, which is a strategy young women use to be safe at parties. Braden said he and his friends viewed women's group behavior as an obstacle to their plans to sexually hook up. Braden said a woman's friends can "cock block" him and his friends, which happened, for example, if he tried to get a girl to go back to his room, and one of her friends intervened to suggest she and her friend should leave. Before anyone at the party had started drinking heavily, Braden and his friends purposefully prevented "cock blocking" by making sure a group of men equal to the number of women approached them and initiated one-on-one conversations with each woman. They did this so that each woman in the group was "preoccupied and everyone is talking," which ensured Braden (and the other men) could interact one-on-one with the woman of his choice. After talking for a while, Braden would suggest the woman leave the party with him to either get something to eat or to go somewhere quiet to talk.

Once they were alone, Braden followed a plan that began with touching the girl on her elbow while they were talking. If she pulled her arm away, he said, he tried touching her elbow again. Braden said he then gradually moved to touching her on other parts of her body until he touched "her thigh or something" and then moved "down (to) her privates." If at any point the girl said no, Braden stopped that particular touch, but he would not withdraw from her completely. "I go to, like, touch her thigh or something, she, you know, go down her privates, and she's, like, no, no I don't want to do that, you know, then I'll just take my hand off. I'll keep my arm around her, you know, unless she doesn't want that too." Braden suggested that after a while he will again try to initiate sexual activity because some girls wanted to get to know

a guy for "more than 30 minutes to an hour" before having sex with him. If the woman didn't acquiesce to his advances that same night, however, Braden continued to build intimacy with her by texting her throughout the week and occasionally hanging out with her. Braden suggested he created this intimacy for the primary purpose of hooking up with the girl at a later date.

Braden said waiting while the girl becomes more comfortable "could be a trick," although "it's not something I maliciously do." It is something "that just ends up in your favor," he said, because often the girl would eventually say yes to further sexual activity. "Some, may [have sex] that night or later in the night. And then some, you know, just wait until a couple weekends later," he said. Braden suggested others may view his actions as manipulative (i.e. a trick), but he was also quick to clarify he did not have malicious intent. Braden's understanding of rape and rape culture was rather narrowly defined. He said shows like *Game of Thrones* depictions of incest were not acceptable because incest was rape. His words suggest he was unaware his own sexual scripted behaviors were coercive. Our interpretation of Braden's behavior is that he considered his behavior to be normative and acceptable because he adhered closely to the prevailing masculinity norms among his peer group.

Although we do not know about all of Braden's sexual encounters, what he described to us could be considered coercive. Sexual coercion includes threats of or actual physical force or the use of incapacitation through drugs or alcohol to make a person participate in sexual activity (Griffin & Read, 2012). Sexual coercion also includes making repeated requests for sexual activity until the non-consenting partner agrees to have sex (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004) as Braden described to us. Sexual coercion occurs frequently among college students, with 82 percent of college men and women reporting they engaged in verbally coercive behaviors with a dating partner over the past year (Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000). Braden's repeated initiation of sexual activity, despite his partner's refusal of earlier sexual advances, was coercive, especially if his partner interpreted his repeated sexual advances as pressure to acquiesce.

### Women's Refusal to Unwanted Sexual Activity

Although it's unlikely our female participants had interacted directly with Braden, based on our conversations it appears they had interacted with men who behaved similarly. Farah and Clarissa were single and spoke about ways they negotiated men's sexual advances. Farah said some of the guys she had



gone on dates with at college had sexually propositioned her, and even though she would say "no," she said the men would continue to ask her to have sex. Farah said she learned if you tell a guy "no" to a sexual advance, he'll "just keep bugging you." So, Farah often told guys she's "on her period," so they stopped pestering her. She assumed they think they'll just have sex with her next time, although she didn't intend to see them again socially. Similarly, Clarissa said she consistently gave men excuses when declining sexual activity. Rather than saying "no," Clarissa told men who propositioned her that her roommate had texted her because she was sick, or she used the excuse that she had an upcoming exam so she could remove herself from the situation. "Most of the time," Clarissa said, "they [men] respond better to that than to 'no I don't want it,' 'cause then they're gonna, you know, force it on, you know." Clarissa also explained the tactic of providing an alternative excuse instead of saying "no" was well-known and often used among her female peers. Farah and Clarissa have identified a strategy to negotiate male dominance in the consent negotiation process. Rather than a clear rejection, they provide an excuse that is largely unrelated to their personal desire not to have sex, and so their rejection does not undermine their partners' masculinity or perceived dominance.

Like Clarissa and Farah, our focus group participants thought men would not respond favorably if women refused their sexual advances. After they watched the *Pretty Little Liars* clip, we asked our female, high school focus group participants what would have happened if Hanna had turned down Caleb's sexual advance. They perceived that Caleb would react negatively:

- Fiona: "He'd get really mad."  
 Gabby: "Things would get really awkward."  
 Elektra: "He'd probably force her."  
 Gabby: "They would try to avoid each other if it went super downhill where like she said no, and he got mad about it, and then they fought. And then they would probably try not to talk to each other or stay as far away from each other as possible."  
 Fiona: "Or since they were in the woods, he could try to take advantage of her."

None of the girls suggested Caleb would be supportive of Hanna's decision. Among these young girls, the only plausible outcome was that Caleb would be upset and quite possibly resort to rape to satiate his desire. Research indicates the timing of and rationale for a woman's refusal is key to men's reaction (Van Wie & Gross, 2001). Men were less likely to stop their sexual advance if their partner expressed it was too early in their relationship to engage in

sexual activity but were more likely to stop their advances if their partner said it was against her religious beliefs/waiting until marriage or if their partner expressed concern about pregnancy (Van Wie & Gross, 2001). According to Van Wie and Gross (2001), "The content of the woman's refusal combined with the level of intimacy at which this explanation is provided may affect how seriously her 'NO' will be taken by her partner," (p. 343). Further, men are more likely to coerce or force sexual activity if they are angered or confused by their partner's refusal to participate in sexual activity (Wright, Norton, & Matusek, 2010). Given this, our female participants may be correct to question whether Caleb would react negatively if Hanna refused his sexual advance, and whether this refusal would result in him forcing Hanna to participate in sexual activity.

### Alcohol and Drug Facilitated Sexual Aggression and Assault

Focus group participants thought alcohol often led to men's sexual aggression. After watching the *Jersey Shore* clip, Kevin said he had seen men be sexually aggressive usually when alcohol was involved. Evelyn, a female focus group participant, said, "Sometimes when guys get drunk, they just automatically, like, become more aggressive." Amber, who attended the same focus group as Evelyn, agreed alcohol played a role in Mike's behavior during the *Jersey Shore* clip. "I also think in this, like, situation there's like alcohol involved, so that probably makes him, like, more aggressive, more touchy and more, like, into the girls so that kind of changes the whole thing a little bit."

Many of our participants told stories of friends who had abused alcohol to the point that they wouldn't remember what they had done once they sobered. Tiffany shared a story that was illustrative of the types of stories we heard from our participants. Some participants, like Tiffany, found their friends' stories humorous. Tiffany said:

- One kid [laughs] it's funny to me because it's not me [laughs]. Um, he got really drunk that night and was making out with this girl. And [laughs] one of his friends took a picture and then showed him the picture the next day. And the kid freaked out. He was like, 'why am I kissing a guy?' [laughs], because he couldn't, from the picture, you couldn't tell who it was. He was like, "why did you let me do that?" The guy was like, 'no it's not a guy, I promise [laughs].'

Tiffany felt such an incident wouldn't happen to her, and so she just found it funny. She didn't question whether the "kid" would be harmed or if he would lose social status because the photo of his drunken escapades had been made

public. Tiffany also didn't specify whether the girl involved in the incident also was inebriated or if her social reputation would be damaged by the sharing of the photograph. Tiffany likely thought the situation was funny because in many ways it seems harmless, especially because the two "kids" were just kissing. Regardless of what type of sexual activity occurs, however, such situations are problematic because impaired individuals cannot consent to sexual activity.

Other participants we spoke with also shared stories of their friends' or acquaintances' alcohol-facilitated sexual activities. Braden, for example, told us about one of his friends from a different fraternity house who was in trouble because a girl reported he sexually assaulted her. The girl had gotten very drunk and vomited on herself, Braden said. According to Braden, his friend, Joe, and the girl's friends, helped her get out of her vomit-covered clothes and dressed her in his clothes. The girl woke up the next morning lying in Joe's bed with his clothes on, and Braden said, she understandably "freaked out." Braden didn't think she had actually been assaulted, however, because he trusted Joe, who said he was simply trying to help her.

Braden's story is fraught with ambiguity, and Joe's actions are questionable even though he was likely intoxicated too. In many states, it's illegal to have sex with a person who is drunk because an intoxicated person is considered to be incapacitated and incapable of giving their consent (Griffin & Read, 2012). Sexual assaults on college campuses often occur when the victim and/or the perpetrator are intoxicated (see Abbey, 2002; Lorenz & Ullman, 2016). In fact, among college students, alcohol-facilitated sexual assault may be five times more common than forcible assaults (Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010).

Joe's story was instructive to Braden. Braden said he and his friends worried about having sex with girls who were too drunk, especially when they also were drunk. He said:

That's what actually every guy in the [fraternity] house is worried about is that, you know you're going to hook up with a girl, and, you know, she's going to be blacked out, and you couldn't tell, and none of her friends told you, and we're fucked and I mean that's a big thing.

Because of the serious ramifications of a sexual assault allegation, like Joe faced, Braden and his friends signaled each other if a girl was too drunk at one of their parties. "Or we'll grab her friends, and we'll be like, 'hey she's way too drunk, she has to leave,'" Braden said.

Braden and his friends also have established rules for their parties so none of them randomly hook up with girls who are intoxicated. Braden said:

Like, one of our main rules is find a girl, or you know, bounce around and talk to a couple of girls you know at the beginning of the night before anyone has had any sort of drinks or anything just so you know they know your face, they know your name, they know you guys have talked and then, like, you can actually go back to the room and talk to them and if you're both drunk like you, you know what I mean, you guys still.

It's important to note that Braden refers to both people being drunk. Further, Braden and his friends have established these rules so they can prove they interacted with the girl before either individual was drunk. Braden suggested that publicly interacting with the girl before either individual consumes alcohol will establish to interested parties (perhaps the girl, other party goers or the police) that the sexual intercourse he and she have later is not a random hookup but a natural progression of events.

Morals drove Roy, who was also a fraternity member, to establish a set of guidelines to help him navigate concurrent alcohol use and sexual activity. "It's just not, I don't see it in my moral code really, to, you know, try to, like, have sex with someone that's intoxicated while I'm sober," Roy said. Therefore, Roy would only mix alcohol and sex if both he and the girl were intoxicated or if he were intoxicated and the girl was sober. "Now if like she's intoxicated and I'm sober," Roy said, "and she tries to get up with me I'm, I, no I, that's like a red flag for me. I don't like anything like that, you know." He wanted to avoid such situations because he felt it made him vulnerable to consequences he'd like to avoid. He explained having sex with a girl who is drunk while he was sober would be like a "one-way ticket, to you know, jail time." Although Roy tried to avoid alcohol-facilitated sexual assault, he didn't question how he could tell whether his intoxicated partner actually wanted to have sex with him, when he also was intoxicated. He also didn't question whether he would be able to make good decisions when he was drunk.

Karly, who was quite knowledgeable about sexual consent, pointed out that two people who were both intoxicated should probably not have sex. We talked with Karly about a recent episode on a popular television program *Switched at Birth* in which two characters had sex while both of them were intoxicated. "So, like, I don't know if they brought up the fact that like regardless of which gender is drunk, anyone who is drunk cannot legally say yes. And I believe in that scenario, both of them were drunk, so they technically

couldn't say yes to each other." Although Karly understood an intoxicated person could not legally consent, she also expected women to alter their behavior to avoid being drunk as a means to protect themselves.

Most of the women we interviewed, in fact, said they were aware consuming too much alcohol put them at greater risk for a sexual assault, and this was especially true when consuming alcohol at parties or bars. Farah was also careful when she drank alcohol at parties because men at a party may "see that you're under the influence so that's the perfect time to take advantage of (you)." In the focus groups, women expressed beliefs similar to Farah's. Naomi said, "Um, I mean there's definitely like a lot of guys who are out there who act like that and, like, try and take control over, like, your body or what you're doing or I mean it depends where you're at. They're in a club, and things gets a little more heightened if you're at a party or you know anytime, like, any, like, alcohol [is involved]." Some of our female participants viewed abstinence from alcohol as the only means to protect themselves from becoming a victim of sexual assault. Karly, Clarissa and Tiffany said they simply avoided consuming alcohol, in the same way Willow and Chelsea avoided using the social media app.

Our female participants also shared stories of situations in which men sexually assaulted intoxicated women. Farah told us about a time she and her roommate saw their friend Julie, who was quite drunk, getting ready to leave the party with Sean, a guy all three knew. Farah said Sean looked like he was a "little bit drunk, too." Farah asked Julie and Sean where they were going, she said. Sean told her he was just going to take Julie home, she said. Farah didn't bother them again, she said. Farah said Sean didn't "seem like someone who's pushy or forceful, so we were like okay, maybe he is just walking her home." A few days later, Farah's friend told her Sean and Julie had sex that night. When asked to define Julie's experience, Farah had to think for a moment, then she said:

Not consent probably because I feel, like, when you're not thinking, like, how you normally would, you're not consenting to that. So I don't know if it's rape or something, but I know, like, you do something that you're not thinking of, and especially if the person knows you're not thinking straight, like, um, yeah that probably, it is rape (*Farah laughs*). If you're thinking of it, so it's, like, it's just really shocking.

It seemed as though Farah had an easier time calling Julie's experience non-consensual sex than calling it rape. It's also possible she knew it was rape but was uncomfortable calling it that in front of us. Farah said this incident had

happened within a few months of her interview, and it was clear to us that she still struggled to make sense of the event. She still saw Sean because they have mutual friends, but she avoided being alone with him. She said every time she sees him now she's "disgusted." Farah already had expressed distrust in men, but she said this particular incident contributed to and strengthened this distrust.

A few of our younger participants said they know girls have to be careful at parties, especially college parties. These participants, however, didn't refer to being mindful of how much alcohol they consumed but instead were concerned with date-rape drugs. Rachel said "like, that date rape drug or whatever, and, like, getting roofied and stuff, sure, yeah, you got to be careful for that, never set your drink down." The college students we spoke with were more concerned with becoming too intoxicated, but they were also aware of date-rape drugs. Phillip, for example, had a friend who had been slipped a date-rape drug while at a party attended by between 30 to 40 people. Phillip said six of his friends were at the party and looking out for each other. They found out she had been "roofied" because she was so sick after the party she had to go to the hospital. Phillip said this event made him feel angry and guilty, because he wasn't able to protect his friend. Still, he said his friends haven't changed their behaviors that much since this incident, except that the girls look out for each other a bit more than before. Later in the interview, he noted that all his female friends carry pepper spray, and, he said, "One of them even has a Taser because her mom wanted her to get one especially after the whole roofie thing." Phillip, nor the girl's mom, seemed to consider that a Taser is not useful after someone has been drugged and incapacitated.

Farah's and Phillip's stories of alcohol or drug-facilitated sexual assault are illustrative of sexual assaults on college campuses, in which the victim or perpetrator often are intoxicated (Abbey, 2002; Hines, Armstrong, Reed, & Cameron, 2012). Their stories also involve individuals who were trying to protect or intervene to help the potential victim. Farah realized she had tried to intervene, just as she likely had been told to do at her college orientation. She also realized her attempt to intervene wasn't successful. Farah said if she had it to do over again, she would have told Sean he was "about to go have sex," and she would have asked them both if "that was what you really want." Farah acknowledged, however, that Julie (and Sean to a lesser extent) was drunk, so it's possible they wouldn't have listened to her anyway. Similarly, although Phillip felt guilty he had not been able to protect his friend, he also told us he was limited in his ability to protect his female friends because he "can't really control them."

As Phillip noted, his female friends started looking out more for each other after they had been faced with a potential sexually assault situation. Similarly, after watching the *Jersey Shore* clip, many of our female college-aged focus group participants said they expected their friends would help them out of uncomfortable situations with men. The women talked about texting their friends to let them know they wanted to leave a bar or club. They also mentioned they most often attended parties, bars and clubs in groups of women so they could look out for each other. Brandy said she has been out at a bar and had a friend tell her "like he's being really creepy or something." She said, "I've definitely seen that, or, like, had a girl out and hand me their hand like 'pull me away from this guy really fast or something.'" Thus, many of our female participants relied on their peers to help them navigate unwanted sexual advances from men, especially when at parties or clubs.

### Women's Reactions to Sexual Aggression

The women we spoke with expressed fear and vulnerability when talking about men's sexual aggression, although a few women also discussed ways in which they would feel empowered to stand up for themselves. After seeing the *Jersey Shore* clip, a number of the college-aged women in our focus groups talked about being vulnerable to men's sexual advances. Naomi said the clip reminded her of the physical differences between men and women. "I don't know it was just kind of scary to see, like, that guys are, can be, like a lot bigger and stronger," Naomi said, "and can just like pick people up and take them away." Virginia and Brandy said they would be nervous and scared if a boy physically picked them up when they were at a bar. Neither Virginia nor Brandy mentioned how they would handle such a situation if it occurred. Faith suggested women needed to proactive and be careful around some men. Faith said women had to "watch out for guys like them [the men on *Jersey Shore*]." "I guess they don't treat girls very well," she said, "and they just want one thing."

A number of the girls we talked with expressed being cautious around men, even in situations that might not necessarily be threatening to women. For example, after watching the *Pretty Little Liars* clip, some of our high-school aged female focus group participants said Hanna needed to be careful when interacting with Caleb. Willow, for instance, said: "Well, I feel like she was really vulnerable. He seemed like a good guy but if it [he] was a bad guy, she's in a dark forest with a tent and a fire and a pot. Things could happen." When asked what could happen exactly, Willow said that Caleb could "abuse her

or use her." Willow also said although it wasn't likely, it was possible Caleb could abduct or kill Hanna. Other participants who attended the focus group with Willow agreed with her, but they argued that Hanna had known Caleb for a long time so they thought Caleb wouldn't hurt her. Agatha, however, said it didn't matter how well you know a guy, even if "you've known him since, like, you were babies ... I think it would be a really bad idea to go, like, camping with a guy." This considerable distrust of men was evident in many of the girls' and women's conversations, and suggests they believe myths about men's inability to control their sexual urges. Such distrust of Caleb is perhaps surprising given that he verbally and clearly asks Hanna for her consent to participate in sexual activity. It's possible, however, the girls are basing their concern on personal experience or knowledge. Some of the men in our focus groups believed Hanna had consented to sexual activity simply by agreeing to go camping with Caleb. Given this, our female participants' concerns for Hanna's safety makes sense.

In contrast to the number of women who expressed fear and vulnerability to men's actions, four of our college-aged female participants who watched the *Jersey Shore* clip identified that they would have stood up for themselves if they had been in Snooki's position. Brandi spoke the most blatantly about standing up to men like Mike. "I probably would turn around and like smack the guy or something and be, like, do not touch me like that or something," Brandi said. Mandy spoke less forcefully than Brandi did, but she said she thought the clip showed "you don't have to, you know, agree to do what you don't want to do." Naomi, however, pointed out Snooki and the other women in the clip were maybe not strong enough to stand up for themselves.

### Teen and Young Adult Dating Violence

People often think of dating violence as the type of sexual assault Farah and Phillip described, which involved situations with acquaintances who met at a party. Interpersonal violence also occurs within the relationship context, and two of our female participants disclosed they had experienced dating violence when they were in high school. Teen dating violence has emerged as a pressing social issue over the past decade. Surveys of teens indicate that one in 10 teens who have dated experienced physical or sexual violence within the last year (Kann et al., 2014), and high school girls were more than twice as likely to experience teen dating violence as their male counterparts (Vagi, O'Malley Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015). Teen

dating violence can have short and long-term consequences. Adolescents who experience dating violence are at increased risk for depression, suicide ideation, substance abuse, and victimization and perpetration of intimate partner violence as young adults (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, & Ennett, 2013).

At one point during our three-hour conversation, Farah described a time when she felt "like one of those people in the movies." Farah wasn't referring to the time she attended the junior prom or when she was participating in an athletic event, as one may expect. Instead, Farah felt like "one of those people in the movies" when she was involved in a violent dating relationship. During her senior year of high school, Farah started dating Malik. It wasn't her first romantic relationship, even though her parents had strict rules against her dating boys. After a while, Farah lost interest in the relationship, and she tried to break up with Malik. Malik, however, wasn't ready for the relationship to end, and he threatened Farah. He said he would have a relative "beat me up," Farah said, so she decided to stay with him.

After a while, Malik began to irritate Farah again, and so she told him a second time that she didn't want to be with him any longer. He threatened her a second time. Malik told her he would have five girls attack her on the street, she said. Farah believed he would follow-through on this threat. "So, then again, I was forced to stay in the relationship," Farah said. After this, Farah tried a different technique. She tried to make Malik mad, but this didn't seem to work either. Farah said he would "just keep calling me and keep texting me." He would text her to "answer right now," Farah said. Then Malik started saying he would show up to her (parent's) house. "And, especially because you know, I can't have relationships so I'm just, like, 'oh my gosh, like, this is going to be even worse,' and, um, he's talking about, like, all this crazy stuff." Farah wasn't sure what to do, so she turned to her friends for help. She chose not to turn to her parents because she didn't want them to find out she had been lying to them about the relationship.

Farah said she always tried to break up with Malik over the phone, which is why she thinks he never became physically violent with her. Finally, in the end, "I just had to change my number," Farah said. Farah was thankful she headed to college. "I just really wanted to go to college" she said "because, like, I just wanted to be far away [from him]." Farah didn't specify whether she ever actually broke up with Malik or whether she just effectively disappeared when she went to college.

Farah's dating violence situation was further complicated because she is active on social media sites. She said she unfriended Malik on Facebook, so he couldn't continue to contact her, and so he would no longer be aware of what she was doing. This approach might have mitigated further abuse. Zweig et al. (2013) argue social media tools allow "those involved in dating violence to harass, control, and abuse their partners" (p. 1072). One-quarter of young people in relationships reported they were victims of cyber dating abuse during the past year (Zweig et al., 2013). Further, this cyber dating abuse often occurs simultaneously with in-person physical and sexual dating violence (Zweig et al., 2013).

### Cyber Stalking

Some young people use social media to monitor their friends or partners' lives from afar, a behavior some scholars have labeled "Facebook Stalking" (Lyndon et al., 2011) and others have called "online surveillance" (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). Among our participants, social media, and Facebook and Instagram, provided a means to anonymously observe their past, current or potential significant others. Many of our participants talked about "Facebook Creeping," which is when they scroll through another person's Facebook or other social media feed to find information about that person. Willow, for example, jokingly called this "Facebook stalking," and she said girls would get together during sleep overs to "stalk boys" they liked or popular classmates. Similarly, Braden said everyone "creeps" on social media, although he said this wasn't something a person would admit to others. Not all of the participants agreed, however. Phillip thought "Facebook stalking" was "creepy." "You can, depending on their privacy settings, you can look at every single photo they've ever posted," he said. "Anything that's been posted on their wall," he said, "you can find out who talks to who the most, um, who their friends are, who maybe their families is, where they live, what's their phone number, things like that." Further, a few of our participants mentioned purposefully restricting their review of others' Facebook feeds, because they wanted to respect their romantic partner's or significant other's privacy.

Far more participants viewed "Facebook stalking" as a common activity. For example, Grace admitted to "stalking" her boyfriend Tony's Facebook page. Early in their relationship, she reviewed his Facebook feed that would have been published during his previous relationships, hoping to get a glimpse of what type of boyfriend he would be. Grace also looked at Tony's ex-girlfriend's Facebook feed for similar reasons. Grace admitted to mistrusting men, in

general, and it's possible she was surveying Facebook to gain reassurance Tony would be a good boyfriend. Although Grace thought "Facebook stalking" was acceptable for her to do, she didn't like that her ex-boyfriend stalked her online. She said she had to keep her social media as private as possible, because she had ex-boyfriends who stalk her. When she was in high school, she ended her relationship with Jackson. Grace said Jackson kept contacting her (via texts, phone calls, and social media) even after their relationship ended and even after she started dating Tony.

When Grace and Jackson were talking after they broke up, he revealed details of her life Grace said only she and Tony had posted on social media. Grace realized Jackson was paying close attention to her and Tony's social media sites. Jackson's surveillance of Grace's social media would have seemed odd to some of our participants, but research indicates individuals most troubled over a breakup are most likely to survey their former partner's social media (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). Currently, there are no established clinical guidelines for what constitutes healthy or unhealthy online surveillance (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015).

In response to Jackson's monitoring, Tony and Grace canceled their Twitter accounts. Grace also examined her connections on other social networking sites to make sure she wasn't connected to Jackson or any of his friends. Grace then reviewed all of the accounts connected to her and identified those that were inactive. She assumed Jackson had set up a fake account, so she blocked all of the accounts that were inactive. This meant these individuals could no longer see Grace's social media feed. She figured once she did this "Jackson knew nothing anymore." Despite this, Grace continued to look at Jackson's social media. She felt she had to "be very careful to monitor what he was telling the world." Her vigilance wasn't entirely unfounded, because she discovered Jackson was harassing her online. He had tweeted such things as "Grace is a whore," she said. Unlike Farah, Grace told her parents about the tweets and Jackson's surveillance of her social media sites. Her parents told her to ignore his comments and him, she said. She said her parents told her to realize he was struggling with their break-up, and since he had been a "good guy" when they were dating, neither Grace nor her parents thought Jackson would become physically violent.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our focus group participants interpreted sexual and romantic relationship media content by applying their existing understanding of traditional sexual scripts.

Participants identified whether the media was realistic by comparing it to their personal experiences. Those participants who had attended clubs and parties were more likely to view the *Jersey Shore* video as realistic. Similarly, our older participants, some of whom said had been camping with friends, viewed the *Pretty Little Liars* clip as realistic. Our younger participants, however, thought it was unrealistic for someone their age to go camping without their parents.

The participants' assessment of the content as realistic also seemed to be associated with their interpretation of it. For example, our youngest focus group participants thought Hanna of *Pretty Little Liars* had put herself at risk for rape or physical violence because she went camping alone with Caleb. Given that they hadn't experienced traveling alone overnight with a group of friends, these participants assumed Hanna had acted recklessly. Further, some of these participants assumed Caleb was predatory because they thought it was unusual that someone would take a girl camping without an expectation of having sex. More experienced and older participants, and those who adhered to more traditional sexual scripts, assumed that one, if not the primary, purpose of the camping trip was to facilitate sexual activity. These participants assumed both Hanna and Caleb understood sexual activity was expected if two individuals stayed the night together.

Our findings suggest some of our participants are able to discern even subtle messages in sexual media content, which has implications for our understanding of media literacy. Evelyn, for example, astutely observed Caleb had paused after asking Hanna if she was okay with having sex, so she could consider her answer. Others noted that Hanna expressed her willingness to participate in sexual activity by her affirmative response to Caleb's question and again when she asked him if he had contraception. These findings suggest even our youngest participants understood subtle communication among sexual partners, which can inform research about how young people negotiate sexual consent.

Although the majority of our participants agreed the main message of the *Jersey Shore* clip was that it was okay to treat women poorly, a few of our participants disagreed. These participants identified that Mike's behavior alienated the women around him; therefore, his behavior was not rewarded. This more nuanced interpretation of the *Jersey Shore* clip was rare yet more common among older participants. It's disconcerting that the majority of participants didn't identify that Mike was not rewarded for his behavior. Based on social cognitive theory, these participants may view Mike's behavior as acceptable and may try to mimic his behavior in real life.



Adherence to traditional sexual scripts and beliefs in rape myths influences our participants' understanding of sexually coercive or interpersonally violent situations in real life. Many of our participants perceived that scantily clad women welcomed men's sexually suggestive comments, and a few were more likely to assign culpability to scantily clad women for unwelcomed harassment or sexual advances. In their own lives, some of our female participants reported feeling men's sexual gaze was ever-present. These women, like Willow and Chelsea, made tactical decisions, such as wearing modest clothing, attempting to protect themselves. That women felt restricted in what they could wear is troubling, but equally troubling is their perception that they can prevent sexual assault by covering up their bodies.

Our participants accepted men's behavior that conformed to dominant masculine ideology, even if such behavior was sexually assaultive or aggressive. These findings suggest many of our participants placed blame for sexual harassment, if not sexual assault, on women. Further, they expect men will be sexually aggressive. These expectations normalize sexual aggression and link sexual prowess and dominance to masculinity. Further, that men's social status is connected to sexual prowess suggests peers' acceptance of sexually coercive behavior, such as the behavior exhibited by Mike's *Jersey Shores*' character and our participant Braden. Such beliefs have implications for sexual assault prevention and prosecution.

Braden's tactics to convince women to have sex with him were sexually coercive, and yet our female participants reported many men they interacted with used similar tactics. In fact, the women were accustomed to men not adhering to a clear, verbal "no" to sexual advances, and so they had adopted alternate tactics that included providing excuses that would not undermine their male partner's masculinity. This finding suggests health and communication practitioners aimed at reducing sexual assault may need to focus on empowering young women with tactics to refuse unwanted sexual activity and changing normative beliefs related to men's coercive behaviors.

Our participants spoke about sexual harassment and coercion in their interpersonal relationships. Tolman et al. (2003) argued sexual harassment has become normalized among young people, and our findings support this argument. Our high school and college-aged female participants reported they routinely received unwanted comments about their bodies from others, primarily men. When the women experienced harassment online, they simply disengaged from the social media application. Similarly, when the women experienced harassment in person, they rarely confronted the men. In fact,

the women thought they had no power to prevent boys and men from commenting on their bodies, so they chose to simply ignore them.

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