

Beyond “Just Saying No”: A Preliminary Evaluation of Strategies College Students Use to Refuse Sexual Activity

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Abstract Preventing sexual assault is a core goal for universities as prevalence rates of sexual assault remain high, particularly among college students. A key mechanism thought to decrease rates of sexual assault is teaching college students how to give clear, explicit, verbal refusals. However, there is a paucity of research regarding how college students refuse sex. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand different behavioral strategies college students would use to refuse sex. A sample of 773 heterosexual college students (523 women, 250 men) were recruited from two large southern universities in the USA to complete a survey on sexual communication. Thirty-eight items assessing verbal and behavioral cues that college students would use to refuse vaginal–penile sex were written based on previous, formative research. Items were assessed by the research team through an exploratory factor analyses, followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The results yielded a three-factor structure: direct nonverbal refusals, direct verbal refusals, and indirect nonverbal refusals; CFA results suggested a good fit index for the model. Two independent sample *t* tests were conducted to examine differences in refusal cues across gender and relationship status; significant differences in refusals emerged for both. The three-factor structure depicting refusal cues was similar to previous work depicting cues college students use to communicate sexual consent; such information could inform sexual assault prevention programming.

Keywords Sexual refusals · Sexual consent · Gender differences · College students

Introduction

Sexual Assault and College Students

Sexual assault continues to be a pervasive problem in the U.S. among college students. Sexual assault has been defined as non-consensual sexual contact or penetration, in which the perpetrator has used force, coercion, or other means (e.g., purposeful intoxication) to acquire such contact from another person (Cantor et al., 2015). Recent research suggests that approximately one in five women experience sexual assault while in college (e.g., Daigle, Fisher, & Cullen, 2008; Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017; Ross et al., 2011). Individuals who experience sexual assault report numerous deleterious side effects including posttraumatic stress symptomology and other negative physical, mental, and sexual health outcomes (e.g., Angelone, Marcantonio, & Mellilo, 2017; Jozkowski & Sanders, 2012; Najdowski & Ullman, 2011; Rostad, Silverman, & McDonald, 2014; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). As such, examining factors that contribute to sexual assault is important and aligns with federal recommendations (e.g., White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014).

Consent and Refusal Promotion as a Mechanism to Address Sexual Assault

The promotion of clear, explicit consent is one tactic that lawmakers and educators have endorsed to reduce sexual assault among college students (e.g., Borges, Banyard, & Moynihan, 2008; Daigle, Fisher & Stewart, 2009; Donat & White, 2000; Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005; Jozkowski, 2016; Schewe,

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2006). Consent has been defined as freely given verbal or nonverbal communication of feelings of willingness to engage in sexual activity (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999); however, consent communication is generally not as simple as “just saying yes.” Instead, consent communication is multifaceted and complex (e.g., Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). Indeed, previous research demonstrates that college students use a variety of cues to communicate consent; such cues are verbal and nonverbal as well as explicit and implicit (e.g., Hall, 1998; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014a; Jozkowski, Sanders, Peterson, Dennis, & Reece, 2014b). Furthermore, consent communication may vary based on certain demographic characteristics of the individuals engaged in the negotiation or other contextual factors. For instance, consent communication appears to vary by gender (e.g., Hall, 1998; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Jozkowski et al., 2014a), relationship status of the individuals involved in the sexual activity (e.g., Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Humphreys, 2007), and the sexual behavior(s) being consented to (e.g., Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004; Hall, 1998; Jozkowski et al., 2014a).

Similar to consent promotion, another common sexual assault prevention strategy is the promotion of explicit sexual refusals (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O’Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006). Sexual refusal communication has been described as a consensual communication process, in which one party rejects sexual activity initiations (e.g., vaginal–penile sex; Beres, 2010; Humphrey & Kennett, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999) and the other party complies (Byers & Lewis, 1988); refusals should not be confused with resisting or defending oneself against a perpetrator. As part of refusal skills training, students are encouraged to provide clear, verbal refusals to their partners; this is accomplished via promoting an unequivocal “no” to sexual activity (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; O’Byrne et al., 2006). For example, messages like “no means no” emphasize clear communication of refusals that, ostensibly, would serve as a mechanism to reduce occurrences of sexual assault (e.g., Jozkowski & Humphreys, 2014). Previous research has found that women report using verbal strategies to refuse sex (Burrow, Hannon, & Hall, 1998; Byers, 1980) and that men are more likely to stop the behavior when verbal refusal strategies are invoked (Byers, Giles & Price, 1987; Jozkowski, Marcantonio, & Hunt, 2017; Muehlenhard, Andrews, & Beal, 1996).

Similar to consent communication, refusal communication is not as simple as “no means no.” In fact, according to conversational analysis research, refusing sex in such a blunt manner (e.g., saying “no” outright as recommended in “no means no” refusal promotion) violates culturally accepted norms of conversation (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999), places stress on women to verbally say no, and potentially suggests or implies that if a woman does not say no, she did not adequately refuse sex and may therefore be at fault if sexually assaulted (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999).

Instead, like consent communication, research suggests that refusals are communicated via subtle cues and that men and women are aware of these communication tactics (e.g., O’Byrne et al., 2006, 2008). For example, college students reported that refusals could involve delays, indirect statements, and/or prefacing (i.e., using words like “well” or hesitations like “ahh”; Beres, 2010; Byers & Lewis, 1988; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; O’Byrne et al., 2006). College students reported these subtle cues were followed up with either excuses or justifications for why they are refusing rather than outright rejections (Byers, 1988; Byers et al., 1987; Byers & Lewis, 1988; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; O’Byrne et al., 2006). These types of refusals, however, challenge the notion of needing a strong, forceful “no” to refuse sex.

Similar to consent, there also seems to be gender distinctions in terms of how refusals are communicated. Some women reported feeling wrong, rude, or foolish when using a forceful “no” to refuse sex (Kitzinger & Firth, 1999) or feeling guilty for refusing (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Jozkowski et al., 2017). Instead, women’s refusals were often more related to them saying they were unable (e.g., providing an excuse) to have vaginal–penile sex rather than them indicating unwillingness (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999).

Alternatively, there seems to be comparatively less research assessing how men refuse sex. One reason for this gap may be related to the fallacy that men do not refuse sex (Beres, 2010; O’Byrne et al., 2006); in fact, some men claimed to “have no idea” how to refuse sex (O’Byrne et al., 2006). This could potentially be because the idea seemed inconsistent with how a man “should” feel with regard to wanting sex (e.g., DeSantis, 2007; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; O’Byrne et al., 2006). In other words, there should be no need for men to refuse, because men should always want sex (e.g., Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Wiederman, 2005). Indeed, if it is discovered that a man refused sex, particularly a college man, his masculinity may be questioned (e.g., you are not a “real man” if you pass up an opportunity for sex; Byers, 1996; DeSantis, 2007; O’Byrne et al., 2006; O’Sullivan & Byers, 1996). As such, the only legitimate excuse for refusing sex seems to be related to the characteristics of the potential partner (Jozkowski et al., 2017). That is, men can only refuse sex from women who they deem not worthy of being a sexual partner, generally because they are not attractive (e.g., DeSantis, 2007; O’Byrne et al., 2006). Men also discussed being uncomfortable with refusals due to lack of familiarity with the act of refusing and because of the vulnerable situation it places them in (i.e., feeling as though they may hurt their partner’s feelings by refusing; O’Byrne et al., 2006). Men also reported feeling apprehensive or anxious about sexual communication, specifically, consenting to sex (e.g., Foubert et al., 2006) and refusing sex (O’Byrne et al., 2006).

In summary, previous research suggests that women and men are capable of “hearing” refusals even when the refusal itself does not contain the word “no” and understanding such cues as refusals (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; O’Byrne et al., 2006). However, outside of these limited qualitative studies,

research on how college students verbally or behaviorally refuse sex is somewhat scarce.

Refusal Measurements

There are only a few studies that have measured refusals. More often, this research actually seems to assess people's refusal efficacy, perceptions of sexual refusals, skill to refuse sex if a condom is not present, or resourcefulness of removing oneself from an unwanted and/or nonconsensual situation, rather than assessing actual cues people may use to refuse sex. Measures like the sexual self-efficacy scale (Rosenthal, Moore, & Flynn, 1991), refusal self-efficacy scale (RSE; Zimmerman, Sprecher, Langer, & Holloway, 1995), and the Sexual Resourcefulness Inventory (SRI; Kennett, Humphreys, & Patchell, 2009) have been used to assess people's perceptions regarding their ability to refuse rather than what a person may choose to do or say to communicate their refusal. For instance, items such as, "How sure are you that you would be able to say no to have sex with someone who is pressuring you to have sex?" from the RSE (Brown et al., 2014; Katz & Schneider, 2015) or "When experiencing an unwanted sexual activity advance, I would tell myself I could do something about this" from the SRI (Humphreys & Kennet, 2010; Kennett, Humphreys, & Bramley, 2013) do not assess how refusals are communicated. Although these measures provide valuable information, an assessment of how people refuse vaginal–penile sex is lacking.

Refusal Vignettes

In addition to survey instruments assessing refusal perceptions or efficacy, refusals have also been measured via role-play or vignette assessments (Jaworski & Carey, 2001; Maisto, Carey, Carey, & Gordon, 2002; St. Lawrence et al., 1995; Weinhardt et al., 1998). For example, in these studies, facilitators role-play a specific character who does not want to use a condom or participants read a fictitious story in which one individual does not want to use a condom and their partner does. Participants are then queried about how they would refuse sex in such scenarios. Researchers have often followed up such assessments with discussion about what the individual did to refuse sex in the context of a behavioral intervention to increase refusal skills (Jaworski & Carey, 2001; Maisto et al., 2002; St. Lawrence et al., 1995; Weinhardt, Carey, Carey, & Verdecias, 1998). Although these role-play assessments allow for an in-depth discussion about sexual refusals when there are discordant condom use desires, they do not measure how people refuse vaginal–penile sex generally. More specifically, these studies focus on refusing sex in the absence of a condom, which may imply that the refusal is unnecessary if a condom were present. We are interested in examining people's refusals more generally. Thus, these interventions likely provide valuable tools to increase refusal behaviors, particularly in the context of public health interventions, but do not provide a measurement tool to assess how people refuse sex.

The Current Study

Given that a majority of research assessing sexual refusals is somewhat outdated (e.g., Burrow et al., 1998; Byers, 1980, 1988, 1996; Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Byers et al., 1987; Byers & Lewis, 1988; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; Muehlenhard et al., 1996; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996), draws on studies with small samples (Beres, 2010; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999; O'Bryne et al., 2006), assesses perceptions about one's ability to refuse (Humphreys & Kennet, 2010; Rosenthal et al., 1991; Zimmerman et al., 1995), or uses role-play scenarios about refusals as part of public health interventions (Jaworski & Carey, 2001; Maisto et al., 2002; St. Lawrence et al., 1995; Weinhardt et al., 1998), additional research is warranted. It is important to understand how college students refuse sex, particularly if explicit refusal promotion is part of sexual assault prevention education initiatives.

The existing sexual refusal research is limited and does not assess different behavioral strategies people use to refuse sex. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to (1) better understand how college students refuse vaginal–penile sex and (2) examine potential differences in refusal behaviors based on select characteristics. Due to a paucity of research on sexual refusals, this work is preliminary with the goals of garnering information on verbal/behavioral strategies students use to refuse sex and establishing early patterns of refusal. Two additional constructs were selected to compare group differences: gender and relationship status. These specific demographic characteristics were selected based on the fact that differences across such characteristics have emerged in previous research when looking at college students' consent communication (e.g., Foubert et al., 2006; Hall, 1998; Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski et al., 2014a).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from two large public universities—one located in the Midwest and the other in the Southern U.S. A total of 1021 students who were enrolled in general electives and introductory health courses were initially recruited. Of these students, 81 of them did not complete all measures of interest and were thus removed from the sample. There were two exclusionary criteria; participants who identified as transgender ($n = 2$) or indicated that their sexual orientation was not heterosexual ($n = 46$) were removed due to low sample sizes. Inclusion criteria for participants were being between the ages of 18 and 25 years old and being enrolled in university as undergraduate students at the time of data collection. Finally, students who had insufficient effort responding (IER, e.g., responding "Agree" for all items) were also removed ($n = 72$), yielding a final sample of 773 (75.71% of the original sample). Participants were predominantly female (67%) and White (84%); see

Table 1 for demographics. The mean age of the sample was 20.35 years old ($SD = 1.40$). Students ranged relatively evenly in terms of year in school, and 29% of the sample reported involvement in Greek life (i.e., membership in a fraternity or sorority).

To explore the empirical factor structure of the scale (i.e., using exploratory factor analysis) and evaluate the latent constructs (i.e., using confirmatory factor analysis), the final sample was randomly split into two independent samples—Sample 1 ($n = 386$) and Sample 2 ($n = 387$)—by using SAS PROC SURVEYSELECT method (SAS 9.4) with stratified function by gender and relationship status. As shown in Table 1, the two samples were similar in terms of all demographic characteristics.

Procedure

Students were invited to participate in the study via completing an anonymous paper and pencil survey consisting of 269 closed-ended items and one open-ended item during the last 30 min of class. Participants were told that the survey assessed “college students’ sexual attitudes and behaviors.” For items related to refusal behaviors, participants were specifically instructed to consider the following: “People communicate their willingness or consent to engage in sexual activity in a variety of ways. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements to the question: “In general, how would you let your potential sexual partner(s) know if

you were not going to consent or were not going to agree to have vaginal–penile intercourse with them?”

All responses were anonymous, and participants were notified that their involvement in the study was voluntary; participants did not receive course credit for their participation in the study. As incentive for participation, students had the option of separately entering their e-mail address into a drawing for a one in ten chances of winning and \$50 gift card. Participants’ e-mail addresses could not be linked to their survey responses. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the institutions of data collection.

Measures

The closed-ended items used for the current study consisted of (1) demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, and orientation), (2) item assessing participants’ relationship status, and (3) the pool of 38 items developed specifically for the study assessing how participants refuse vaginal–penile intercourse. Data from the additional items collected in the survey are out of the scope of this study and are not included in any further analysis.

Relationship Status

The survey item “Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?” is used to access participant’s relationship status. Originally, there were six response options

Table 1 Demographic characters for Sample 1, Sample 2, and Combined

Characteristics	Combined ($n = 773$)	Sample 1 ($n = 386$)	Sample 2 ($n = 387$)
Gender			
Female	523 (67.7%)	261 (67.6%)	262 (67.7%)
Male	250 (32.3%)	125 (32.4%)	125 (32.3%)
Ethnicity			
White	650 (84.1%)	322 (83.4%)	328 (84.8%)
African American	53 (6.9%)	29 (7.5%)	24 (6.2%)
Asian American	24 (3.1%)	11 (2.8%)	13 (3.4%)
Hispanic	17 (2.2%)	9 (2.3%)	8 (2.1%)
Multi-racial	29 (3.8%)	15 (3.9%)	14 (3.7%)
Years in college			
1st year	160 (20.7%)	81 (21.0%)	79 (20.4%)
2nd year	200 (25.9%)	101 (26.2%)	99 (25.6%)
3rd year	205 (26.5%)	94 (24.4%)	111 (28.7%)
4th year and above	208 (26.9%)	110 (28.4%)	98 (25.3%)
Greek life			
Yes	224 (29.0%)	124 (32.1%)	100 (25.8%)
No	548 (70.9%)	262 (67.9%)	286 (73.9%)
Missing	1 (0.1%)	–	1 (0.3%)
Relationship			
Single	432 (55.9%)	216 (56.0%)	216 (55.8%)
Involved in a romantic relationship	341 (44.1%)	170 (44.0%)	171 (44.2%)

participants could select from. Due to the small response rate across all the different response options, relationship status was dichotomized into two groups: single (coded 1) versus involved in a romantic relationship (coded 2). These relationship status categories were constructed based on previous research (e.g., Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Jozkowski et al., 2014a).

Development of the Sexual Refusal Tactic Scale

Based on previous formative research (Jozkowski et al., 2014b), thirty-eight items were generated on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree) to assess cues college students would endorse using to refuse vaginal–penile intercourse. The items in this initial item pool were intended to cover a wide array of behaviors that assess different refusal styles. As recommended by DeVellis (2003), specific language from participants' responses was incorporated at the initial item-writing stage in an attempt to reflect accurate language from the target population (i.e., college students).

Of the original 38 items, 17 items were removed for various reasons (e.g., ambiguity, perceived questionable terminology, and conceptual overlap or redundancy) upon consensus among the authors. For example, items that included conjunctions such as “I would go to sleep *or* pretend to be asleep” (emphasis added) were removed due to concern over ambiguous phrasing. Additionally, prior to administration, five professionals who had expertise in this target field reviewed the initial item pool and evaluated the content of individual items. The examination dimensions were divided into content applicability, the clarity of the questions, and the content coverage of each question item for identification.

Statistical Analyses

Following preliminary descriptive analyses, Sample 1 was used to conduct a series of exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to examine the psychometric properties of the latent constructs. Sample 2 was used to perform reliability tests and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to cross-validate the prior EFA model. All analyses were conducted in SPSS 24, except testing the CFA model which was conducted using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2016).

EFA

Principal-axis factoring (PAF) with an oblique rotation was selected to explore the possible latent constructs of this scale. PAF is recommended because this procedure is relatively robust when the assumption of multivariate normality is violated (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; Floyd & Widaman, 1995). In addition, an oblique rotation was performed instead of orthogonal rotation because it is more

sensible at achieving solutions with a simple structure (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Gorsuch, 2014). For determining the appropriate number of factors, several criteria were applied: the Kaiser–Guttman rule, the scree test (Cattell, 1966), parallel analysis (Horn, 1965), revised parallel analysis (Green, Thompson, Levy, & Lo, 2015), and theoretical expectation.

CFA

Since the chi-square test is influenced by large samples (Brannick, 1995; Kelloway, 1995), we followed common practice for global fit assessments in CFA by using other approximate fit indices to evaluate the level of misfit (see review Millsap, 2007). Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest relying on multiple fit indices that are sensitive to different aspects of model fit. Specifically, several recommended model fit criteria were used in this study, including the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR), with the following suggested criteria for good model fit to the data: CFI > .90, RMSEA and SRME values between .06 and .08 indicating there is acceptable data-model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was also used to evaluate the internal consistency of each subscale.

t Test

Due to the preliminary nature of this study, independent sample *t* tests were conducted to examine potential differences in each subscale of refusal style by gender and relationship status (i.e., single compared to in a relationship). These characteristics were selected based on previous research which has demonstrated differences in how consent to vaginal–penile intercourse is communicated (Foubert et al., 2006; Hall, 1998; Humphreys, 2007; Humphreys & Kennett, 2010; Jozkowski et al., 2014a). In addition, a Welch's *t* test was used when samples violated the homogeneity assumption.

Results

The descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) from Samples 1 and 2 are shown in Table 2.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

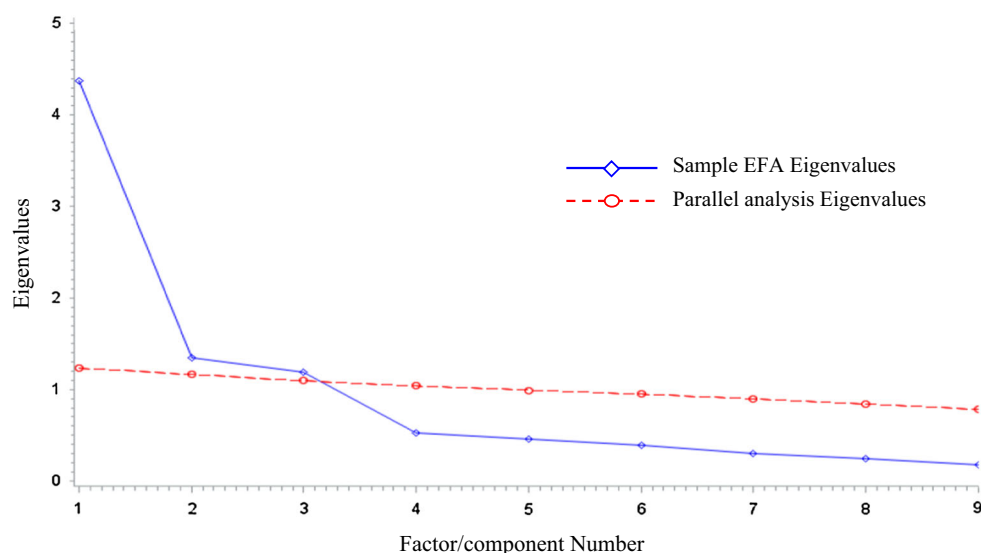
Using Sample 1 data with the remaining 21 items (after the initial illumination of 17 items), a PAF with an oblique rotation was conducted to explore and identify the latent factor structure. The initial EFA results indicated that several items either correlated at .30 or less with a single factor or severely cross-loaded on other factors. Therefore, a conservative approach regarding item retention decisions was executed such that for an

Table 2 Item content and descriptive statistics for Samples 1 and 2

Item	Sample 1 (<i>n</i> = 386)				Sample 2 (<i>n</i> = 387)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skew	Kurtosis	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skew	Kurtosis
1. I would say that I have no interest in engaging in sex with this partner (9)	2.76	.92	-.21	-.84	2.86	.81	-.28	-.73
2. I would use body language (12)	3.06	.73	-.59	.45	3.06	.74	-.60	.39
3. I would let my partner know using physical signals (18)	3.05	.73	-.48	.30	3.06	.72	-.64	.66
4. I would talk to my partner about the fact that I don't want sex (22)	2.98	.79	-.47	-.18	3.03	.78	-.53	-.08
5. I would tell my partner no (29)	3.13	.77	-.67	.21	3.13	.76	-.66	.24
6. I would stop giving my partner attention (33)	2.48	.79	.08	-.42	2.55	.85	-.03	-.59
7. I would move away from my partner (34)	2.67	.77	-.29	-.19	2.69	.84	-.24	-.49
8. I would roll away from my partner (35)	2.68	.76	-.23	-.21	2.74	.83	-.28	-.43
9. I would keep my distance from my partner (36)	2.57	.81	-.18	-.44	2.59	.87	-.13	-.65

The original item number listed in parentheses

Fig. 1 Solid line presents the scree plot from the EFA of nine items in Sample 1 (*n* = 386). The dash line represents the randomly generated eigenvalues using the procedure of Horn's parallel analysis. This figure is generated by using Kabacoff's (2003) SAS Macro program



item to be retained it needed to correlate at .40 or more with a single factor and should not cross-load with other factors over and above .20. After removing 12 items, the final EFA solution was nine items and yielded a three-factor model. A parallel analysis was also conducted, which creates a random dataset with the same number of observations and variables as our original dataset in order to confirm the number of factors retained from the APF and our factor structure (see Fig. 1). Additional criteria for determining the appropriate number of factors also supported this three-factor solution.

Based on a qualitative evaluation of the item content within the pattern of item-factor loadings, we labeled the three factors as follows: direct nonverbal refusals, direct verbal refusals, and indirect nonverbal refusals. As shown in Table 3, factor loadings ranged from .67 to .92 and correlations between refusals factors were moderate (i.e., ranging from .40 to .52).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Using Sample 2, a CFA was conducted on the three-factor model that reflected the prior EFA measurement model. Not surprisingly, the χ^2 statistic was statistically significant [$\chi^2_{(24)} = 59.605$, $p < 0.001$] for the three-factor model likely due to the large sample size. As such, we applied other global fit assessments which provided approximate fit indices (i.e., CFI, SRMR, and RMSEA; Milsap, 2007) to evaluate the level of misfit. The three-factor model demonstrated a good data-model fit (CFI = 0.982; SRMR = 0.032; RMSEA = 0.062, 90% CI 0.042–0.082). All factor loadings were significant, providing evidence to support convergent validity of the indicators (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The completely standardized solution for this final model is shown in Fig. 2.

Reliability

Coefficient alpha reliabilities for total and subscale scores were computed; our total scale had an alpha of .85, with direct nonverbal having an alpha of .92, direct verbal having an alpha of .82, and indirect nonverbal as .73. Together, these

Table 3 Exploratory factor analysis solution using Sample 1 with an oblimin rotation

Item	F1 Direct nonverbal	F2 Direct verbal	F3 Indirect nonverbal
Factor loadings			
7	.92		
8	.87		
6	.79		
9	.70		
4		.79	
5		.77	
1		.67	
2			.84
3			.80
Factor correlations			
F2	.52	—	—
F3	.46	.41	—

Factor loadings < .20 are omitted

findings support the reliability and validity of the scores from the three-factor solutions.

Comparison of Refusal Cues

Gender

All three refusal cues significantly differed by gender, with women reporting greater endorsement of the cues compared to men. In other words, women reported they endorse use of direct nonverbal, indirect nonverbal, and direct verbal refusals more than men (see Table 4). In addition, the effect sizes (i.e., eta square) ranged from small to medium (.018–.092).

Relationship Status

A significant difference emerged across relationship status with single men and women being more likely to endorse use of direct nonverbal refusal cues compared to participants who reported being in a relationship (see Table 5). There were no significant differences for direct verbal and indirect nonverbal refusal cues between participants who were single or in a relationship.

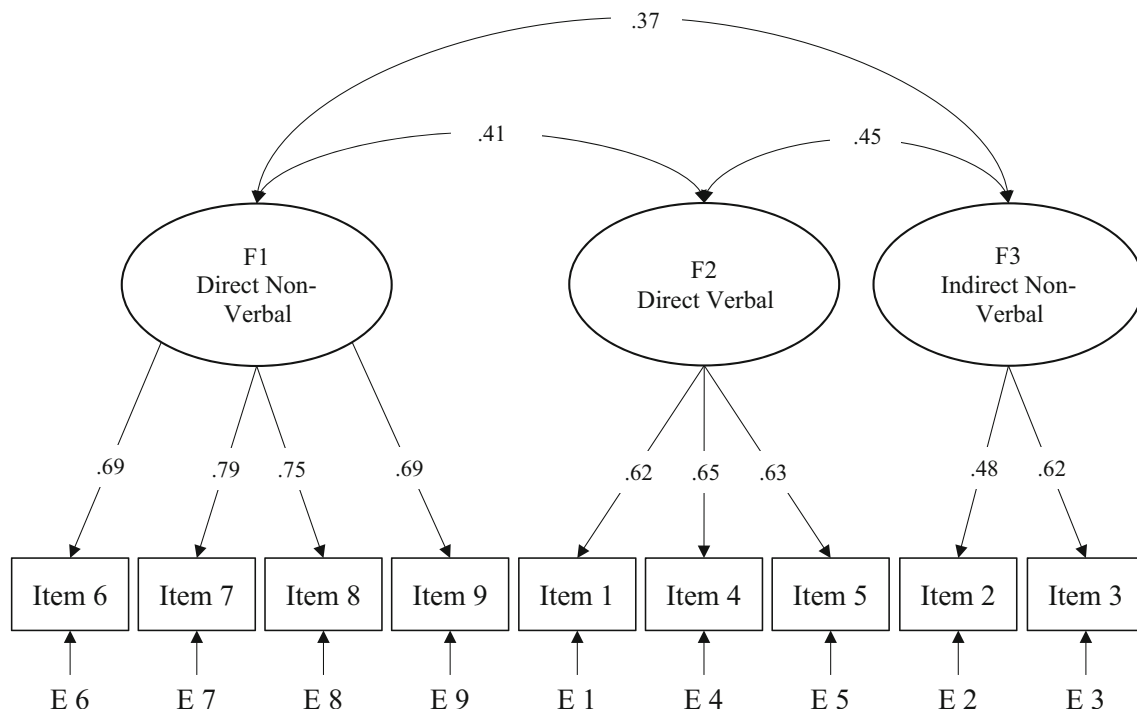


Fig. 2 Completely standardized solution for refusal style model. Note the inter-factor correlations are moderate among all the factors

Table 4 Comparison of refusal styles between men and women

Subscale	Women (<i>n</i> = 523)		Men (<i>n</i> = 250)		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Direct nonverbal	10.76	2.73	9.93	3.11	437.29 ^a	3.77**	.38–1.28	.018
Direct verbal	9.38	1.96	8.03	2.06	771	8.85**	1.05–1.65	.092
Indirect nonverbal	6.34	5.67	1.22	1.34	771	6.96**	.49–.87	.059

^aWelch *t* test was used because of violation of homogeneity***p* < .01**Table 5** Comparison of refusal styles between single and in-relationship

Subscale	Single (<i>n</i> = 432)		In-relationship (<i>n</i> = 341)		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Direct nonverbal	10.90	2.62	9.97	3.12	662.78 ^a	4.38**	.52–1.33	.025
Direct verbal	9.04	1.87	8.83	2.33	642.28 ^a	1.36	–.09–.51	.002
Indirect nonverbal	6.17	1.23	6.06	1.39	771	1.18	–.07–.30	.002

^aWelch *t* test was used because of violation of homogeneity**p* < .05; ***p* < .01

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how college students refuse sexual activity and to determine whether there were differences in refusal cues based on gender and relationship status. We identified three unique types of refusal cues (factors) endorsed by the participants in our sample: (1) direct nonverbal refusals which involve behaviors like rolling away or keeping a distance from a sexual partner; (2) indirect nonverbal refusals which were ambiguous behaviors such as using body language to refuse sex; and (3) direct verbal refusals which involve verbal expressions of refusals that used the word “no.” These categories are similar to previous findings from studies examining cues to communicate consent to sex (e.g., Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski et al., 2014a). As such, our findings suggest there is a repertoire of cues college students use to communicate refusals like there are for students’ consent communication.

Interestingly, we found differences in refusals across gender and relationship status. For example, there were significant differences in how women and men reported refusing sex with women more strongly endorsing use of refusal cues across all subscales compared to men. This is not entirely surprising given that previous research has found that men and women use different cues to communicate consent (e.g., Hall, 1998; Jozkowski et al., 2014a, b) and ascribe to different roles in the traditional sexual script (e.g., men as sexual initiators; women as sexual gatekeepers; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Wiederman, 2005). Based on the traditional sexual script, women often “decide” whether sex should or

should not occur as the sexual gatekeeper; thus, it would be expected that women would more strongly endorse using refusals than men because they have more opportunity to refuse sex. Related, if women are not supposed to initiate sex, according to the traditional sexual script, men may not find themselves in a position to refuse sex. This may explain why men reported less agreement with using refusal cues across all subscales compared to women. Of course, we know that women do initiate sex and men do refuse. As such, it is important to continue to understand the ways in which men report refusing sexual behaviors.

We found an additional difference in refusals when we compared college students across different relationship status categories. Students who identified as single were more likely to report they would endorse direct nonverbal refusals compared to students who reported being in a romantic relationship. Individuals may prefer these types of refusal cues with a new partner due to concerns about hurting their feelings (Beres, 2010; Jozkowski, et al., 2017; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999) or general embarrassment about refusing sex (O’Byrne et al., 2006). No other significant differences in refusal cues emerged across relationship status, potentially suggesting that, overall, single participants and those in a relationship refuse sex similarly. However, it is important to note that we asked college students to report how they would generally refuse sex. As such, we do not know the specific relationship context of situations they may have considered when answering these questions. More precise, event-level assessment would be useful to better understand how relationship status between partners might influence cues used to refuse sex.

Limitations

Although we present findings that serve to elucidate college students' communication of sexual refusals, it is important to note that limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. First, this study was exploratory with a sample consisting primarily of white, female college students. Future research should work to increase diversity in terms of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and garner refusal cues about a variety of sexual behaviors, not just those used with vaginal–penile sex. This may assist with understanding whether refusals differ across demographic variables and types of sexual behaviors being engaged in.

These data were also derived from a cross-sectional sample, making it difficult to discern temporal factors (e.g., if relationship status influences refusal cues). Future research should assess the relationship status of the individual that one is refusing sex from to better understand how this might influence refusal cues. Additionally, we asked participants to respond about how they generally refuse vaginal–penile sex. Although asking people about their general behavioral patterns seems to be a common practice to assess various health and sexual behaviors (e.g., Beres, 2010, 2014; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013, 2014; O'Bryne et al., 2006), it may be the case that participants' responses were not as precise as they could be given that participants may have summarized their refusal cues across multiple experiences. Researchers should consider the use of event-level data collection techniques in order to increase precision in asking about refusal cues. Future research should also examine the extent to which participants' responses to questions about how they generally refuse sex deviate from or are consistent with event-level measures of their refusal cues. In addition, directions created for these assessments should be clear and direct the participant to remember their most recent sexual refusal to fully ensure that their responses reflect their true behaviors.

Implications for Sexual Assault Prevention Education

Despite these limitations, this study represents an initial examination of different cues college students may use to refuse vaginal–penile sex. Our results were consistent with, but build on, previous qualitative work (Beres, 2010; O'Bryne et al., 2006) by providing quantitative support for the notion that college students would use a variety of methods to refuse sex, many of which are nonverbal and implicit. Although sexual assault prevention programs focus on teaching “no means no” and promote using clear, explicit, often verbal, rejections as mechanisms to reduce miscommunication and consequently sexual assault (e.g., Byers, 1980, 1988; Byers et al., 1987; Rowe, Jouriles, McDonald, Platt & Gomez, 2012), only one of our factors actually included explicit verbal refusals. In other words, our findings indicate that there is an array of mechanisms used by college students to

communicate refusals, many of which include nonverbal, behaviorally driven, or ambiguous and non-confrontational cues. These findings are consistent with previous refusal (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O'Bryne et al., 2006) and consent research (Foubert et al., 2006; Hall, 1998; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999); however, they do not align with recommendations from some sexual assault prevention education approaches that advocate for explicit refusals (e.g., no means no; New, 2014; Rowe et al., 2012; Smith, 2014). These findings could be used by individuals who work with university students, particularly in cases of sexual assault and Title IX to better inform the myriad methods college students report using to refuse sex. Additionally, sexual assault prevention programs could use these findings to better inform college students about the nuanced differences in refusal cues when considering factors such as gender and relationship status.

Focusing prevention efforts on informing students, especially women, to refuse sex via outright “no's” may not be the best approach; indeed, it can also encourage victim blaming (Beres, 2010; Edwards et al., 2014; Kitzinger & Firth, 1999). It is important to reinforce that college students report using a variety of cues to communicate refusals and that this information be presented to faculty and staff on student conduct boards. The variety of cues likely used by college students to refuse sex should be emphasized in order to dispel common rape myths. Programs that promote “no means no” may be well intended, but may do more harm than good by suggesting that it is one person's responsibility to say no, even though these other nonverbal/implicit refusals are used and recognized by others. Taken together, university policies and educational efforts for students and administration could be adjusted to highlight the complexities and realities of sexual consent and refusal (Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

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