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To cite this article: Kristie A. Thomas PhD , Susan B. Sorenson PhD & Manisha Joshi PhD (2016) “Consent is Good, Joyous, Sexy”: A banner campaign to market consent to college students, Journal of American College Health, 64:8, 639-650, DOI: [10.1080/07448481.2016.1217869](https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1217869)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1217869>



Accepted author version posted online: 29 Jul 2016.
Published online: 29 Jul 2016.



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MAJOR ARTICLE

“Consent is Good, Joyous, Sexy”: A banner campaign to market consent to college students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study assessed the recall of, reaction to, and understanding of a brief campus banner campaign promoting consent in sexual relationships, and determined whether campaign exposure was associated with subsequent engagement in activities related to sexual assault education, awareness, and prevention. **Participants:** A stratified random sample of 1,200 undergraduates was recruited during fall of 2010; 628 (52.3%) participated. **Methods:** To account for history and maturation, an experimental research design was employed with an online survey. **Results:** Direct and indirect campaign exposure was associated with increased action. Students expressed primarily positive reactions to and appeared to understand the consent message. The campaign appealed to and was associated with increased activity among a wide range of students with one exception: a negative effect was observed for business students. **Conclusions:** Colorful banners with pithy, upbeat messages hold promise for engaging undergraduates in conversations and proactive activities related to sexual assault prevention.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 December 2015
Revised 6 June 2016
Accepted 24 July 2016

KEYWORDS

Consent; prevention; rape; sexual assault; social marketing

One responsibility of US colleges is to prevent rape and sexual assault of and by students.^{1,2} Such attention is critical, as sexual violence is a persistent and pervasive problem on college campuses and among college-aged women,^{3–6} and victimization can lead to a range of acute and chronic negative consequences for physical, psychological, and behavioral health.^{3,7} Such attention also is required: federal law—most recently articulated in the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act—mandates, among other things, that colleges and universities receiving federal funding offer sexual assault prevention programs.⁸

Sexual assault prevention varies considerably across institutions of higher education.^{9,10} Differences include the intervention's target (eg, men-only¹¹ vs women-only¹²), format (eg, trainings¹² vs posters¹³), and intended outcome (ie, changes in behavior [eg, bystander intervention^{14,15}], attitudes [eg, rape myth acceptance^{16,17}], and knowledge [eg, definition of rape¹⁸]), and each of these factors has been studied to determine contributors to effectiveness.¹⁰ Regardless of such differences, colleges tend to adopt prevention policies and programs that focus on fear of punishment rather than on promoting healthy sexual attitudes and behaviors.¹⁹

Social marketing campaigns, which promote the adoption of positive behaviors,²⁰ hold considerable promise for reducing sexual assault on campus. They can reach wider audiences than can trainings and lectures, and campaigns aimed at similarly widespread public health problems (eg, binge drinking) have been successful in changing attitudes and behaviors.^{21,22}

Although sexual assault social marketing campaigns are gaining popularity on college campuses,²⁰ few focus specifically on consent. In particular, creatively reframing attitudes about the benefits of obtaining and expressing consent during sexual interactions has not been a common health promotion strategy on campus.²³ This oversight is problematic, in no small part because consent is a key issue in campus sexual assault.^{4,24} Many students do not discuss consent directly, relying instead on nonverbal cues, which can lead to miscommunication and misperception.^{25,26} Students also might struggle to identify whether a situation is consensual or nonconsensual, especially if it deviates from the stereotypical notion of rape (ie, use of physical force by the perpetrator and clear verbal refusal by the victim).^{25,27,28} One attempt to counter these misconceptions is the emerging shift (eg, California's SB-967²⁹) from “No means no” to “Yes means yes.”

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The current study describes and evaluates an innovative banner campaign developed to market the concept of sexual consent to college students. It provides important information for college educators interested in understanding the reach they might expect a similar campaign to have on their campus, students' reactions to such a campaign, and its impact on their behavior.

Social marketing campaigns

The concept of social marketing emerged in the early 1970s. In their seminal article, Kotler and Zaltman defined it as “the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research.”^{30(p5)} Social marketing borrows from business marketing but is distinct in that it deals with beliefs and values versus preferences and opinions.³⁰ Effective social marketing campaigns understand the target audience, convey the benefits of adopting the new behavior, benefit society as well as the target audience, and undergo evaluation.²⁰ Generally, there are 4 types of social marketing campaigns: injury reduction, health promotion, environmental protection, and community mobilization.²⁰ Regardless of type—and in contrast to the sexual assault prevention programming of many colleges and universities—most social marketing efforts promote the adoption of positive social norms and behaviors rather than penalize negative ones. Depending on the focus, some campaigns take the positive focus a step further by employing clever language and images to promote attitude and behavior change.²⁰

Sexual assault prevention and social marketing campaigns

Social marketing campaigns about sexual assault share the same overall goal, but they often differ in their focus and target audience. Whereas some focus on intervention after the incident (eg, use of on-campus Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner services³¹), the majority focus on prevention. For example, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) developed a “Know Your Power” poster campaign to raise awareness among college students about the role of bystanders in preventing sexual assault and intimate partner violence.^{32–35} Posters are displayed throughout the campus and depict a variety of scenes in which a bystander can intervene and offer behaviors that the viewer can model if in a similar situation. The campaign was developed as a less time-consuming and expensive vehicle to convey the main aspects of the “Bringing in the Bystander” program,³² an in-person educational program, found to be effective at decreasing rape

myth acceptance and increasing bystander attitudes, efficacy, and self-reported behaviors.¹⁴

Several notable efforts to market consent to college students also have been developed. The “Voices Not Victims” poster campaign at the University of California, Davis, encourages students to seek verbal consent via the slogan “What seems like your cue to continue is really your cue to ask” (www.voicesnotvictims.com).³⁶ At UNH, the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program (SHARPP) developed a poster campaign with the slogans “Got Consent” and “Consent, It Does Every Body Good,” which has since been adopted at other universities.³⁷

Despite their relative ubiquity, few sexual assault social marketing campaigns are formally evaluated.³² The “Know Your Power” campaign mentioned previously is an exception. Exploratory evaluations of the campaign indicate that exposure to posters led to an increase in knowledge of bystander activities³²; moreover, it was associated with an increase both in willingness to take action and in having taken action against violence—particularly when posters were viewed daily.³⁵ The campaign was expanded at the university—images were doubled and displayed on campus buses, table tents, and the login screens of all campus computers—and reevaluated using a quasi-experimental design with 352 students (of 1,327) who completed pre- and post-test measures.³³ Findings were consistent with the behavior changes detected in previous evaluations. In addition, participants' readiness to change increased, even among women, who generally started out with higher scores. These evaluations are particularly useful in supporting a range of strategies beyond trainings (eg, the innovative Green Dot training¹⁶) to promote bystander intervention—currently the main focus of sexual assault prevention on campuses.²

A few observations about existing campaigns

In general, prior campaigns have depicted very specific situations and behaviors, which may not translate to broader concepts related to the prevention of sexual assault. For instance, original conceptualizations of bystander behaviors were limited to direct intervention. A more recent conceptualization, however, redefines bystander intervention to include both reactive and proactive opportunities.³⁸ Reactive opportunities include intervening before, during, or after an assault has occurred; proactive bystander opportunities, however, include taking a gender-based violence course, joining a peer education group about sexual assault, volunteering at a local rape crisis hotline, and changing student organizational policies to address sexual assault.³⁸ The scant research documenting student engagement in such opportunities suggests that it is relatively low.³⁹

Although poster campaigns generally are less expensive and less labor-intensive than educational trainings and workshops, they nonetheless do require resources.³² Such expenditures may not be feasible annually, calling for smaller and more centralized campaigns. In addition, posters must be relatively large in size, strategically placed, and creatively designed to attract the attention of today's college student, who often is focused on a mobile device while walking.⁴⁰

Finally, "know your audience" is a dictum for all presentations. Recent research suggests that a majority of college students know both a victim and a perpetrator of sexual assault and observes that current prevention programs seem to disregard such knowledge.⁴¹ This oversight is problematic. Given that personal connection to a victim or a perpetrator can affect one's willingness to engage in bystander behavior,⁴²⁻⁴⁴ it is likely that it also affects one's reaction to and reception of prevention efforts such as social marketing campaigns. And yet, there is little research on whether and how this variable affects target audience members.

The current study

The purpose of the current investigation was to expand the use of social marketing in sexual assault prevention by developing and evaluating a banner campaign promoting consent as an essential and enjoyable aspect of sexual relations. We used a mixed-methods approach to assess 2 study aims in a stratified random sample of college students: (1) recall of, reaction to, and understanding of a time-limited, pro-consent banner campaign; and (2) whether exposure to the banner campaign was associated with engagement in proactive bystander activities.

Methods

The social marketing campaign

Provocative, brightly colored banners were created by a graphic artist following informal individual conversations and group discussions with students at a private space on campus. Five messages about consent were displayed: Consent can be Revoked, Consent is Best When Consensual, Sex without Consent Isn't Sex, The Joy of Consent, and Consent is an Aphrodisiac. A sixth banner—Consent Lubricates Relationship—was stolen 2 days into the campaign and is not included herein.* All used a unique font and the same 2 bright colors: hot pink and red.

*The creator of the banners greeted this news with enthusiasm, inferring that if someone liked the banner so much that he or she stole it, he had been successful. His hope is that it hangs in a fraternity for years.



Figure 1. One of the banners displayed during the campaign.

Banners were displayed for 1 week along the university's main pedestrian walkway. The walkway is a primary means by which organizations reach students; information is disseminated in multiple forms (eg, banners hung on poles, people handing out flyers) on a diverse array of issues, events, and volunteer opportunities. By university regulation, banners are limited to a specific location on the walkway and can be displayed for only 1 week. By our count, nearly 1,000 people walk by the banner section of the walkway each noon hour.[†] See Figure 1 for an image of a banner along the walkway.

Study participants and procedures

In the fall of 2010, a stratified sample of 1,200 undergraduates (300 freshman, 300 sophomores, 300 juniors, and 300 seniors) was recruited from a private, medium-sized university located in an urban setting. To control for potential historical and measurement effects,⁴⁵ members of the sample were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 groups:

Group 1	O	X	—
Group 2	O	X	O
Group 3	—	X	O

where O represents an observation (ie, survey administrations: September 30, 2010–October 14, 2010 and October 26, 2010–November 9, 2010) and X represents the intervention (ie, display of the banners: October 18, 2010–October 22, 2010). The study design is an improvement upon many evaluations of campus sexual assault programming, most of which rely on a simple pre- and posttest design, one of the weakest research designs.⁴⁵

[†]All 3 authors participated in counting pedestrians on multiple days during the noon hour so as to obtain the most accurate estimate of foot traffic (ie, potential exposure to the banners).

In an effort to understand how best to obtain an acceptable response rate,[‡] a series of individual and group conversations with undergraduates was undertaken. We followed their 2 main recommendations: make the survey less than 5 minutes long and offer multiple incentives. (Participants were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing for ten \$50 gift cards to a vendor of their choice or one \$250 gift card; an additional \$250 gift card was offered to those in Group 2, who were asked to participate in 2 surveys.) Informed consent was obtained at the start of the survey: students were presented with a description of what participation entailed, the risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of the study. Students clicked a button indicating consent in order to proceed to the survey questions. The University of Pennsylvania's institutional review board reviewed and approved all study procedures.

Two response rates were calculated: by questionnaire and by respondent. The weblink was opened for 802 (50.1%) of the 1,600 surveys; in 785 (97.9%) of the 802, the participant gave informed consent and continued to the survey itself, and 645 (82.2%) of the surveys that were started were completed. The response rate was 50.5% (404 of 800 of surveys) in the pretest and 49.8% (398 of 800 surveys) in the posttest, yielding 802 surveys for analysis. The response rate for individuals was 52.3% (628 of 1,200) and varied somewhat by group: 53.5% for Group 1, 56.0% for Group 2, and 49.5% for Group 3. The resulting sample was roughly comparable to the composition of the student body in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and school within the university. (The gender and ethnicity [ie, white to students of color] composition of the undergraduate population is roughly equal; about 10% of students are from outside the United States) Thus, in terms of participation and representation, the study sample is of good quality.

Measures

Whether the participant saw the banners was a key variable. To reduce social desirability bias that would result in false positives, we developed a series of questions rather than ask students directly whether they had seen them. Because banners about a wide variety of topics are displayed on the main walkway through campus, we needed to cue the students as to which banners they were being asked about. To avoid biasing responses by using a certain descriptor for the banners, 1 of 3 descriptive frames was randomly assigned to the set of questions asked of each respondent, namely, that the banners were

about sexual relationships, sexual assault, or consent in sex. The type of descriptive frame was included in the multivariate analysis to account for any possible effect it might have had on recall of and reaction to the banners.

Those who reported seeing the banners were asked a series of follow-up questions about the banners, including 4 closed-ended questions—Where did you see them? (5 possible campus locations were listed); Did you like them? (yes/no/other); Did you talk with anyone about them? (yes/no); and Did you tell anyone else to go see them? (yes/no)—and 3 open-ended questions—How would you describe them?; What do you think was their main message?; and What was your overall reaction to them?. We operationalized campaign exposure as “yes” if the participant reported seeing the banner campaign *and* correctly remembered the location ($n = 199$); all others were considered to have not seen the banners. This decision likely led to including some participants who actually saw the banners—but did not correctly remember where—in the “no exposure” group. The consequence is to reduce the likelihood of finding differences between the 2 groups.

To assess reaction to individual banner images, all participants in the posttest group ($n = 398$), regardless of whether they reported seeing the banners on campus, were presented 3 of 5 randomly selected banner images and asked 2 follow-up questions after each image: a closed-ended dichotomous (yes/no) question (“Did you like the image?”) and an open-ended question (“What reactions or thoughts did you have when you first saw it?”). After the images were shown, participants were asked, “Thinking of the images that you just saw overall, what stood out about them for you?” with 3 response options: colors, message, or something else. Those who selected “message” or “something else” were asked to elaborate.

We assessed whether students personally knew a victim or perpetrator of sexual assault, which may have affected their awareness of and reaction to the banners, via 8 dichotomous (yes/no) questions from the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES).⁴⁸ The SES, developed by Koss and Oros, has been used in over 30 years of research with college students and has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$ for women and $.89$ for men) and test-retest reliability ($r = .93$).⁴⁹ The questions focus on male-on-female sexual assault, the most common form of sexual assault. A recent revision of the SES, which takes into account male victims, alcohol-facilitated assault, and other considerations, is available⁵⁰ but was not used so as to keep the survey brief. Portions of the SES have been used successfully in prior Web-based research.^{18,51}

[‡]Prior research using online surveys with undergraduates have obtained response rates ranging from 18% to 42.2%.^{4,46,47}

The 8 SES questions were presented with a preamble instructing participants to include knowledge of others' as well as their own experiences. For victimization questions, participants were told:

The next set of questions is about your personal knowledge of sexual assault. In these questions "anyone" means any women you know, including your women or girlfriends, girl or women relatives, and, if you are female, yourself. You will not be asked to indicate who had any of these experiences. Do you know anyone who ever...

The preamble was followed by behaviorally specific descriptions of the 8 types of sexual assault; descriptions ranged from "giving in to sex play when she didn't want to because she was overwhelmed by a man's continual arguments" to "having sexual intercourse when she didn't want to because a man threatened or used some degree of physical force." To assess knowledge of a male perpetrator of sexual assault, the preamble and questions were modified to ask about perpetration. Findings about students' knowledge of sexual assault victims and perpetrators are reported in detail elsewhere.⁴¹ Whether the participant personally knew a sexual assault victim or perpetrator or both was included in the multivariate analysis.

Dependent variables

In both the pre- and posttest survey, participants were asked about their participation in 9 activities that can be considered what McMahon and Banyard have called proactive bystander opportunities.⁵² In the pretest, participants were asked whether they had done any of the following 7 activities since the beginning of the fall semester: attended a rape prevention workshop; attended a lecture about sexual assault; attended a speak-out about sexual assault; attended a self-defense class; had a conversation about sexual assault in general; had a conversation about a specific sexual assault case; or participated in another event about sexual assault. Participants in the posttest were asked, "Since the Fall break [which was right before the banner campaign began], have you done any of the following?" with the same response options as in the pretest. A by-product of the research design, the number of potential activity days varied for the pre- and posttest participants (23–38 and 9–23 days, respectively) and was taken into account statistically.

Analysis

Our first aim was to assess the degree to which the campaign reached the intended audience and the degree to which their responses aligned with the goal of highlighting the importance of consent. Specifically, we assessed

recall of, reactions to, and understanding of the banner campaign and images of individual banners. We calculated descriptive statistics for responses to closed-ended questions and used grounded theory techniques⁵³ to analyze responses to open-ended questions. The latter involved multiple rounds of coding in order to determine the frequency of responses and generate initial codes and categories. Responses were 5 to 35 words long, which was sufficient for organizing data into categories. Throughout coding, we used the technique of constant comparison (ie, comparing responses within and across participants) to determine the robustness of categories.⁵³

The second aim was to determine whether there was a positive association between the banner campaign (independent variable) and subsequent proactive bystander activities (dependent variable). The time frame for engaging in proactive activities was longer for the pretest group than for the posttest group, so we calculated a weekly activity rate for each respondent. We used *t* tests to compare groups on rate of engagement in bystander activities and linear regression, first with the entire sample and then with posttests only, to assess the association between the campaign and subsequent proactive activities. The multivariate analyses took into account respondent demographic characteristics, personally knowing a victim of sexual assault, and personally knowing someone who had perpetrated sexual assault. Prior to multivariate analysis, standard diagnostic statistics (ie, correlation matrices and tests for multicollinearity) were examined for each predictor and found to be generally acceptable.

Results

Recall of the pro-consent banner campaign

About two thirds (66.8%) of the 374 posttest respondents reported seeing banners on campus. Of the 240 participants who reported seeing the banners and where they saw the banners displayed, 82.9% remembered the location correctly ($n = 199$).

The extent of recall differed according to cognitive frame (see Table 1). Of the 124 participants for whom banners were described as about "sexual assault," 83 (66.9%) said they saw them, but only 71 (57.3%) remembered the location correctly. Describing banners as about "sexual relationships" elicited 92 "yes" responses out of 130, but only 66 (50.8%) remembered the location correctly. Finally, of the 120 participants who had the banners described as "consent in relationships," 75 (62.5%) said they saw them, but only 62 (51.7%) remembered the location correctly. Those who reported seeing the banners *and* correctly recalled the location were 35.7% of the "sexual assault" group, 33.2% of the "sexual

Table 1. College students' recall of and reactions to banners promoting consent in sexual relationships (%).

Recall of banners	Total (n = 374)	Cognitive frame		
		Sexual assault (n = 124)	Sexual relationships (n = 130)	Consent in relationships (n = 120)
Remembered seeing the banners	66.8	66.9	70.8	62.5
Remembered banners and location correctly	53.2	57.3	50.8	51.7
Response to banners ^a	Total (n = 199)	Sexual assault (n = 71)	Sexual relationships (n = 66)	Consent in relationships (n = 62)
Liked the banners	78.2	74.6	78.5	82.0
Told someone to see the banners	6.1	4.3	6.1	8.2
Talked to someone about the banners	33.0	35.2	33.3	31.2

Note. Percentages for cognitive frame variables reflect the affirmative responses for each column total, which, in turn, reflects having randomly assigned participants to only 1 of the 3 cognitive frame prompts.

^aIncludes only those participants who reported seeing the banners and correctly remembered the location where the banners had been displayed (n = 199).

relationships" group, and 31.1% of the "consent in relationships" group. In other words, describing the banners as about sexual assault elicited highest recall; describing them as about sexual relationships elicited highest discrepancy between perceived and actual sighting. Banners about consent, the construct of interest in this study, fell in the middle for both recall and discrepancy between perceived and actual sighting.

Recall of banner content was extremely high. The majority of participants (87.4%) answered the open-ended question asking them to describe the banners they saw; of those 174 participants, 93% offered a response indicating accurate recall. The most common descriptions were "attention-grabbing" or "eye-catching" and "colorful" or "bright." Other frequent descriptors were effective; clever, witty, funny; simple, clear; big, bold; and provocative.

Reaction to the pro-consent banner campaign

Overall, reaction to the banner campaign was positive. The majority of the participants who saw the banners on campus (78.2%) reported that they liked them (see Table 1). There were slight variations according to the cognitive frame: those prompted with banners about

"consent in relationships" had the highest liking (82%), followed by banners about "sexual relationships" (78.5%), and banners about "sexual assault" (74.7%).

Responses about the individual banner images offered insight on how the banners were and would have been received (see Table 2). (Recall that questions about the banner campaign were asked only of those who reported seeing it *and* accurately recalled the location of the display, whereas questions about individual banner images were asked of everyone in the posttest following the online presentation of the images). Participants appeared to like some images more than others: Joy of Consent (63.5%), Sex without Consent isn't Sex (60.2%), Consent can be Revoked (57.9%), Consent is an Aphrodisiac (51.8%), and Consent is Best when Consensual (50.5%). To describe what participants liked and disliked about the banners, we turn to the open-ended questions about the banner campaign and the individual banner images. We present these findings by type of reaction: positive and nonpositive (ie, indifferent, mixed, or negative).

Positive reactions

A total of 163 participants who saw the banners on campus described their overall reaction. Of those, 57.4% were solely positive, with responses falling into 4 general categories. First, 30.1% of the participants expressed agreement with and support for the banners' overall message and cause (eg, "It is a good campaign and very attention-grabbing."). Second, 22.6% of the participants indicated that the banners were an effective way to raise awareness, consciousness, and knowledge (eg, "They were a good way to get people to think about the importance of consent."). Third, 21.5% of participants commented on the presentation style of the campaign, particularly its cleverness, catchiness, humor, visual appeal, and specific messages (eg, "I thought they were funny slogans and are easily memorable."). Finally,

Table 2. College students' perceptions of and reactions to individual online banner images (%).

What stood out about the images		
	Liked it	Recalled seeing it
Colors (n = 362)	73.1	
Message (n = 361)	80.9	
Something else (n = 341)	26.4	
Joy of Consent (n = 223)	63.5	43.5
Sex without Consent isn't Sex (n = 221)	60.2	56.6
Consent Can be Revoked (n = 223)	57.9	40.4
Consent is an Aphrodisiac (n = 224)	51.8	54.9
Consent is Best when Consensual (n = 222)	50.5	43.7

12.9% of the participants reported unspecified positive reactions (eg, “good/positive”).

Positive reactions to the 5 online banner images focused mainly on tone and message. In terms of tone, participants described liking how clever, witty, and playful the images were. This was common for “Consent is an Aphrodisiac” (eg, “This poster is hilarious and gets its point across. Two of my guy friends have approached me laughing about this and telling me they liked it. I laughed out loud when I saw it the first time. We all NOTICED it and stopped to read it.”), “Joy of Consent” (eg, “I thought it was very whimsical. I like how it portrays a very serious issue with a hint of playful manner.”), and “Consent is Best when Consensual” (eg, “It’s a cleverly worded slogan”). Those who liked the images also consistently agreed with and supported the message. This was particularly common for “Sex ~~without Consent~~ isn’t Sex,” (eg, “That is true; sex without consent is rape.”), and “Consent can be Revoked” (eg, “This is such an important factor in the issue of consent, that some people forget or do not realize.”).

Nonpositive reactions

Nonpositive reactions among those who saw the banners on campus fell into 1 of 3 categories: negative (13%), a mix of positive and negative (11.1%), and indifferent (15.4%). In general, negative and mixed reactions involved skepticism about the banners’ effectiveness at changing attitudes or behaviors (eg, “They were well made but it isn’t clear how effective they will be, if at all, in reforming the behavior of the people who would commit forms of sexual assault or rape or women who put themselves in risky situations.”).

Negative reactions to the 5 online banner images differed by image. We focus on the 3 reasons that were common to all. First, participants expressed confusion or disagreement with the message or images on the banner. This reason was relatively common for “Sex ~~without Consent~~ isn’t Sex” (eg, “You shouldn’t cross out ‘Without consent’ because you end up reading ‘Sex isn’t sex.’”) and “Consent Can be Revoked,” particularly because of the use of lips in place of the letter “O” (eg, “I sort of feel like the lips make it seem like the woman is promiscuous or enjoying it, which doesn’t exactly seem to go along with the message it’s trying to give.”). The second reason was difficulty reading the message due to the font or other features of the image. This was more common for “Consent is Best when Consensual,” primarily due to negative reactions to the font (eg, “The lettering of consensual, particularly the “a,” was too difficult to make out and determine what the word actually was, which took away from the message it was trying to get across.”). The third reason had to do with disliking the colors (eg,

“too red/pink” and “alarming”) or the font (“annoying”). The colors were the most common reason for disliking “Consent is an Aphrodisiac” (eg, “Red and pink clash, so the letters kind of blend in.”).

Understanding the pro-consent banner campaign

The overwhelming majority of students understood the message that the campaign intended to send, that is, consent in sex is necessary and positive. Evidence comes from 3 questions, 1 posed to those who saw the banners (“What do you think was the banners’ main message?”) and 2 posed to all respondents after being shown each of 3 randomly selected images of the 5 banners (“What reactions did you have when you first saw the image?” and “What do you think the message is?”). We present these findings according to respondent group.

Among those who correctly remembered seeing the banners on campus, 87.4% (174 of 199) offered responses that indicated an accurate understanding of the intended message. Responses fell into 3 categories: pro-consent (eg, “That consent is of the utmost importance, and should be prized, earned and protected by both men and women”), anti-rape (eg, “That it is never ok to force any sex acts upon anyone no matter what”), or both (eg, “Their main message was that consent is important and that sexual assault/rape is wrong.”).

Reactions to the 5 online images fell into 1 of 5 categories. First, close to half of participants understood and agreed with the intended message of each image (eg, “It discusses sex in terms of ‘YES’ versus just ‘NO.’”). Second, roughly one fifth of the participants understood the message but expressed dislike, disagreement, or skepticism (eg, “I get the point about consent but is this really going to make a difference? I think these messages need to stop trying to be ‘cute’ and be more graphic and evocative.”). Third, 12% of participants misunderstood the message and its intentions (eg, “I just don’t agree with promoting intercourse for its own sake, nor do I think it’s safe.”). Fourth, roughly 10% of participants explicitly expressed confusion about the message (eg, “It is confusing and doesn’t make sense.”). Fifth, in less than 7% of cases, understanding was not discernable (eg, “Interesting claim.”). Finally, when asked about the message of the images, 89.3% of the 131 respondents commented that consent is necessary and good (eg, “To consider consent as much a part of the ‘sexual pleasure’ as the actual act.”).

Impact of exposure to the banner campaign

Table 3 reports the mean weekly activity rate for each of the 8 proactive activities and for 2 cumulative variables

Table 3. Mean proactive activity rates by timing of and direct exposure to banners, *t* tests.

	Overall		After banners	
	Before banners	After banners	Did not see	Saw
Proactive activity	(<i>n</i> = 380)	(<i>n</i> = 374)	(<i>n</i> = 175)	(<i>n</i> = 199)
Had conversation about the general topic of SA	0.16	0.27***	0.28	0.33
Had conversation about a specific case of SA	0.16	0.15	0.15	0.12
Followed news report about a specific case	0.08	0.10	0.07	0.13
Attended lecture about sexual assault	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04
Attended sexual assault speak-out	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.00
Attended rape prevention workshop	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Took self-defense class	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.01
Volunteered at a rape crisis center	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
Any activity	0.18	0.34***	0.34	0.37
Total number of activities	0.41	0.61***	0.57	0.60

Note. SA = Sexual assault. Proactive activity engagement is standardized by week.

****p* < .001.

(ie, rate of engagement in any activity and for the total number of activities). The most common activities were having a conversation about sexual assault in general and having a conversation about a specific case of sexual assault. Bivariate analyses involved 2 comparisons: when the respondents took the survey (ie, before vs after the campaign) and, among the posttests, whether or not they

saw and correctly remembered the banners. There were no differences for any of the activities in the second comparison; however, the first comparison documented substantial increases in the rate of conversing about the topic of sexual assault (0.16 vs 0.27; *p* < .001), engaging in at least one proactive activity (0.18 vs 0.34; *p* < .001), and the number of activities (0.41 vs 0.61; *p* < .001).

Table 4. Multiple regression analyses of exposure to banner campaign and rate of subsequent engagement.

Variable	Full sample			Posttest only		
	Converse about topic of SA (<i>n</i> = 731)	Any proactive activity (<i>n</i> = 719)	Total proactive activities (<i>n</i> = 731)	Converse about topic of SA (<i>n</i> = 363)	Any proactive activity (<i>n</i> = 354)	Total proactive activities (<i>n</i> = 363)
After banner campaign (vs Before)	0.11***	0.16***	0.21***	NA	NA	NA
Saw the banners ^a (vs Did not)	NA	NA	NA	0.10**	0.09**	0.15
Personally know a SA victim (vs No)	0.02	0.04	0.09	0.02	0.04	0.01
Personally know a SA perpetrator (vs No)	0.06*	0.04	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.17
Gender (vs Male)						
Female	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.04	-0.04	-0.05
Race and ethnicity (vs White)						
Asian	-0.03	-0.01	0.02	-0.04	-0.01	0.05
Black/Latino/Multiracial	0.01	0.02	0.04	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01
Year (vs Senior)						
Freshman	0.02	0.01	-0.07	0.07	0.05	0.05
Sophomore	-0.01	-0.02	-0.05	-0.00	-0.03	-0.06
Junior	0.03	0.02	-0.08	0.09	0.07	0.24
Division (vs Arts & Sciences)						
Engineering	-0.01	-0.01	-0.05	-0.00	0.01	0.02
Business	-0.05*	-0.07*	-0.16**	-0.12	0.13*	-0.30*
Nursing	0.09	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.16	0.11
Cognitive frame (vs Sexual relationships)						
Banners about consent	NA	NA	NA	0.14**	0.09	0.11
Banners about sexual assault	NA	NA	NA	0.02	-0.02	-0.07
Constant	0.12***	0.16***	0.40***	0.11	0.23**	0.46*
<i>R</i> ²	.07	.10	.04	.10	.08	.04
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.05	.08	.02	.07	.04	.00

Note. SA = sexual assault.

^a"Saw" refers to participants who not only remembered seeing the banners but also remembered the location correctly.

p* < .05 *p* < .01 ****p* < .001.

These findings suggest a possible positive campus-wide relationship between the campaign and subsequent proactive activities.

We next conducted several multivariate regressions to test robustness of the findings related to exposure and engagement in proactive activities. Table 4 reports the coefficients and statistical significance levels of multivariate analyses for the whole sample and for the posttest groups only. Exposure to the banner campaign generally was associated with increased engagement in proactive activities. Several other noteworthy findings emerged. First, demographic characteristics of the individuals were not associated with a change in activity level. Second, exposure to the banner campaign was associated with reduced activity among business majors. And, third, the adjusted R^2 was low ($<.10$) for all models, indicating that key variables associated with changes in participation were not captured.

Comment

The current study demonstrated that a brief social marketing campaign—in this case a pro-consent message delivered via provocative, brightly colored banners—holds promise in conveying the message that consent is necessary *and* sexy and in facilitating engagement in dialogue about sexual assault and proactive bystander activities. Moreover, the campaign appealed broadly: it was associated with increased engagement across all ethnic groups. These findings are particularly timely: according to a Fall 2015 Association of American Universities (AAU) report, nonconsensual sexual contact is common on campus—particularly for female students—yet most students do not feel at risk, intervene on behalf of others, or know about available campus resources for survivors.⁴

Our descriptive and qualitative findings indicate that the banner campaign left a positive impression on those who saw them on campus. The majority of students recalled what the banners looked like and their impression of the banners' underlying message. Moreover, it was evident from reactions to the actual banners and to individual banner images that students largely understood the pro-consent message. In general, slogans with fewer (vs more) words were more likely to be understood and liked. Also, although most students appreciated the use of slightly provocative slogans, images, and colors, a few did not—either because they disliked, disagreed with, or just did not understand the point. Thus, the risk of a recommended social marketing technique²⁰—having “fun” with the message—is losing a portion of the intended audience.

These findings support the use of social marketing techniques, particularly banner displays, in sexual assault

prevention. An appeal of using social marketing campaigns in sexual assault prevention is that they are less expensive and labor-intensive than a course or even a one-time training. Indeed, we found that our campaign was inexpensive and easy to execute, perhaps even more so than existing social marketing campaigns, which typically involve the development of multiple materials and the coordination of their display in multiple locations. That said, each campus is different; those interested in implementing a similar banner campaign—particularly campuses without a central walkway or other high-traffic location—can be expected to make decisions specific to their campus (eg, how many banners to display, where to display them, how long to display them). The use of positive slogans focused on what *to* do versus what *not* to do appealed to participants, a finding that aligns with those from prior evaluations of bystander intervention marketing campaigns.^{33,35} Unlike those campaigns, which typically pair slogans with images of college students, the campaign we assessed utilized tactics including bold colors, a pithy and playful tone, and unique fonts in large banners to attract attention and resonate with the target audience. Findings provide preliminary support for consent campaigns with similar tactics (eg, the pithy and playful tone of “Got Consent?”³⁷) and suggest that promoting self-identification (ie, featuring people who resemble the target audience) might not be as vital in consent campaigns as in bystander intervention campaigns.³⁴

About one third of college students volunteer an average of 40 hours per year,⁵¹ and colleges and universities might consider ways to increase the number of students who include sexual assault prevention into their community service portfolio. Our study findings provide a potential strategy in that participants engaged in several proactive bystander activities at higher rates soon after the banner exhibit: conversing about the topic of sexual assault, conversing about a specific case of sexual assault, and engagement in any activity and in the total number of activities all increased substantially. Moreover, the relationship was particularly strong when the entire sample was considered, which suggests that the banners had a positive effect on the campus as a whole: the increased conversations about sexual assault may have affected students who did not physically see the banners.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

As others have noted, evaluating social marketing campaigns is difficult and requires creativity.^{35,54} The biggest challenge is often random assignment to the intervention (ie, the campaign), and our study was no exception.

Although it was not feasible to randomly assign exposure to the banners, we employed several strategies to bolster validity. In addition, most evaluations of social marketing campaigns assume exposure; however, we not only explicitly assessed exposure but also assessed it conservatively (ie, asking about recall and location) and with some creativity (ie, randomly assigning cognitive frames). Another limitation was not asking participants about their own experience of nonconsensual sexual contact or about a more complete range of bystander activities (ie, reactive activities⁵² were not assessed); however, these decisions were made to keep the survey short so as to maximize participation.

That the campaign seemed to have the opposite intended effect for business students is puzzling. Business students might be more entrenched in or informed about marketing principles and, therefore, are harsher critics or have a particularly demanding course of study that leaves less time for social interactions and engagement in the activities measured here. More research is needed to better understand business students' attitudes toward consent and engagement in proactive activities so as to identify pro-consent marketing techniques that resonate with them.

Finally, engagement in proactive activities was generally low, with some occurring at especially low rates (eg, attending a self-defense class, volunteering at a rape crisis center). These low activity rates are at least partially a result of the study's observation window; regardless, they limited statistical power and the "real-world" significance of the findings. Further research is needed to examine patterns of student involvement over time and their reasons for becoming involved; such information could inform outreach and program development.

Conclusions

The current focus on sexual assault on college campuses is not likely to abate soon. As institutions of higher education work to reduce nonconsensual sexual contact and facilitate a climate in which students believe that their reports about sexual assault will be taken seriously and handled effectively,⁴ they no doubt will need promising interventions. The current study provides preliminary evidence that one of the ways to achieve those goals is to adopt creative campaigns that market consent. The campaign in this study was feasible, memorable, and effective in conveying a pro-consent message and eliciting conversation about sexual assault, a positive step in creating a campus climate that is receptive to reducing sexual assault.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Charles Hall, who created the banners, and Susan Putnins, who helped code the qualitative data.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. The authors confirm that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements, of the United States and received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania.

Funding

No funding was used to support this research and/or the preparation of the manuscript.

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