



University of
BRISTOL

**Constructing Consent: A Sociological Analysis of How External Organisations Frame
Post-16 Sexual Consent Education**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how external organisations construct and communicate sexual consent within post-16 educational settings. In the United Kingdom, consent education beyond age 16 remains inconsistent and dependent on individual institutions, despite growing public concern about the adequacy of sex education at this stage. In this context, external providers play an increasingly significant role in supplementing school-based provision.

Using interviews, observation and document analysis, this dissertation explores how external facilitators frame consent in this post-16 context. It finds that providers often move beyond legalistic definitions towards more relational, embodied and contextual understandings. However, these approaches are inconsistent and constrained by institutional pressures, risk-based messaging and persistent gendered norms. This dissertation, therefore, concludes that consent education is not unified but is instead actively negotiated through competing frameworks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Discussions around sexual consent have become increasingly prominent within public, educational and policy debates in the United Kingdom, particularly in response to growing awareness of sexual violence and harassment among young people. Charities such as Everyone's Invited (2022) have played significant roles in exposing the prevalence of sexual abuse within schools and colleges, with thousands of anonymous testimonies detailing experiences of harassment. These accounts draw attention to both the scale of the issue and the limitations of existing approaches to RSE (Relationships and Sex Education).

Alongside this, campaigns like Make It Mandatory (n.d.) have called for the extension of compulsory RSE beyond age 16. This reflects broader concerns that the current provision is insufficient, particularly at a stage when many young people begin to navigate sexual relationships (Mercer et al., 2013). Yet, at the time of writing, RSE remains non-statutory in post-16 education, resulting in significant variation in the availability and content of consent education at this stage. At the point at which teenagers can consent to sexual activity, formal education on the subject often becomes limited or absent, creating a gap between institutional provision and lived experience.

This gap is increasingly filled by third-sector organisations, who supplement RSE in half of schools (Woolcock, 2023). The assumption here is that they can offer more specialised approaches than teachers. However, despite their growing presence, there is limited empirical research that examines how these organisations conceptualise and communicate consent. Existing studies focus on young people's experiences of RSE, rather than the frameworks and assumptions used by those who are delivering it, providing a research opportunity into how consent is constructed within these educational spaces.

This is sociologically significant as consent is not simply a fixed concept, but something shaped through social norms, gendered expectations and cultural understandings (Beres, 2007; Simon and Gagnon, 1998). Examining how it is framed within educational settings, therefore, provides insight into the values and assumptions being communicated to young people about sex, agency and responsibility.

Consequently, this dissertation explores the way in which external providers both communicate and conceptualise consent within post-16 education. It asks: how do external facilitators frame consent, and do these framings reinforce or contest socially established sexual scripts? In doing so, it moves beyond evaluating effectiveness, focusing on the pedagogical discourses surrounding consent.

Methodologically, my research adopts a qualitative multi-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews, observation of workshops and analysis of educational materials. This enables an exploration of both intended messaging and its delivery in practice, capturing how consent is defined and enacted across different contexts.

This dissertation begins by situating the study within existing literature on consent and sex education, before outlining the methodological approach used to examine how consent is constructed. It then turns to my empirical findings, exploring how facilitators frame consent beyond legal models, how sexual agency and responsibility are negotiated, and how ambiguity and gendered sexual scripts are navigated within education. The final chapter concludes and reflects on the wider implications of these findings for consent education and future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter situates my research amongst existing sociological studies, findings and frameworks, demonstrating its relevance and contribution. It outlines the educational landscape of sex education in England, before reviewing the key theoretical frameworks of this dissertation. The chapter concludes by highlighting the lack of research into how external organisations conceptualise and deliver consent within schools.

External organisations refer to non-governmental, non-profit groups such as charities and voluntary organisations that provide consent or sex education. Such organisations sit outside the formal schooling system but often supplement school-based sex education, particularly in post-16 settings.

2.2 The Educational Context of Sexual Consent

In England, RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) is statutory in secondary schools as of September 2020, following the Royal Assent of The Children and Social Work Act of 2017 (Sex Education Forum, 2021). However, it is up to individual schools to decide how and when this will be taught. Crucially for this research, “The statutory requirements do not apply to sixth form colleges, 16-19 academies or Further Education... colleges” (Department for Education, 2019), meaning that after age 16, RSE is often optional or absent.

Statutory guidance states that schools must develop and publicise their RSE policy on their website (Department for Education, 2019). Reviewing the policy of my previous secondary

school, I recognised discrepancies between what the school claimed students would know by Year 11 and the content that was delivered. Unfortunately, such discrepancies are far from uncommon. Research widely documents inconsistencies in the delivery of RSE within schools, often due to a lack of training, limited time allocation, and teachers' reluctance to engage in discussions of sex or view students as sexual subjects (Allen, 2005; Bragg et al., 2020; Cary et al., 2022; Wright, 2024).

In 2021, when Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) was requested by the government to carry out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, its results revealed a prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment, with children "rarely positive" (2021, p.8) about the RSE they had received at school. Young people often report that such school-based education is given too late, after they have already become sexually active, and the depth of information provided is too limited, with overly simplistic content at ages 15-16 failing to reflect the realities of those already navigating sexual relationships (Allen, 2005; Cary et al., 2022; Guyon et al., 2023). This reflects a call for sex education to be continual and built upon throughout school, remaining age-appropriate all the way until age 18 (Make it Mandatory, n.d.) and past the point where people start to become sexually active, with the average age for first sexual intercourse being 17 (Mercer et al., 2013, p.1786).

The impact of inconsistent and incomplete sex education can be clearly observed. Studies across countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States find that many people reach late adolescence with limited understanding of consent and healthy relationships (Allen, 2005; Cary et al., 2022; Guyon et al., 2023; Williamson et al., 2023). Young people instead draw on a range of informal sources such as peers, pornography, and social media to fill the gaps in their understanding (Allen, 2023; Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2021; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik, 2008). The often-conflicting messages

available across these sources contribute to misunderstandings about sexual consent, limiting the effectiveness of education in preventing harm (Wright, 2024).

Given these widespread misunderstandings and the varied sources from which young people draw knowledge, it's important to establish what is legally meant by "consent" within this research. The 2003 Sexual Offences Act, Section 74 (The Crown Prosecution Service, 2021), defines sexual consent as the agreement by choice, with the "freedom and capacity to make that choice". However, there are many conflicting accounts for what is deemed consensual, with Beres (2007) calling consent a "nebulous concept" (p. 94). Ambiguity arises from gendered expectations, social pressures, and differing interpretations of communication, making consent difficult to navigate in real-world situations, even with legal understanding (Allen, 2003; Beres, 2007; Mitchell and Wellings, 2002; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Williamson et al., 2023).

This tension between formal definitions and lived experiences highlights a key limitation of traditional RSE and creates a space in which external organisations play a growing and influential role (Emmerson, 2010; Woolcock, 2023). Examining how these organisations conceptualise and teach consent is therefore crucial to understanding how consent is constructed and communicated within post-16 education.

2.3 The Role of the Third Sector in RSE

The limited nature of school-based RSE, along with young people's demands for more relevant and inclusive consent education (Guyon et al., 2023), has contributed to the growing importance of the role of external organisations operating in this area (Emmerson, 2010). Part of the third sector, these organisations sit outside of formal

education but are increasingly invited into these spaces to provide workshops or targeted assemblies. I am particularly interested in their involvement in post-16 settings, where the statutory requirements for RSE no longer apply, meaning provision varies widely between schools. The lack of consistent post-16 provision is also reflected in wider public discourse, with the Make It Mandatory campaign advocating for compulsory RSE up until age 18 (Make It Mandatory, n.d.).

As expressed, current research demonstrates that young people are regularly dissatisfied with their school-based RSE, which is often limited and disconnected from their lived experiences (Allen, 2023; Cary et al., 2022; Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2021). Frequently used resources, such as the Tea Video (Blue Seat Studios, 2015), while designed to make consent an accessible concept, have been criticised for reducing consent to an overly abstract and simplistic scenario, especially for older audiences. By focusing on tea rather than sex, there is less personal investment, making boundaries easier to identify (Bragg et al., 2020). Additionally, it overlooks the gendered and social norms involved in engaging in sex, which are not present when drinking tea (Brook, 2026). Such hypothetical scenarios are disconnected from lived sexual experiences, making them ineffective in teaching students about the realities of consent communication. Instead, students should be taught about consent in a way that engages “with the difficulty of the concept or else it will do little to enable young people” (Bragg et al., 2020).

It is within this context of dissatisfaction that schools turn to third-sector organisations to supplement their RSE curriculum, assuming that external providers will be better equipped to address complex areas of sex and relationships. However, despite their presence in educational settings, there is little empirical research into how these external organisations teach or conceptualise sexual consent. Existing studies focus on young people’s evaluations of the RSE they received, rather than the underlying sexual scripts

used by external educators themselves. This is the contribution that this dissertation aims to make.

2.4 Sexual Script Theory

My analysis draws on sexual script theory, which suggests that sexual behaviour is shaped and informed by culturally produced scripts which guide how individuals interpret and enact sexual interactions (Simon and Gagnon, 1998, pp.29–38). These scripts operate at three levels: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic, referring to shared social norms, interactional expectations, and internal desires, respectively.

Research demonstrates that young people are heavily influenced by sexual scripts when interpreting consent (Williamson et al., 2023), shaping assumptions about who should initiate sex, how interest should be communicated, what non-verbal consent looks like, and what makes up a “normal” sexual encounter. These scripts often reinforce heterosexual gendered expectations that position men as initiators and women as gatekeepers of sex (Cary et al., 2022; Healy Cullen et al., 2023; Hust, Rodgers and Bayly, 2017; Masters et al., 2013). Additionally, these expectations and norms can shroud the need for active, mutual, and ongoing communication, contributing to ambiguity about how consent is understood in practice (Baldwin-White, 2019; Rittenhour and Sauder, 2023).

Research by Williamson et al. (2023) illustrates how young people are influenced by gendered cultural scripts, especially when encountering ambiguous sexual scenarios, like when alcohol or power dynamics are involved. When legal or formal knowledge is insufficient, they draw on alternative sources of understanding, such as peers, social

media, and societal norms. Similarly, Cary et al. (2022) found that young people arriving at college or university often rely on scripts shaped during adolescence in the absence of adequate formal consent education, which can lead to misunderstandings about consent and, consequently, negative sexual experiences. These findings are also substantiated by Healy Cullen et al. (2023), who studied secondary school students, using stories about communication to understand what they deemed as consensual. They found that these students were heavily influenced by sexual scripts, such as media and music, to attribute consent to hypothetical scenarios. These scripts often “both upheld and troubled a heteronormative binary that responsabilises women and absolves men” (p. 1556). Further concerns arise from the use of pornography as a sexual script from which young people learn about consent (Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik, 2008).

As demonstrated, there has been much research into how young people use sexual scripts to supplement inadequate formal sex education; however, research has not yet examined how sexual scripts are embedded within the educational materials of third sector organisations themselves. This dissertation contributes to existing literature by analysing how external organisations construct, reinforce, or resist dominant cultural and gendered scripts within their teaching and materials.

2.5 Feminist and Critical Perspectives

Feminist and other critical perspectives argue that discussions about consent should recognise its intersectionality and complexity, along with its emotional nature, going beyond the standard legal definition (Loick, 2019; Narvaja, 2016; Whittington, 2021). Failure to do so creates a binary of consent, often excluding queer people and reinforcing norms that contribute to rape culture. Whittington (2021) argues for an alternative to legal

definitions of consent, suggesting that it should be recognised as a continuum. This encourages more nuanced conversations around desire and agency, aspects which are often overlooked within traditional RSE. Additionally, Loick (2019) argues that relying on dominant legal definitions of consent treats it as a “thing”, such as a transactional agreement, rather than a relational and contextual process. Therefore, education that teaches a “yes or no” binary tends to obscure structural inequalities related to gender and power. These critiques demonstrate a call for consent education that goes beyond legality and considers social contexts. Including these perspectives in my analysis enables a critical evaluation of whether external organisations reproduce narrow binary consent models or embrace more nuanced frameworks.

Critical perspectives are also reflected in the context of digital sexual consent, where Sylwander (2025) argues we must move beyond binary models and adopt an “emotionally attuned, and rights-based understanding of consent”. This reflects broader concerns that education around digital sex cultures is often framed through discourses about risk, shame and surveillance (Dobson and Ringrose, 2015; Livingstone and Mason, 2015). These scripts work to discipline the sexualities of young women by portraying them as responsible for their own victimisation, while neglecting the gendered power relations that lead to online harassment. This aligns with wider feminist critiques that sex education often focuses on the risk and danger for women, rather than pleasure, agency and mutual respect (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Curtin et al., 2011).

Allen (2005) also critiques the tone of conventional RSE, arguing that it “depreciates young people’s own knowledge and experiences, positioning them as child-like rather than as young adults” (p. 397). In her later work, Allen (2023) continues her critique through the lens of popular culture, using the Netflix series *Sex Education* (2019) to demonstrate how fictional media representations can model more inclusive and honest approaches to

consent education. Allen (2023) argues that the series demonstrates how fictional narratives that focus on diversity and inclusivity address the gaps that formal education often leaves (Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2021), positioning it as a valuable resource for young people by answering what she describes as “what [she] wanted to know at 16” (Allen, 2023, p.410). The popularity of Sex Education, which was viewed by over 40 million households in its initial weeks (Hayes, 2019), illustrates a demand for relatable and realistic discussions of all things sex, relationships, and consent. It has been suggested that the series’ widespread success can be partially attributed to the fact that mainstream RSE fails to meet the needs of young people, allowing media representations to provide the inclusive conversations that are currently missing (Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2021). This substantiates the importance of examining how external organisations construct sex education and whether they reproduce the limits of school-based RSE or offer a more diverse and progressive approach that answers what young people want or need to know.

2.6 Contributions to Existing Literature

This dissertation contributes to existing literature by focusing on an under-investigated angle, namely the conceptualisation and communication of consent by external organisations. Despite extensive research into young people’s experiences of consent education, most existing studies focus reflectively on what students wish they had been taught, or an evaluation of the understanding their school-based learning provided them (Cary et al., 2022; Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2021; Guyon et al., 2023). While this is useful in identifying widespread dissatisfaction, it reveals little about the conceptualisation of consent by those facilitating the learning.

Existing research also remains largely focused on formal school settings, with far less attention paid to how consent is delivered beyond compulsory provision, leaving post-16 RSE comparatively underexplored.

Additionally, there is a limited body of work related to external contributors who come into schools to facilitate further learning. Measor, Tifin and Miller (1999) investigated the impact of bringing healthcare professionals into schools to supplement sex education, indicating that specialist contributors can enhance learning, especially where teachers lack training or confidence. However, this study again focuses on students' experiences of RSE, rather than delving into how external contributors conceptualise ideas and sexual scripts relating to consent.

Finally, whilst feminist and critical perspectives highlight limitations of dominant school-based models of consent, critiquing their legalistic framing (Loick, 2019; Whittington, 2021) and arguing instead for more inclusive and relational approaches, there is little empirical work assessing whether third-sector organisations do this in practice.

Taken together, existing literature offers a limited account of how external organisations conceptualise and communicate sexual consent. This dissertation directly addresses this through a qualitative investigation of the messages, narratives, and sexual scripts used by third-sector consent educators.

2.7 Conclusion

Overall, in response to consistent concerns about the quality and relevance of school-based RSE, this dissertation analyses how third-sector organisations construct consent, in relation to sexual script theory and feminist perspectives.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the methods used in conducting the research for this dissertation, providing clarity on why each method was chosen, along with how the research was completed.

3.2 Multi-Method Approach

This research used a multi-method approach, consisting of semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. Combined, these three methods allowed for triangulation, improving the reliability of findings by capturing different aspects of how consent education operates (Bowen, 2009; Denzin, 1978).

This research was informed by a combined sexual script theory and feminist approach, which understands consent not as a fixed concept, but as something that is produced and negotiated through discourse, education, and social interaction. Accordingly, the research methods examined how consent is constructed across different contexts.

3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews formed the central method of data collection, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how facilitators conceptualise and communicate sexual consent within post-16 education (Bryman, 2016). This method was particularly suited to my

research aim as it enabled participants to reflect on both the design and delivery of their workshops, providing insight into the messaging underpinning their practices.

The interviews were guided by a flexible topic guide (Appendix A), designed to ensure consistency across interviews whilst also allowing for participants to elaborate on areas most relevant to them (Bryman, 2016). It included questions on how facilitators conceptualised consent, misconceptions, and issues surrounding gender and power. The guide was used flexibly, with follow-up questions exploring emerging ideas in greater depth.

Over two months, I conducted seven online interviews with facilitators from six organisations that deliver RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) to schools and colleges across the United Kingdom. This included charities, non-profits, and businesses. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), selecting individuals who were directly involved in the facilitation of consent educational workshops for young adults aged 16+. Initial contact was made via email or contact forms, with gatekeepers providing access to appropriate staff members.

Gaining access to participants presented practical challenges, reflecting the relatively small and networked nature of organisations that deliver RSE. Unfortunately, responses to initial contact were limited, requiring follow-ups and flexibility in recruitment strategies. As a result, following a successful observation of two sessions, participation requests were adapted to a single 45-minute interview, rather than the original request for multiple forms of engagement. These dynamics highlight how access to participants is not always straightforward, with recruitment processes shaping the final sample.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the interview process. Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the research and gave informed consent before participation, via Microsoft Forms. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research, without consequence. Interviews took place on Microsoft Teams with transcription enabled and were audio recorded as a backup.

Given the sensitive nature of sexual consent discussions, care was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable and were not required to disclose any personal experiences. For confidentiality, all participants and organisations have been anonymised with pseudonyms. Below is Table 1, which contains all relevant participant information, including their role, which types of research they were involved in, their organisation, and the type of organisation.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Role	Observation?	Document analysis?	Organisation	Type of organisation
Dominic	CEO/ Founder/ Facilitator	No	Yes	<i>Organisation 1</i>	Limited Company
Amanda	Facilitator	Yes			
Lydia	Co-founder/ Co-director/ Facilitator	No	Yes	<i>Organisation 2</i>	Social enterprise
Steven	Programme Lead/ Facilitator	No	Yes	<i>Organisation 3</i>	Charity
Megan	Development Director/ Co-Founder/ Facilitator	No	No	<i>Organisation 4</i>	Non-profit
Jessie	Co-director/ Facilitator	No	No	<i>Organisation 5</i>	Non-profit
Melanie	Director/ Facilitator	No	No	<i>Organisation 6</i>	Charity

Although interviews provided rich and detailed accounts, they are not without limitations. As self-reported data, interviews may reflect an idealised version of practice, especially when analysed in isolation. Additionally, participants may have framed their approaches in ways that align with their organisation's values or perceived expectations. For this reason, where possible, interviews were conducted alongside observation and document analysis, allowing for comparison between what facilitators say, do, and how their messages are formally presented.

3.4 Observation

Whilst interviews provided access to facilitators' reflections and intentions, the method of observation allowed for examination of how these ideas are communicated in practice (McKechnie, Baker and Gold, 2008), which was particularly important given the often-interactive nature of consent workshops.

To avoid ethical constraints associated with working with minors, my observation was focused solely on facilitator delivery, not student participation. I was able to observe the same workshop twice, facilitated by Amanda, as it took place back-to-back, for two audiences of Year 12 students (aged 16/17) in a sixth form college. Observing the same workshop twice enabled assessment of consistency in delivery and familiarity with the content of the session, supporting detailed fieldnotes.

Fieldnotes were taken during and immediately after each session, focusing on key concepts. These included: how consent was defined and framed, language used by the facilitator, and the use of scenarios. Attention was also given to the education techniques

employed by the facilitator to engage the students in the content. This included questioning styles, activities, and the careful management of sensitive topics.

As an observer, I did not actively engage in the workshop, allowing me to focus on the interactional dynamics and facilitation techniques. However, my presence may still have influenced the behaviour of both the students and the facilitator, a phenomenon called the Hawthorne effect (Catalogue of Bias Collaboration, 2017). Nonetheless, observation provided valuable insight into how consent education is performed, rather than simply described.

3.5 Document Analysis

Document analysis enabled an investigation into the official narratives and language used by external organisations, providing an additional layer of insight into how consent education is designed and communicated (Bowen, 2009).

The documents analysed consisted of workshop slides or excerpts of slides from three organisations (Appendix D), obtained following or during interviews. In several cases, participants indicated that they were unable to share materials due to organisational policies surrounding intellectual property, meaning availability was uneven.

This limitation reflects the broader gatekeeper practices shaping access within this field. The document dataset is therefore illustrative rather than comprehensive, but still provides valuable insight into how consent is formally framed and communicated.

My analysis here focused on identifying both how consent was defined and the presence of broader tropes such as gender and power. Particular attention was also paid to the visual design of materials, including the balance between written content and discussion prompts. These features were considered as part of how organisations structure engagement with consent education and whether this is done through content-heavy approaches or discussion-based formats.

Studied alongside interviews and observation, document analysis enabled comparison between intended messaging, facilitator interpretation, and observed delivery, strengthening the overall analytical depth of my research (Bowen, 2009).

3.6 Data Analysis

For analysis, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, selected due to its suitability for identifying patterns in how consent is constructed and communicated across different forms of qualitative data.

My analysis began with familiarisation, involving repeated reading of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents. Initial codes were then generated, capturing recurring ideas and language. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes, reflecting the shared ways of framing consent across organisations. Although multiple patterns emerged, my discussion focuses on the three core themes, selected to prioritise depth over breadth.

It is important to note that participant quotations are not evenly distributed across my analysis, reflecting the semi-structured nature of the interviews and the differing levels of

depth and relevance across participants' responses, with some drawn on more comprehensively to illustrate key points.

I combined both inductive and deductive approaches within my analysis. This meant that, whilst identifying patterns emerging organically from the data on one hand, I was also guided by concepts drawn from existing literature surrounding consent education. This allowed for a balance between data-driven insights and a theoretically informed interpretation.

Additionally, due to the multi-method design of my research, analysis was conducted both within and across data sets, enabling me to identify both consistencies and points of divergence across different forms of data.

3.7 Researcher Positionality

It is important to recognise my positionality and the potential impact this may have had on the research process (Berger, 2015). As a university student with prior academic interest in gender, sexuality, and consent education, my position shaped both research design and data interpretation, particularly in centring feminist critiques of legalistic models of consent.

In interviews, participants may have assumed a degree of shared values or perspectives, possibly influencing them to frame their responses in ways that aligned with what they perceived to be the focus of the research. While this may have allowed for rapport and openness, it also increases the likelihood of socially desirable responses.

To account for this, I remained attentive to how my theoretical commitments may have influenced the identification and prioritisation of patterns within the data. Additionally, I engaged closely with the data throughout the analytic process, ensuring my interpretations were grounded in participants' responses.

Recognising these factors does not undermine the validity of this research, but strengthens it by providing greater transparency, situating my findings within the context in which they were produced (Berger, 2015).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were essential to the design and conduct of this research. Given the sensitive nature of sexual consent as a topic, care was taken to ensure confidentiality and informed consent throughout. This was particularly important given that participants often discussed institutional constraints and limitations, which could carry reputational sensitivities.

Care was also taken to represent participants' accounts accurately and in context, avoiding selective quotation that could distort meaning. These considerations were essential to conducting my research in an ethically responsible and respectful manner.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach adopted in this research and reflected on the processes of data analysis, researcher positionality and ethical

considerations. This provides the foundation for my analysis, presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how external consent education providers conceptualise and frame sexual consent within post-16 educational contexts. Using thematic analysis, my findings examine how consent is constructed not merely as a legal requirement, but as a relational practice, shaped by broader cultural narratives about gender, risk and sexual agency. In line with my theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, analysis is informed by sexual script theory and feminist critiques of traditionally legalistic models of consent. All participant quotations are drawn from interviews, unless otherwise specified.

Across interviews and observations, facilitators referenced the legal definition of consent, which is agreement by choice, with both the “freedom and capacity” to make that choice, as set out by the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, Section 74 (The Crown Prosecution Service, 2021). However, this definition was rarely positioned as sufficient and was instead built upon. Facilitators moved away from a binary yes/no framework of consent, towards an understanding of mutual positivity, pleasure and open communication. This shift reflects the critiques of traditional consent education as identified in the literature, and particularly arguments which suggest that consent should not be reduced to a contractual moment but must be understood as ongoing and situational (Loick, 2019; Whittington, 2021).

Through analysis, I identified three interrelated themes: (1) Constructing Consent Beyond the Legal Definition and Transactional Script, (2) Cultivating Sexual Agency and Mutual Responsibility, and (3) Navigating Ambiguity and Gendered Scripts within School Cultures.

Together, these themes suggest that while external providers generally seek to build upon narrow legalistic framings, the way they construct and communicate consent often varies.

4.2 Constructing Consent Beyond the Legal Definition and Transactional Script

The most prominent theme encountered during this research was that external educators are making a conscious effort to move away from legal frameworks while defining consent, addressing the broader research question of how consent is framed within post-16 education. The legal definition is treated as a necessary but insufficient foundation and is repositioned as a minimal threshold while offering a relational and ethical model of sexual interaction. It is something that educators feel they must cover, but it was characterised as overly simplistic when applied to lived experience.

Existing literature critiques the dominance of legal and contractual models, arguing that they reduce consent to a momentary agreement, failing to capture the contextual nature of sexual interactions (Loick, 2019; Wright, 2024). Drawing on sexual script theory, such models can also reinforce goal-oriented and gendered understandings of sex, in which consent becomes something to be obtained (Simon and Gagnon, 1998; Wiederman, 2005). This theme builds upon these critiques, demonstrating how facilitators are working to actively resist these framings, reconstructing consent as an ongoing, embodied and relational process.

Interviewee Dominic described offering students the legal definition of consent “because we have to”, positioning it as an institutional requirement. This suggests the law acts as a compulsory baseline, but not something that captures the complexity of sexual

interaction. In addition, Melanie describes the law as providing a “really helpful framework”, but not a sufficient definition in itself.

This move beyond legality was also reflected in workshop materials, although with some variation between organisations. Dominic and Amanda’s organisation provided slides that emphasised going “beyond ‘consent’”, focusing instead on positive experiences. An excerpt from Lydia’s organisation’s slide deck similarly asked, “What does consent mean to you?” before going on to offer the legal definition on subsequent slides.

This foregrounds Lydia’s critique of the mainstream RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) curriculum, which she argues “is problematic... because it focuses so much on consent as a legal contract, which completely misrepresents consent”. Her characterisation of consent as a “legal contract” reflects feminist and other critical perspectives, which reject the idea that consent should be treated as a distinct agreement or disagreement, and instead understand it as an interpersonal process (Loick, 2019; Narvaja, 2016; Whittington, 2021).

Lydia’s approach illustrates how facilitators reconstruct consent within the constraints of the curriculum. She acknowledges that it instructs to “teach by the law”, but expresses that within workshops, she goes further to offer two definitions of consent. The first is the legal definition (The Crown Prosecution Service, 2021), and the second is the Latin etymology of the term, which she states is “to feel together through the senses”. Lydia uses the juxtaposition of these definitions to encourage debate among young people about “what the law misses out” and “what has been lost over the years”, positioning the legalistic model as historically and conceptually incomplete.

The contrast between these definitions is significant. The legal model privileges cognitive capacity and individual choice, framing consent as a rational decision, whereas the etymological framing emphasises embodiment and relationality. Here, consent is positioned as something felt and experienced together, rather than declared in a distinct moment. This constructs consent beyond a lawful agreement, as a shared and embodied process, and invites young people to conceptualise consent beyond an established definition. In this way, going beyond the legal definition positions young people as active participants in interpreting and negotiating its meaning.

Similarly, Megan critiques education that relies on abstract theories of consent rather than embodied understanding, arguing that “Consent education has been too much about the theory... rather than the practice of it. How does it feel in our bodies?” This construction echoes feminist critiques of contract-based consent models, which argue that legal frameworks risk stripping sexual interaction of its relational dimensions (Loick, 2019). The emphasis on embodiment, therefore, demonstrates how facilitators are moving towards a model of consent grounded in lived experience.

Whittington (2021) argues that moving away from legal definitions allows us to recognise consent as a continuum, rather than a binary distinction between yes and no. From this perspective, sexual encounters are shaped by varying degrees of pressure, expectation and ambiguity that a singular legal definition struggles to capture.

Dominic goes on to critique what he describes as a mindset of “trying to get something”. When asked about common misconceptions about consent, he reflected that some young people approach sexual situations as if they “have to *get* consent”. In his words, this reduces consent to a verbal “yes” or an absence of a verbal “no”. This mindset leads to the idea that consent is something to be secured, legitimising the pursuit of an already desired

outcome. Dominic's use of the repeated language of "getting" is revealing. It constructs consent as an act of acquisition, reflecting what sexual script theory identifies as goal-oriented models of heterosexual interaction (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p.105-107). Dominic positions such goal-oriented understandings of consent as problematic, rejecting potentially harmful sexual scripts surrounding gender roles and consent.

Dominic then proceeds to advocate for a reframing of consent, in which sexual encounters are recognised as being "complicated" and "vulnerable", with lots of "expectations and pressure". This allows those who are entering a sexual encounter to value feeling "safe" and "positive" rather than seeking authorisation. Here, consent is reconstructed, away from its transactional script, as a process grounded in shared enjoyment. His emphasis on encouraging young people to ensure they are "both having a good time" shifts the focus from avoiding wrongdoing to encouraging reciprocity and creating space for pleasure.

Similar tropes emerged within Steven's construction of consent as "an ongoing practice rooted in mutual respect, clear boundaries, and the freedom for each person to express what they do or do not want without fear of pressure or consequences". The emphasis on "ongoing practice" directly challenges the notion that consent is a singular transactional moment. Instead, consent is constructed as being embedded within power relations, with reference to the potential for pressure or coercion. In this sense, consent is not simply about whether permission has been granted, but about whether individuals feel genuinely able to express their desires and boundaries. This was also reflected in Steven's workshop materials, where consent was not explicitly addressed, but instead embedded within a wider model of "the 10 signs of a healthy relationship", emphasising values such as trust, respect and honesty. However, while these principles align with relational understandings of consent, their generalised nature also risks undermining consent as something that

requires active communication, instead presenting it as something that is implicitly achieved through “good” relationships.

Through observation of a workshop facilitated by Amanda, I experienced firsthand how her organisation moves beyond a legalistic model, with her words and teaching materials emphasising the importance of relationships being “equal, positive and pleasurable”. This was the key message Amanda wanted students to take away from her session. Prioritising these aspects of human interaction can provide a more intuitive framework for navigating intimacy, meaning that consent becomes less about securing explicit permission in one transactional moment. She explained in her interview that this framework helps to “demystify” sexual relationships, encouraging young people to recognise that the same ethical principles that structure friendships should also apply to sexual encounters. In this framing, the presence of these relational qualities becomes a stronger indication of consent than the presence or absence of a verbal “yes”.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how facilitators actively reframe consent beyond legal definitions and transactional models. While the legal framework remains a reference point, it is communicated as being insufficient. Instead, facilitators choose to construct consent as a relational practice, grounded in communication, mutual respect, and shared experience. In doing so, they are attempting to equip young people with a more nuanced understanding of sexual interactions, one that moves beyond the question of whether consent has been technically obtained and towards how sexual encounters can be navigated responsibly and collaboratively.

4.3 Cultivating Sexual Agency and Mutual Responsibility

The shift towards reconstructing consent beyond narrow legal definitions is accompanied by a broader attempt to reshape how young people understand and view themselves as sexual subjects. This theme explores how facilitators frame sexual agency, particularly in relation to the sharing of intimate images, addressing the broader question of how consent is communicated within post-16 RSE.

Existing literature highlights the dominance of risk-based approaches to digital sex-education, which often emphasises the negative consequences of sharing intimate images (Dobson and Ringrose, 2015; Sylwander, 2025), and calls for sex education that recognises the legitimacy of young adults as sexually rational agents, with the capacity to make their own decisions (Allen, 2005; Curtin et al., 2011). This theme builds upon this discourse, with facilitators emphasising empowerment and the legitimacy of pleasure, positioning consent as an expression of individual sexual agency, while also revealing tensions in how risk is negotiated in practice.

Dominic articulated this explicitly, describing the importance of “empowering young people with the fact that... [sex] is something that they should... enjoy and have their own agency around”. He suggests that young people often engage in sex, not because they have reflected on what they “want” or what would make them feel good, but because it’s perceived as “the done thing”. In this account, sexual behaviour is shaped by peer norms and gendered expectations rather than self-determined desire. As Dominic suggests, consent education can therefore become a space not just for preventing harm, but also for encouraging students to ask themselves “Why do I want this?” or “Do I want this?”, positioning consent not as a negotiation between partners, but as a process through which individuals can reflect on their own desires. This pushes back on traditional RSE, which

often positions young people, and especially young women, as sexually passive agents (Curtin et al., 2011) and resonates with existing scholarship, which calls for consent education to move beyond risk avoidance towards the cultivation of sexual agency (Allen, 2005).

This is also echoed through Lydia's etymological definition of consent. Understanding consent as feeling "together through the senses", empowers young people to centre personal connection and shared pleasure within their sexual experiences, contributing to the development of sexual agency. Here, young people are emboldened to identify what they want sexually and navigate towards a mutually positive experience.

The emphasis on sexual agency was particularly prevalent in discussions surrounding the taking and sharing of intimate images. While facilitators widely encouraged young people to reflect on their own desires and boundaries within sexual relationships, this theme revealed significant variation between organisations' approaches to digital sexual practices. In particular, facilitators differed in the extent to which they recognised young people's autonomy in relation to the creation of intimate images, and where they located responsibility when harm occurred.

Amanda described using scenario-based exercises in which students are encouraged to consider how to respond when an intimate image is shared within a group chat without the subject's consent. Rather than focusing on why the image was taken in the first place, the focus is on those who choose to distribute the image without consent. Drawing on what Amanda called an "active bystander" framework, students are invited to challenge the distribution of the image, report the behaviour, and offer support to the subject. Focusing on those who choose to distribute the image was a conscious decision, as Amanda emphasised that questioning why the image was taken can reproduce victim-

blaming narratives and risks moving the responsibility away from the individual who violated the subject's trust.

While Amanda acknowledged that sharing intimate images carries risks, she resists actively discouraging young people from taking them. Instead, she argued that if they want to do it and they “know the risks of it, like it’s your life”, positioning young people, and especially those old enough to consent, as capable of making decisions about their own sexual expression, with responsibility for harm located in the act of non-consensual distribution. The emphasis here is on communicating norms of respect, consent, and care within digital sexual interactions. Through this framing, the circulation of intimate images becomes a question of ethical relationships, rather than personal risk management, with responsibility directed towards preventing harm to others.

In contrast, Steven described a much more prohibitive approach to the sharing of intimate images. He explained that their organisation takes a “hard line”, emphasising that it is illegal for under-18s to take and share sexual images of themselves, highlighting the risks of it “going into the wrong hands”. Rather than empowering young people to navigate sexting safely, if they are going to do it, he deliberately avoids this type of messaging, stating that “we’re not the organisation that’s gonna say, do it and do it safely... we’re saying, don’t do it”. In this framing, responsibility and safety are constructed through avoidance of risk altogether, rather than through ethical relationships with others. Whilst this approach still seeks to protect young people from harm, it positions them as individuals who must be safeguarded from the potential consequences of risky decisions, rather than sexual agents capable of navigating complex digital relationships.

This reflects wider concerns within existing literature that young people’s online sexual practices are framed through discourse centred around risk and protection, often at the

expense of recognising their rights and capacity for agency (Livingstone and Mason, 2015). This tension is even more explicit in post-16 contexts, where young people are legally capable of consenting to sexual activity, yet remain prohibited from creating or sharing sexual images of themselves before the age of 18.

Melanie's account illustrates an attempt to navigate this carefully, acknowledging that while the creation of intimate images may technically be illegal, "the law is there to protect young people and not unduly criminalise them". Rather than discouraging the behaviour outright, her organisation emphasises teaching where and how to seek help and distinguishes between consensual image creation and harmful distribution. In this framing, young people are positioned as both subjects requiring protection and as individuals capable of navigating risk.

Jessie similarly highlighted the tension between recognising young people's autonomy and following institutional expectations, noting that while "people are going to do it", facilitators still have the responsibility of ensuring that students understand it is illegal. This reflects the constraints within which facilitators operate, where messaging must balance realism with the requirements set out by the curriculum.

Although each of these approaches recognises that the sharing of intimate images can lead to harm, they differ in how responsibility for that harm is conceptualised and communicated to young people. Risk-based messaging that emphasises the possibility of images falling into the "wrong hands" may unintentionally place greater emphasis on the decision to create the image rather than on the violation committed by those who go on to distribute it without consent. Furthermore, the repeated messaging of risk in this way normalises the existence of those "wrong hands", constructing misuse as an expected outcome rather than an unacceptable violation of consent. In doing so, responsibility

subtly shifts towards those creating the images, rather than challenging the behaviour of those who violate consent by sharing them on (Dobson and Ringrose, 2015).

This risk-based framing is also reflected in the extent to which consent itself is explicitly discussed within Steven's organisation's sessions. When prompted for a definition of sexual consent, Steven mentioned that his organisation usually doesn't offer one, unless explicitly asked by students. He noted that while looking at the signs for healthy/unhealthy relationships, "conversations about consent often emerge organically". Notably, his organisation creates and facilitates sessions centred around the taking and sharing of intimate images, an issue that fundamentally concerns consent. By framing sexting through legal boundaries and potential risks, and without relating it to consent, the non-consensual distribution of images is presented largely as a legal or safety concern, rather than explicitly articulated as a violation of sexual consent.

In contrast, approaches that foreground consent and bystander responsibility position the distribution of images as a breach of trust and consent between individuals. This difference highlights how the language and narratives around consent are unevenly applied across different areas of sexual education, particularly when the discussion shifts from physical intimacy to digital sexual practices.

Overall, this demonstrates that whilst external facilitators seem to be shifting away from sexual scripts that reproduce harmful and gendered stereotypes, RSE remains inconsistent across different contexts. This disparity reflects wider findings within existing literature, which highlight that young people's experiences of RSE are highly variable, shaped by differences in school provision (Cary et al., 2022; Guyon et al., 2023).

4.4 Navigating Ambiguity and Gendered Sexual Scripts within School Cultures

This final theme explores how facilitators actively navigate ambiguity and gendered sexual scripts in their discussions. This builds on the question of how facilitators communicate consent, and whether they reinforce or move away from established sexual scripts within their RSE practices. Sexual script theory suggests that sexual interactions are structured by culturally embedded expectations, often positioning men as initiators or desirers and women as gatekeepers or the desired (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p. 109; Wiederman, 2005, p.497-500). These scripts can complicate communication and interpretation of consent, particularly in situations of ambiguity or pressure (Beres, 2007; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). This theme examines how facilitators engage with these complexities, highlighting both the persistence of gendered norms and efforts to challenge them.

Interviewees frequently critiqued the reduction of consent to a binary framework of “yes means yes” and “no means no”. Megan reflected that while such messaging has become central to consent education, it fails to account for the “nuances of consent, the complexities, the sometimes grey areas, the sometimes... confusing parts” that are encountered in practice. Rather than rejecting this framework completely, facilitators positioned it as an incomplete tool that risks obscuring the inherent ambiguity of sexual interaction. This tension reflects a broader challenge within consent education: the need to balance clear guidance alongside the complexity of lived experience. In the face of this, facilitators described attempting to create space for more open-ended discussions, encouraging students to engage with uncertainty rather than relying on fixed rules and narratives surrounding consent.

This engagement with ambiguity was particularly evident within both observation and the analysis of Amanda’s materials. She explicitly introduced a “grey area” on a continuum

between consensual and non-consensual encounters. With the help of visual aids, she worked to encourage students to consider situations where communication might be unclear, and to reflect on the social and emotional factors that might shape decision-making within these contexts.

Facilitators' engagement with ambiguity was also shaped by their need to challenge dominant understandings of responsibility within sexual encounters. Across interviews, there was a clear concern that young people often locate the responsibility for navigating ambiguity at the level of individual communication, rather than recognising broader social constraints that can shape this. Lydia reflected that students frequently frame experiences of sexual harassment as "just a part of life", and "so, what's the point in, really, like, reporting it"? This normalisation of sexual harassment reflects a wider cultural context in which gendered behaviours are often both expected and minimised (Dobson and Ringrose, 2015), limiting young people's ability to critically engage with ambiguous or uncomfortable sexual situations.

The tendency to individualise responsibility was also evident in how young people interpret communication within sexual encounters. Dominic noted that students often suggest that if someone feels uncomfortable in a situation, they should simply articulate this explicitly. However, such perspectives overlook how social norms, particularly surrounding gender, shape who feels able to speak and how their communication is interpreted (Mitchell and Wellings, 2002). This links back to articles about college students' beliefs about consent, such as "When a Girl Says No, You Should Be Persistent Until She Says Yes" (Baldwin-White, 2019). In this sense, ambiguity is not simply a neutral feature of sexual interaction but is structured by unequal power relations that can work to constrain expression, especially of young women. This is supported by research which finds that younger women may avoid giving direct refusals to sex due to concerns about

“disappointing” a partner, instead responding with ambiguity such as “I don’t know”, with greater sexual experience linked to increased assertiveness (Mitchell and Wellings, 2002, p.400).

Consequently, facilitators described actively working to reframe these gendered scripts by introducing discussions of power and wider social context within sexual interaction. Dominic’s workshop materials introduced a scenario in which, after a first date, a woman continues having sex with her date at his house, because she decides it’s not worth saying no, even though she had changed her mind. Dominic noted that students often focused on the absence of a clear refusal, suggesting that “there’s no way of knowing” if someone didn’t want to continue. However, when prompted to consider the contextual elements, such as being in the house of someone you haven’t met before, students begin to recognise how the conditions surrounding a sexual interaction may create an implicit power balance.

Facilitators’ engagement with gendered influences also revealed tensions in how these issues are and should be framed within educational settings. Jessie, for example, described a school displaying posters about “toxic masculinity” in its corridors, intended to raise awareness. However, she reflected that these materials risk inadvertently reinforcing the behaviours they seek to challenge, suggesting that it became “almost like, yes, this is what you do to promote [toxic masculinity]”. This demonstrates a difficulty within education where attempts to name and critique harmful gender norms may simultaneously cause them to become recognisable scripts. In this sense, gender is not simply a topic within consent education, but a script that influences how it is communicated. Jessie’s observation that it is “very tricky” to facilitate discussions around gender and sexuality further underscores the uncertainty around the best way to address these topics in an educational setting.

While workshops aim to challenge dominant understandings of consent and disrupt gendered social scripts, their impact is often constrained by the wider social and institutional contexts in which they are delivered. Megan explained that students often view consent as a “one-way” interaction, in which “one person’s asking for it and one person’s giving it”, a framing she noted can carry a “really gendered element”. This aligns closely with traditional gendered scripts, reinforcing a model of consent as something to be obtained (Simon and Gagnon, 1998; Wiederman, 2005).

Megan’s account also highlighted how such understandings are not uniquely present amongst students but can be reproduced within educational settings themselves. She described a situation in which, after she had led a constructive and important workshop on consent, a male teacher wrapped up by saying, “I want you all to remember... boys, you have to ask for consent”, and “girls give consent”. Megan felt this “literally undid all of the work” of her workshop. This illustrates how deeply embedded these gendered scripts remain, and how quickly and easily they can re-emerge.

This is substantiated by Amanda describing instances in which gender and power imbalances are “actually at the school’s level”, reinforced by teachers framing the sharing of intimate images in ways that blamed those who created them. She reflected on hearing a teacher discuss this topic and noted that there wasn’t consideration for the social pressures and power imbalances that may have been at play, and this mindset can easily foster “a culture of shame”, undermining facilitators’ attempts to emphasise context and empathy. This demonstrates how institutional narratives can reproduce the very dynamics that workshops seek to challenge.

This also speaks to the limitations faced by external organisations when they come into schools for a one-off hour-long workshop, once a year. This is a great opportunity to lead progressive and informative conversations around consent, but young people's views will be continually shaped by their wider social context, especially once they leave the room. For that reason, there are strong arguments which support the implementation of comprehensive RSE programmes throughout schools, which are built upon year by year, and include teacher training. Currently, facilitators continually signpost both the time and economic restraints on RSE provision, especially within state schools.

Within the current model, Jessie mentioned that provision is often irregular and dependent on individual schools, describing it as “kind of as and when”, shaped by “the schools themselves and also the time that they have”. Melanie corroborated this, noting that delivery “tends to be a one-off in most situations”, with some schools opting to bring her organisation back annually for different year groups rather than providing sustained engagement with the same cohort of students. These constraints are representative of the broader marginalisation of RSE within the formal school curriculum. Jessie highlighted that RSE is limited and “not given the... importance it should be given”, mentioning that some schools opt to cover all content in a singular “drop-down day”, which can take away from the significance of the content itself.

Facilitators also identified variation in how sessions are received across different school contexts, further complicating the delivery of consistent and impactful consent education. Lydia explained that students in state schools are often more willing to speak openly and “tell you how they really feel”, enabling facilitators to engage directly with underlying misconceptions. In contrast, she noted that students in private schools were more concerned with offering the “right answer”, potentially reflecting a stronger awareness of norms, but also limiting opportunities for more honest discussion. Amanda added to this,

highlighting material differences between schools, with private schools often having access to greater resources and debate training, which she suggested may support more polished forms of participation. She contrasted this with experiences in other school settings, where student responses were often “a lot more interesting”, suggesting greater authenticity in how attitudes are expressed.

These structural constraints are not separate from the challenges of addressing ambiguity and gendered sexual scripts, but actively shape them. Limited time, inconsistent provision, and institutional cultures restrict the extent to which facilitators can meaningfully engage with the complexities of consent. In this sense, ambiguity is sustained by gendered power relations and reinforced within educational settings themselves. While facilitators attempt to disrupt these scripts through discussion and contextual framing, they are constrained by the wider social and institutional environments in which consent education takes place.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how external consent education providers conceptualise and frame sexual consent within post-16 educational contexts. Across all three themes, there are clear efforts to move beyond narrow legalistic and transactional understandings of consent, which are regarded by facilitators as insufficient for capturing the realities of sexual experience. Instead, consent was more commonly constructed in ways that emphasised healthy communication and lived experience.

However, the shift in how consent is constructed is neither uniform nor unproblematic. While facilitators seek to cultivate sexual agency and position young people as capable of making informed decisions about their own sex lives, in practice this is negotiated

unevenly, particularly in relation to the sharing of intimate images. Here, tensions emerge between approaches that emphasise empowerment and responsibility, and those that revert to more risk-based messaging. As such, the framing of consent remains inconsistent across different contexts, revealing underlying uncertainties about how best to balance protection and autonomy, especially for 16-17-year-olds.

These findings also highlight the persistence of ambiguity and gendered sexual scripts, which continue to shape how consent is understood and enacted. Although facilitators attempt to challenge these scripts by foregrounding context and power, their efforts are often constrained by the broader institutional and cultural environments within which they operate. Entrenched gender norms within school contexts often work to reproduce the very dynamics that consent education often seeks to disrupt.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while external providers play a significant role in advancing more nuanced models of consent, their capacity to transform dominant understandings is limited by structural factors. Consent education, therefore, remains a contested and uneven space, in which more progressive framings often exist alongside persistent legal, cultural and institutional limitations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how sexual consent is constructed and communicated by external organisations, within post-16 settings. Focusing on facilitators' perspectives, observed practice and educational materials, this research has demonstrated how consent is not presented as a fixed concept, but is actively constructed through overlapping and sometimes competing frameworks.

In line with existing literature, this research found that consent education is not operating within a shared or uniform framework. While a central contribution of this study is the identification of a shift away from legalistic understandings of consent, there is a lack of a consistent alternative that replaces them. Instead, organisations draw on a range of approaches, shaped by their values and interpretations of what young people need, contributing towards more embodied and context-dependent frameworks.

My findings also draw attention to the limitations of relying on external organisations to address gaps in RSE. While these organisations are often positioned as offering more progressive or engaging approaches, their work is shaped by many of the same institutional constraints as formal education. One-off workshops, time limitations, and existing school cultures all restrict the extent to which more critical discussions of consent can be sustained. However, this is not to suggest that such interventions aren't valuable. Workshops can introduce alternative ways of thinking, disrupt socially established sexual scripts and prompt reflection, but their impact is limited when delivered in isolation instead of as part of a continuous approach and without wider institutional support.

This research also highlights the importance of examining how consent is produced through educational practices. As demonstrated, consent doesn't enter the classroom as

a fixed concept but is shaped through the ways it is explained and contextualised by facilitators. Education, therefore, becomes a key site in which wider narratives around gender and power are reinforced or contested, impacting the critical perspectives of young people.

These findings carry broader implications for how consent education is understood and delivered. The challenge lies not only in what is taught, but in the lack of clarity surrounding the aims of consent education itself. Without a shared understanding of whether consent education should prioritise legal knowledge, risk prevention or sexual agency, provision is likely to remain fragmented, particularly in post-16 contexts.

This dissertation contributes to existing literature by shifting focus away from young people's experiences of consent education and towards the frameworks used by those delivering it. In doing so, it highlights how sexual script theory can be applied not only to understand how sexual behaviour is interpreted, but also how these scripts are actively produced and communicated through educational practices. This reinforces the importance of examining consent as something shaped through discourse, rather than as a stable concept.

Despite these contributions, there are limitations to this study. This research is based on a relatively small sample of facilitators and organisations, meaning its findings are not intended to be representative of all consent education provision. In addition, this research focuses on how consent is constructed and communicated, rather than how it is received. While this reflects the analytical focus of the study, it means that the interpretation of these messages in practice remains beyond its scope.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that consent education within post-16 settings is characterised by variation and underlying tension, rather than a clear or unified approach. While external facilitators are actively moving beyond narrow legal frameworks, what replaces these models remains uncertain. More relational and context-sensitive approaches emerge, but are often accompanied by competing priorities around risk and responsibility. As a result, consent education remains a negotiated, rather than unified practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Topic Guide

Introduction

- Brief explanation of research purpose – do you have any questions?
- Consent confirmation
- Reassurance of anonymity

Role

- Can you describe your role within your organisation?
- What type of consent or RSHE education do you deliver?
- How do you see your role as different to teachers delivering similar content?

Conceptualising Consent

- How do you define sexual consent in your work?
- Are there particular frameworks or definitions you draw on?

Delivery of Consent Education

- What key messages do you aim to communicate to young people about consent?
- Are there particular challenges in delivering this content?

Perceptions of Young People's Understanding

- What level of understanding do young people typically have?
- Are there any typical misconceptions young people bring to consent education?

Reflections

- What do you think works well in consent education?
- What could be improved in the current provision?

Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B

Excerpt from interview with Amanda

Interviewer 18:48

I find it interesting. You're talking about the teachers. Because I was sat with **REDACTED**, I think, in the second one, and I was kind of asking, oh, what to talk consent, ask of you in these sessions. And she was saying, like, they're asked to not really give any input or ask for silence or anything like that. So I found that interesting, that it's kind of in these sessions, it's kind of up to you to, like, maybe change the structure a bit of what people are used to in lessons, where they need to be putting their hand up or being quiet and stuff. So I thought that was really interesting.

Amanda 19:23

They have to be open to it. And I think the schools have different levels of being okay with being open to it. Yeah, there was another thing that just came to mind, Oh, yeah. Currently they're teaching as well. I've been to quite a few schools where they do and I guess this is more about, like, gender for women and power, where they just discourage new taking in any form. And they will say, I literally heard a teacher last week say, you know about scenario that was on the board that was like, there's a nude picture. Who's at fault here? And they were saying, Oh, it's the guy who sent this. And he was like, yeah, and then also, where was the source? And I was like, Oh, okay. And we were like, we don't want to, you know, so we want to try and go and be like, there's so many different reasons that we don't know about why someone might have sent a new picture. It's not their fault if that does happen because they thought they were in a relationship with trust and all that, or they could have been pressured to take that photo. They could have had negative consequences if they didn't take that photo. We just don't know. So I think that's another thing I've noticed, and like teachers very keen to just discourage any nude taking, which, again, I understand, because, like, legality, yeah, why not? But it's creating, again, a culture of shame if someone does do something like that. So yeah, I think actually a lot of the lot of the gender and power imbalances are actually at the school's level, not necessarily at the kids' level, even though they're trying, they're trying, they're trying a lot, but yeah, it's different. Also at different schools, you'll have a totally different situation, different not situation, a different experience

at a private school, no matter the gender, no matter if it's single sex, or whether it's mixed, you'll have a different experience at private school than you will at a public school, because private schools, they have debate teams, they have all of this extra funding towards that stuff, and they'll be the most like calm, happy teachers ever. And then you go to the you know, and it's a different experience a mixed school, but sometimes what comes out from the students that mixed schools is actually a lot more interesting. But yeah, that's the end of that question.

Interviewer 21:51

That's very interesting. Thank you. And how do you in the context of sending nudes and sexting, how do you balance, like the legal aspect, because I know when I was at school, we were basically taught, if you're taking a picture of yourself, you're creating child pornography. Yeah, and I know that people kind of trying to move away from that, but how do you like find that balance of you're not really encouraging people to be doing this, but also giving them the agency that like, if this is something that they're going to do, do it safely. And, yeah,

Amanda 22:27

I think the main way that we do it is through the use of those scenarios. Like the scenario that we do have around nudes is that it appears in a couple of the assemblies where it's like a group chat, and then it gets sent in. And what we do there is we use our active bystander like three points of what do you do? So you either say, No, this is not okay, and, or you know, or confront the person, and or you can report it, or you support Carla in this instance, who's the scenario person? So I guess looking at it from a third person's point of view, where, like the nude, has already been taken, we don't know the reasons, it kind of allows us to put some sympathy towards her in the fact that we don't understand it, to treat her with kindness no matter what. But also to Oh, yeah. And then that will be the moment we explain the law in a way where you can still, like, protect Carla, where it's like, if you do want to report this, do not, you know, screenshot it. Don't save the images. Don't do any of that, because that's just going to actually persecute you in it, in the distribution. So it's like, delete it, delete it, delete it, and get rid of it as soon as possible, so you're not held accountable for that as well. So I guess it's like, it's kind of saying what the crime is, seeing what the legal is,

but also like, I guess clearly saying who is right to be persecuted in this instance, with that scenario, and we talk about victim blaming as well, about saying, you know, that's another big part of the curriculum, of saying, you know, we just don't understand the reasons, and often well, not well in that instance, but wider as well. It's like, you know, if we put context into situation, sometimes it can also be harmful, in the sense of, if people ask questions like, Why did you do that? What were you wearing? Or did it just, you know, moves the blame away from the person who did this. And I think that's also like, what, what even the teaching is doing to say, like, you shouldn't take nudes, you know, it's on the internet forever and all of that stuff, which it is, but you know, it's if it's something that you want to do, and you know the risks of it, like it's your life. You know, I think, I think that if we actually teach people like, maybe it's not right to share nudes. I think sometimes that is better teaching than not to take them at all. Yeah, so, and actually, that's what's in the triangle. When I mentioned earlier about that triangle, actually, in the top of that triangle, in the assembly I did in the bad things like rape, sexual assault, it's then not sexual harassment. It's sharing someone's nudes because we want to be like, yeah, that's not good. That's really illegal, yeah.

Interviewer 25:22

And if you are ever brought in to do a workshop or an assembly because something's happened at a school, do you struggle with that a bit more? Is it more restricted than on what you're talking about and less like conversation?

Amanda 25:39

I've never been I've never been told about something that's happened. I've never been like, we're bringing you in because something's happened. And I imagine in that case, it would go to someone who was more senior in the company, like Dan might go in, or one of the people who've been, like, with us for like, two or three years, who were more equipped to deal with that kind of stuff. They don't really tell us anything. I remember one of my first assemblies I was doing with REDACTED, who's one of the senior facilitators, and we did have like, three or four girls, like, kind of just cry and leave. Never got the context of that. But they did say the teachers, they weren't, yeah, something I think did happen, but they took the trigger warning that at the beginning, or they took that moment to be like, No, it's fine to leave. So it's Yeah, I did, oh God, it was awful as well at the private school, one of them, we

did, where the teacher, who was lovely, he just didn't quite say the right words at the end of when he was like, wrapping us up, and he said, Oh, I've had too many boys come in ashen faced from the weekend before. It's like, oh, horrible way to end lovely conversation we've had. But yeah, I think I've gone off topic. But yeah, we don't get that context, really, because of safeguarding as well. Yeah, so it would, it would change the stakes dramatically. I think if we did know something and that, we couldn't talk about that, whether it was, like earlier in the week with the femininity thing, I had no idea that was, like the school's culture, but yeah, I don't think so. Sometimes they'll let us know if they're like, if it's a special needs like a SEND session or not. But no, we don't get any info about that, right?

Interviewer 27:35

And with the femininity stuff, I assumed they had seen the slides beforehand, and they just hadn't picked up on it.

Amanda 27:44

The thing is, it's like me, I just don't think they have the time to review it properly. I think they look it over and they go, Cool, or they look they're looking instead for like, technical requirements, yeah, or troubleshooting like that. They give it a general skim, but they probably won't look through the delivery guide or any of the stuff, because under each slide is like an idea of what we talk about. They just don't have time. Yeah? They don't have time to look through that. And it wasn't my Booking Contact either, so they probably even hadn't even seen the slides.

Interviewer 28:18

That makes sense. Yeah. So how do you kind of see your role as different than if a teacher was delivering the material. And do you think it like gives you more freedom, or, in some instances, less?

Appendix C

Excerpt of notes from Observation 1

Redacted workshop 1 (26/01/26)

- observing **Redacted**

Title - "How can I go beyond "consent" to ensure my experiences are positive?"

- open + safe space for discussion
- Comparison - why do people engage in sex vs 'in an ideal world' why do people engage in sex?
- Collaborative group discussion on tables - asking students to get something down on their whiteboards
- Sex and relationships should be about: equality, positivity and pleasure
- What is consent?
 - freely given, given with capacity, specific, informed, ongoing and reversible
 - ↳ define these in groups
 - ↳ asking students to expand and explain things in their own terms
- Continuum - Rape + sexual Assault → Positive + enjoyable

↓

grey areas with negative consequences

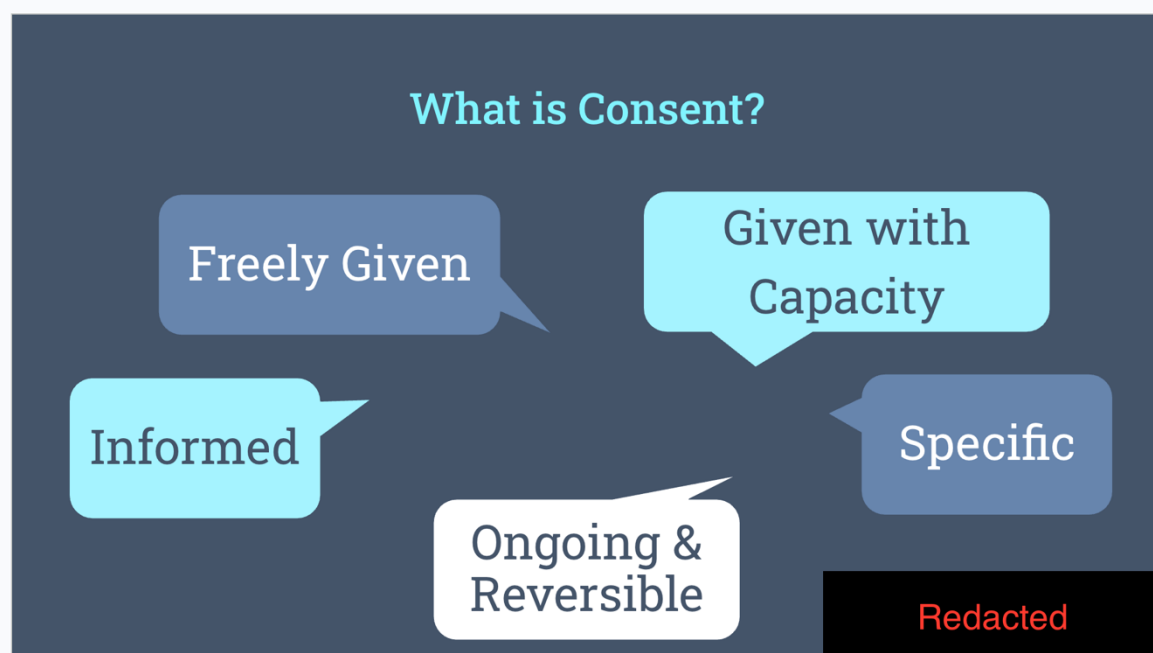
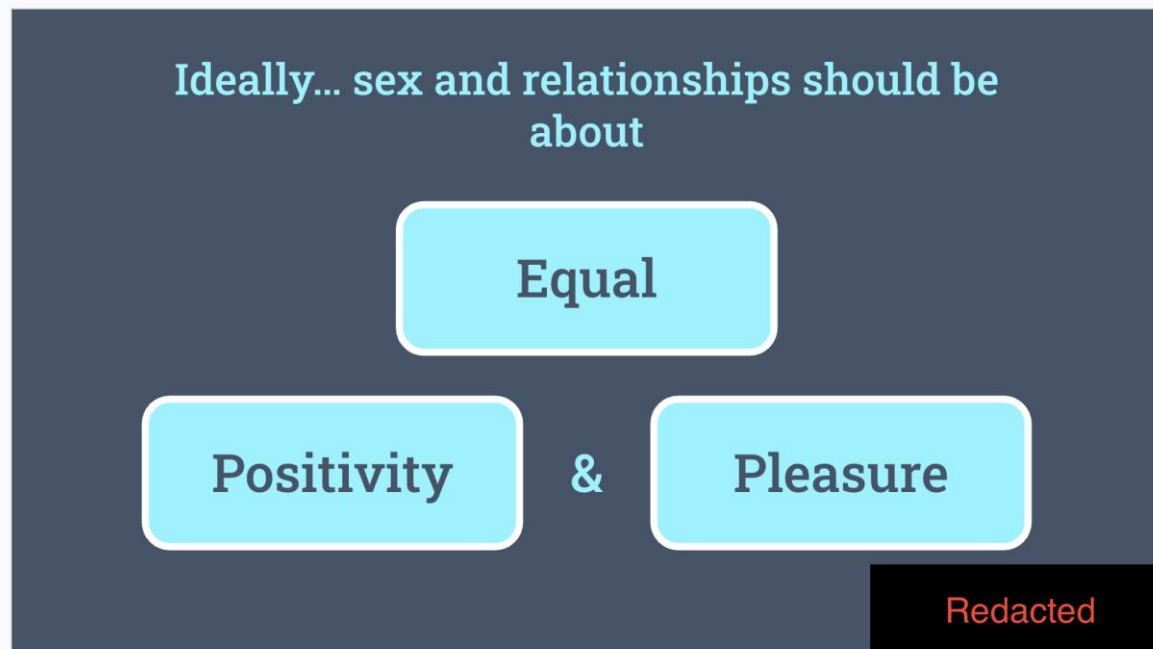
- Handshakes 1:
 - asking students to shake hands with everyone on their table
- 2:
 - agree on the details of the handshake beforehand
- did you prefer round 1 or 2?
 - 1 - know what you're getting yourself into
 - 2 - more freedom to choose
- How can a ~~couple~~ ensure sexual activity is positive?
 - how to communicate without discussing everything? → open questions, body language
→ checking in with small groups
- How do you need to feel?
 - trust, attraction
- What to know?
 - age, boundaries, medical history, contraception
- What definitely needs to be discussed ↗

Scenarios - is the situation positive?

- what advice could we give to those in the scenario?
- what are the other dynamics at play?
 - ↳ power?
- other context - alcohol and other substances
- clarifications from the law
 - ↳ instigator has to get consent.

Appendix D

Excerpt from analysed documents



HOW DO YOU ASK FOR CONSENT?

Be clear

Let them know
it's okay to
say 'no'

Don't put your
desires onto
the other
person

Defining the 10 signs of a healthy relationship

Boundaries	Trust	Equality	Independence	Kindness
Owning actions	Respect	Healthy conflict	Fun	Honesty