

Understanding the diversity of sexual consent perceptions among upper secondary school students in Sweden: a mixed-methods study

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Abstract

Introduction: Understanding the diversity of adolescents' perceptions of sexual consent is essential for developing sexuality education that reflects young people's lived experiences.

Methods: This mixed-methods study (2025) examined perceptions of sexual consent and school-based sexuality education among upper secondary school students (n=1,378; aged 16–20 years) in Sweden, and their associations with gender, sexual orientation and birthplace. Free-text consent definitions were analysed using a qualitative inductive–deductive approach and integrated with quantitative survey data analysed using bivariate and multivariable analyses.

Results: Most participants understood consent primarily as an implicit rather than explicit process. Boys were less likely than girls to define consent explicitly (OR= 0.77, 95% CI 0.60–0.98), whereas LGBTQIA+ participants were more likely to do so than heterosexual participants (OR= 1.83, 95% CI 1.29–2.59). Girls and LGBTQIA+ participants also more frequently reported unmet needs in sexuality education, with girls substantially less likely than boys to perceive their education as sufficient (OR= 0.31, 95% CI 0.24–0.41).

Conclusions: The findings highlight considerable diversity in adolescents' understandings of sexual consent. Moving beyond binary conceptions of consent towards more nuanced and inclusive approaches may strengthen adolescents' sexual literacy and better prepare them for the complexities of sexual communication.

Policy Implications: To support adolescent sexual communication capacity, safety and skill, sex education needs to address the diversity of consent expressions and how factors tied to sex, gender, sexual orientation and birthplace may influence consent perceptions and contribute to gendered power dynamics and hegemonic sexual scripts.

Introduction

The link between sexual health promotion, sexual harm prevention and sex education has been established in numerous studies (Beres 2014, 2020; Muscari et al., 2023; Chenneville et al., 2025; Pavanello Decaro et al., 2025). Yet, there is a growing body of research that is suggesting that adolescent sex- and consent education is not adequate to manage the multifaceted nature of sexual communication (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2019; Marcantonio et al., 2024; Whittington, 2021; Halldén et al., 2026; Setty, 2025; Righi et al., 2021; Unis & Sällström, 2020). To promote adolescents' capacity to manage sexual interactions safely, there is an inherent responsibility to align sex education with the social, cultural, technological and political developments in the lives of young people today. Securing youth sexual literacy, defined as the ability to manage one's sexual health with knowledge and awareness, is a fundamental part of supporting adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (Chenneville et al., 2025; Muscari et al., 2023).

The Swedish Consent Act was implemented in 2018 and imply that any sexual contact not clearly consensual, counts as rape or negligent rape (Bragg et al., 2021). The term negligent rape was meant to fill a gap for cases where even if there was no physical resistance, violence in any form or even verbal negation, the perpetrator should have understood that the act was not consensual. Placing sexual and intimate ambiguity in a legal context, the Consent Act was controversial and presented police force and courts with new challenges defining the boundaries of sexual harm, cohesion and violence, leading to documented issues in application and sentencing, due to difficulty in interpretation of evidence and definition of the criminal offence (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2025a). Upon reviewing crime statistics since the implementation of these legal amendments, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2025a) identified being young, inexperienced and under the influence of alcohol as risk factors in a 'not insignificant proportion' of the cases of conviction under the Consent Act.

Following these developments, the Swedish National Agency for Education launched a reform of the school sex education curriculum in 2022, which accentuated the importance of consent education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2026). However, while challenges tied to sex education have been documented internationally, similar concerns have also been identified in Sweden, also after the reform. A recent national review by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2025) found substantial variation in how schools implement the knowledge area sexuality, consent and relationships. The review concluded that many schools fail to adopt a coherent whole-school approach, resulting in students receiving fragmented or superficial knowledge. Teachers also reported uncertainty when addressing sensitive topics, while students expressed a desire for more opportunities to discuss real-life situations involving relationships and consent (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2025). These findings suggest that there remains a need to strengthen the relevance and quality of consent education in Swedish schools, further highlighting the importance of understanding young people's own perspectives on consent and sexuality.

Sexual consent is an undertaking that involves both verbal and non-verbal communication, transmitting the personal boundaries that reflect the sense of readiness and trust that is experienced in that moment. Beyond the immediate, interpersonal process of this multidimensional exchange, communicating consent also involves the sociocultural and contextual meanings that are ascribed to sexual interactions, including the own role defined by identity, gender and sexuality. This sense of self is in prime development during adolescence. Research has shown that where experience lacks, reliance on sexual scripts to navigate sexual interactions increases (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2024). Sexual scripts, as defined by Masters et al., (2013, p. 401) are 'cognitive schema that instruct people how to understand and act in sexual situations', meaning they are the internalised reflections of cultural norm that mirror shared beliefs, power dynamics and social biases and capable of colouring the way sexual communication is conceived. This current study aimed at examining how adolescents in Sweden perceive sexual consent and sex education, and possible associations with gender, sexual orientation and birthplace.

Materials and methods

Study design

This cross-sectional mixed-methods study followed the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines (von Elm et al., 2007; appendix A), and the Good Reporting of a Mixed Methods Study (GRAMMS) checklist (O’Cathain et al, 2008; appendix B). The study procedure has been described in detail by Halldén et al. (2026).

Participants

This study draws on data collected among upper secondary school students in northern Sweden at the beginning of 2025. It was part of a larger study examining sex education since the curriculum reform and aimed at developing measures to support vulnerable youth. Students from grades 10–12, aged 16–20 years old, (n = 2260) at a public upper secondary school with the whole county as catchment area, were invited to participate in the study. Students from all programmes were invited participate, with the exception of those enrolled at the programme for intellectual disabilities, due to ethical considerations.

Around 10% of the 2260 students were missing at the time of data collection. From the 2034 students that initiated the survey, 1378 students completed it correctly, resulting in a response rate of circa 68%. With some variation between single variables, internal missing data was generally low, at around 1% for the quantitative variables and below 8% in the free-text answers.

Data collection

Data was collected through a digital questionnaire created using Qualtrics. The multiple-choice and scaled questions were developed in collaboration between researchers and head teachers, and those regarding demographic participant data drew on survey methods from the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2023). After revisions following an initial pilot study featuring a small group of students, the questionnaire was distributed by teachers to the target population at school during school hours. Towards the end of the survey period of just under a month, the questionnaire could be accessed digitally directly on the initiative of the participant. The demographic data collected included the participants’ sex (boy, girl), gender (boy, girl, non-binary, other), sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual¹, bisexual, unsure, other) country of birth (Sweden, one of the other Nordic countries, another EU country, non-EU countries, unsure), as well as school year and educational programme.

Investigating the students’ experience of consent education, the questionnaire inquired whether the participants’ sex education had included consent and communication (yes, no, unsure). It examined the students’ opinion about consent education, asking them to rate its importance (very important, somewhat important, less important, not important at all, no opinion). The survey also inspected the connection between the participants’ self-estimated sex literacy and sex education, inquiring whether the students felt that the knowledge received in sex education was sufficient for them to handle their sexual health (yes, sufficiently; yes, but not sufficiently; no). Additionally, it examined possible gaps in sex education, querying whether the participants felt something was missing from their sex education (yes, no). The survey’s open question regarded the students’ own definition of consent: ‘Consent is a concept within the subject area of “sexuality, consent, and relationships.” Describe in your own words what consent means to you.’. These free-text answers were collected as string data.

Mixed-methods approach

While this study relied on a quantitative data collection method, the open-ended answers of consent definitions generated free-text data, which was analysed qualitatively. Where quantitative research concerns itself with statistical measure, qualitative research can bring forth meaning held in data (Creswell, 2022). The mixed-methods approach in this study facilitated a deeper analysis, thus allowing an examination of meaning-making within the target group, and enabling qualitative and quantitative approaches to complement each other.

Qualitative data analysis

After an initial review of the participants’ consent definitions, primary categories were outlined. The primary categories were refined through a theoretical framework, which lay the foundation to the process of condensation and abstraction, where the essence of meaning held in the data was interpreted, systematic categories were created and coding took place according to theme and content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The meaning units were perceived both by manifest meaning, but also by underlying drive and essential meaning, accessing its depth, an approach of qualitative content analysis as a process of surpassing surface level conception to engage with the deeper meaning held in language (Lindgren et al., 2020; Kleinheksel et al., 2020).

The theoretical framework was informed primarily by the widely cited review by Muehlenhard et al. (2016), which conceptualised the first three categories of sexual consent: internal, external and interpreted willingness. The fourth category, aligned willingness, was derived from reoccurring meaning units defining consent according to agreement in the qualitative data. Although content analysis aims to create distinct categories, the interconnectedness and ambivalence of the human experience meant that some overlapping was unavoidable (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Works by Willis et al. (2019, 2021, 2022) and writing by Whittington (2021) offered the theoretical foundation of the two models developed in this study, which demonstrate the categories’ interrelations. The content analysis hence followed a combined inductive-deductive approach, also known as hybrid coding or the abductive approach, which means that the categories were informed equally from theoretical elements from published literature, as directly from the data itself, effectively balancing theory and empirical evidence (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Graneheim et al., 2017; Kaur et al., 2025).

Missing data was handled through categorisation. Answers implying the participant couldn't answer the question, chose to not or left a non-serious answer were included along with the blank responses, resulting in about 8% (n = 108), out of which 14 participants reported they did not know what consent was and another 9 gave non-related or non-serious answers. All data that gave a definition of consent that didn't fit into any of the criteria categorically created in the content analysis was instead coded in a fifth "other" category.

As any qualitative method, the qualitative content analysis used in this study introduced an interpretative aspect between the raw data and research representation, with the researcher deciphering meaning through participants' own words, essentially a process of interpretation as meaning making (Malterud, 2022; Patton, 2015). This is a practice that is inseparable from the researcher's preconceptions. Informed by Joanna Briggs Institute's critical appraisal checklist for qualitative research (2017) congruity, coherence to data and consistency were continuously strived for throughout the research process. The first author conducted the data analysis in continuous discussion with the co-authors.

Quantitative data analysis

The data analysis was done using SPSS version 29 and p-values of 0.05 or less were considered significant. Apart from univariate analyses, generating descriptive statistics, independent variables were processed bivariate by gender, and with dependent variables (consent perceptions, and experience, perceived importance and completeness of sex- and consent education) using Pearson's chi-squared test. The statistically significant variables were processed through multivariable logistic regression models, with results reported as odds ratios (ORs) and with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Binary logistic regression is a statistical method that requires a binary outcome variable (Pinheiro-Guedes et al., 2024). For this reason, the dependent variables processed through logistic regression were dichotomised.

Despite the sufficient sample size, some variables were still homogenous enough that they had to be dichotomised to be statistically applicable. The variable defining participants' country of birth was dichotomised between two groups: those born in the Nordic countries, including Sweden, and those born in the rest of the world. With the great majority of participants identifying as heterosexual, participants defining themselves as homosexual or bisexual participants and those with undefined or those unsure of their sexual orientation were combined in a LGBTQIA+ group. This study features around 1% non-binary participants, meaning that the frequency of participants not identifying with their legal sex was too low to use as a statistically applicable variable. Hence, all analyses used legal sex to determine gender, sometimes using the terms sex and gender interchangeably.

Ethical considerations

This study touched on topics of sexual violence and harm, which can risk triggering stress, trauma and unease for survivors and therefore required an ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023–05473-01; 2024–07335-02), who also approved the inclusion of participants younger than 18 years of age in this study. In accordance with the ethical approval, adolescents received age-appropriate verbal and written information and provided their own informed voluntary consent to participate. Participants were also provided with instructions on how to seek support at youth centres in case the survey generated questions or concern. No IP-addresses were registered, and principles of anonymity were respected throughout the study.

Results

Participant characteristics

The complete data sample (n = 1378) featured more girls (n = 753), than boys (n = 625) and this was the case in every school year, totalling 54.6% girls and 45.4% boys (Table 1). There was a significant gender difference within the group of LGBTQIA+ participants (p < 0.001), with over 68% being girls (n = 124), compared to just over 31% boys (n = 57). Almost 90% (n = 1232) of participants were born in Sweden. Pearson's chi-squared test showed significant gender differences (p < 0.05) on all variables concerning the participants' experience and opinions about sex- and consent education.

Table 1
Participant characteristics by gender.

School year (n = 1378)	Total n = 1378 (100%)	Girls n = 753 (54.6%)	Boys n = 625 (45.6%)	p-value
				0.266
Year 1	557 (40.4%)	290 (38.5%)	267 (42.7%)	
Year 2	425 (30.8%)	237 (31.5%)	188 (30.1%)	
Year 3	396 (28.7%)	226 (30.0%)	170 (27.2%)	
Birthplace (n = 1378)				0.328
Sweden	1232 (89.4%)	683 (90.7%)	549 (87.8%)	
Nordic countries	14 (1.0%)			
EU country	19 (1.4%)			
Non-EU country	112 (81%)			
Unsure	1 (0.1%)			
Sweden and Nordic countries	1246 (90.5%)	691 (91.8%)	555 (88.9%)	0.075
EU or non-EU-country	131 (9.5%)	62 (8.2%)	69 (11.1%)	
Sexual orientation (n = 1374)				< 0.001
Heterosexual	1193 (86.8%)	628 (83.5%)	565 (90.8%)	
Homosexual	35 (2.5%)			
Bisexual	75 (5.5%)			
Other/unsure	71 (5.2%)			
LGBTQIA+	181 (13.2%)	124 (16.4%)	57 (9.2%)	
Have you experienced consent taught in school sex education? (n = 1376)				< 0.001
Yes	699 (58.8%)	349 (52.1%)	350 (67.6%)	
Unsure	188 (13.7%)			
No	489 (41.2%)	321 (47.9%)	168 (32.4%)	
Is it important that consent and communication are taught in sex education? (n = 1376)				0.001
Yes	1188 (86.3%)	670 (89.1%)	518 (83.0%)	
No	188 (13.7%)	82 (10.9%)	106 (17.0%)	
Did you, in school, receive the knowledge needed to take care of your sexual health? (n = 1376)				< 0.001
Yes, sufficiently	834 (60.6%)	401 (53.3%)	433 (69.4%)	
Yes, but not enough	384 (27.9%)	256 (34.0%)	128 (20.5%)	
Not sufficiently or at all	158 (11.5%)	95 (12.6%)	63 (10.1%)	
Consent perception (n = 1270)				0.021
Internal willingness	276 (21.7%)	151 (21.2%)	125 (22.4%)	
External willingness	297 (23.4%)	191 (26.8%)	106 (19.0%)	
Interpreted willingness	115 (9.1%)	62 (8.7%)	53 (9.5%)	
Aligned willingness	539 (42.4%)	289 (40.5%)	250 (44.9%)	
Other	43 (3.4%)	20 (2.8%)	23 (4.1%)	
Based on Pearson's chi-squared test				

Consent perceptions

Through the abductive approach of qualitative content analysis, five categories of consent perception were outlined (Table 2). Together these categories of closely related definitions form two models (Fig. 1). The first model categorises perceptions of consent according to degree, ranging from the most subtle

and indirect forms to the most explicit and verbal. The second model groups conceptually related categories, reducing overlap while broadening the meaning of each category, dividing the four forms of willingness into either implicit or explicit expressions of consent. Rather than representing distinct forms of consent, this model positions perceptions along a continuum, with internal and aligned willingness representing consent as primarily implicit, intuitive, subtle and not necessarily verbally expressed, and interpreted and external willingness representing consent as something that is communicated explicitly through observable signals or clear verbal expression.

Table 2
Qualitative content analysis.

Meaning unit	Condensation	Abstraction
<i>Both should want to and it should be respected if one doesn't want</i>	Wanting	Internal willingness
<i>To be able to choose if wanting or not wanting to do something</i>	Feeling	
<i>To want to do something</i>	Internal processing	
<i>It means when both say Yes and agree</i>	Verbal affirmation	External willingness
<i>A Yes is a Yes and a No is a No</i>	Binary definition	
<i>I will say when I consent and no one can force me</i>		
<i>To allow what is happening to happen</i>	Showing	Interpreted willingness
<i>When all parts agree and clearly show that they are okay</i>	Allowing	
<i>When another person shows me I can do something to/for them</i>	Perceiving	
<i>That someone has expressed or seems to be okay with something</i>	based on what is observed	
<i>That both have the same ideas about what they want</i>	Agreeing	Aligned willingness
<i>Consent is when two parts agree on something</i>	Aligning	
<i>That you agree in a relationship, both parts. For example you agree to have sex</i>	Sharing the same idea	
	Assuming	
<i>Consent is when both respect each other and treat everyone the same way and never take decisions about each other's lives or ideas</i>	Non-defined intimacy	Other
<i>For me, consent is when you have a cozy moment with someone else</i>	General respect	
<i>Consent is to have something done to you or someone else by one or several people, voluntarily</i>	Not-forcing	

The way consent was perceived varied according to the demographic variables, but there were some overarching themes (Table 3). Overall, aligned willingness had the highest frequency in all groups (42.4%, n = 539), implying that mutual alignment is a concept of considerable importance for youth whilst navigating sexual negotiation, with around 40% of girls (n = 289) and almost 45% of boys (n = 250) defining it this way (p = 0.021). The second most defined consent perception among girls was external willingness (26.8%, n = 191), while among boys it was internal willingness (22.4%, n = 125), indicating deviation between the sexes in consent perceptions.

Table 3
Model 1 consent perception and participant characteristics.

School year (p = 0.564)	Total n = 1270	Internal 21.7% (n = 276)	External 23.4% (n = 297)	Interpreted 9.1% (n = 115)	Aligned 42.4% (n = 539)	Other 3.4% (n = 43)
Year 1	493 (38.8%)	113 (22.9%)	109 (22.1%)	39 (7.9%)	209 (42.4%)	23 (4.3%)
Year 2	395 (31.1%)	86 (21.8%)	97 (24.6%)	38 (9.6%)	165 (41.8%)	9 (2.3%)
Year 3	382 (30.1%)	77 (20.2%)	91 (23.8%)	38 (9.9%)	165 (43.2%)	11 (2.9%)
Birthplace (p = 0.009)						
Sweden	1159 (91.3%)	262 (22.6%)	271 (23.4%)	100 (8.6%)	492 (42.5%)	34 (2.9%)
Nordic countries						
EU country						
Non-EU country						
Sweden and Nordic countries	1171 (92.2%)	265 (22.6%)	273 (23.3%)	103 (8.8%)	496 (42.4%)	34 (2.9%)
EU or non-EU-country	99 (7.8%)	11 (11.1%)	24 (24.2%)	12 (12.1%)	43 (43.4%)	9 (9.1%)
Sexual orientation (p = 0.001)						
Heterosexual	1105 (87.1%)	242 (21.9%)	243 (22.0%)	98 (8.9%)	491 (44.4%)	31 (2.8%)
Homosexual	33 (2.6%)					
Bisexual	72 (5.7%)					
Other/unsure	59 (4.6%)					
LGBTQIA+	163 (12.9%)	34 (20.9%)	54 (33.1%)	17 (10.4%)	46 (28.2%)	12 (7.4%)
Based on Pearson's chi-squared test						

The definitions of consent also differed according to sexual orientation ($p < 0.001$), where participants identifying as LGBTQIA+ more often defined consent as external willingness, at just above 33% ($n = 54$), compared to 22% of heterosexual participants ($n = 243$), among whom over 44% defined consent according to aligned willingness ($n = 491$), compared to just above 28% ($n = 46$) of LGBTQIA+ participants (Table 3). These findings indicate that among girls and LGBTQIA+ participants consent perceptions are more diverse, whilst boys and heterosexual participants had a greater association to the more subtly expressed consent categories internal and aligned willingness.

Between those born in or outside of Nordic countries a sharp contrast could be observed, with it being twice as common for those from Nordic countries to perceive consent as internal willingness at around 23% ($n = 265$), compared to circa 11% ($n = 11$) of those born elsewhere ($p = 0.009$).

When defining consent through the two-sided continuum (Fig. 1), implicit understandings of consent were more common among all gender groups and sexual orientations at over 66% ($n = 815$), although in the group of boys and heterosexual participants there was a greater divergence, with over 68% of heterosexual participants ($n = 733$) defining consent as an implicit process and almost 32% explicit ($n = 341$), compared to 53% implicit ($n = 80$) and 47% explicit ($n = 71$) in the LGBTQIA+ group (Table 4). Amongst girls around 63% defined consent as implicit ($n = 440$), against circa 36% as explicit ($n = 253$), compared to over 70% ($n = 375$) and just below 30% in the boys' group ($n = 159$). Thus, boys and heterosexual participants on one side and girls and LGBTQIA+ participants on the other, had more aligned opinions ($p = 0.013$ for gender and $p = 0.005$ for sexual orientation) (Table 3).

Table 4
Model 2 consent perception and participant characteristics.

Gender	Total n = 1227	Implicit n = 815 (66.4%)	Explicit n = 412 (33.6%)	p-value
				0.013
Girl	693 (56.5%)	440 (63.5%)	253 (36.5%)	
Boy	534 (43.5%)	375 (70.2%)	159 (29.8%)	
Sexual orientation				0.005
Heterosexual	1074 (87.7%)	733 (68.2%)	341 (31.8%)	
Homosexual	29 (2.4%)			
Bisexual	70 (5.7%)			
Other/unsure	52 (4.2%)			
LGBTQIA+	151 (12.3%)	80 (53.0%)	71 (47.0%)	< 0.001
Based on Pearson's chi-squared test				
2024).				

Multiple logistic regression analysis showed that boys were more than 20% less likely to define consent as explicit (OR = 0.77; 95% CI: 0.60, 0.98), compared to girls, while LGBTQIA+ participants were nearly twice as likely to perceive consent explicitly, compared to heterosexual participants (OR = 1.83; 95% CI: 1.29, 2.59). The omnibus test showed that the logistic regression model was significant with a p-value of < 0.001.

Sex education and sex literacy

Almost 70% (n = 433) of boys compared to just above 53% (n = 401) of girls reported having received sufficient sex education to manage their sexual health (p < 0.001), totalling around 60% of all students (n = 834) (Table 2). The difference between boys and girls was also present among those reporting to have received some, but not sufficient sex education, at 34% of girls (n = 256), compared to just above 20% (n = 128) of boys. Girls and LGBTQIA+ participants showed a higher likelihood of perceiving gaps in school set sex education, shown by the nearly 35% of girls (n = 262), compared to approximately 14% of boys (n = 87) and 23% (n = 279) of heterosexual and almost 40% (n = 70) of LGBTQIA+ participants reported that something was missing from their sex education, both variables presenting significance (p < 0.001).

Logistic regression analysis showed that girls were almost 70% less likely to experience their sex education as complete (OR = 0.31, 95% CI: 0.24, 0.41), compared to boys. Meanwhile heterosexual participants were almost twice as likely to feel nothing was missing from their sex education, compared to girls and LGBTQIA+ participants (OR = 1.80, 95% CI: 1.28, 2.52 respectively). This suggests that girls and LGBTQIA+ participants to a lesser degree than boys and heterosexual participants feel that their needs are met in sexual education.

Experience and perceived importance of consent education

About 52% (n = 349) of girls reported having experienced consent communication taught in school, compared to over 67% (n = 350) of boys, while almost 50% (n = 321) of girls and around 32% (n = 168) of boys had not experienced consent education (p < 0.001), showing great variance in the experience of consent education between boys and girls. Regarding the participants' opinion about consent education, almost 90% (n = 670) of girls, compared to 80% of boys (n = 518) agreed it was important, while the difference between girls and boys disagreeing was almost 11% (n = 82) of girls, compared to 17% (n = 106) of boys. A logistic regression analysis showed that girls were almost 62% more likely to agree with the importance of consent education, compared to boys (OR = 1.62, 95% CI: 1.18, 2.21). While sexual orientation did not show statistical significance (p = 0.921), birthplace represented substantial differences in the opinion of consent education (p < 0.001), with those born in the Nordic countries more than twice as likely to define consent education as important (OR = 2.09, 95% CI: 1.34, 3.24), compared to those born in or out of an EU-country.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how adolescents in Sweden perceive sexual consent and sex education, and possible associations with gender, sexual orientation and birthplace. Its findings show that gender and sexual orientation were especially significant factors in the understanding and experience of relevance of consent- and sex education, indicating that themes and topics covered in the school set sex education are experienced as more relevant, useful and relatable for boys and heterosexual students, than for girls and LGBTQIA+ participants. Birthplace, sexuality and gender influenced the way consent was defined, with boys, heterosexual and foreign-born participants being more associated with internal and non-verbal consent perceptions and girls and LGBTQIA+ participants having more diverse understandings of consent. These findings are in line with previous research that has implied significant gender difference in the communication and interpretation of consent among youth (Richards et al., 2022). The gendered and sexual orientation-based unevenness challenges the way consent is framed in sex education, highlighting grey areas within these frames.

Reflecting on the participants' consent perceptions according to the categories outlined in this analysis, it is clear that no one definition is sufficient to hold the ambiguity that consent communication can contain. The primary issue with implicit perceptions of consent is that they often are too subtle to safely base

judgements upon, while the main problem with explicit perceptions is that they lack the realistic nuance of real-life sexual communication, which happens through more varied modes than on a yes- or no- basis. This highlights the importance of providing nuance and depth in consent education in order to cover a variation of expressions and perceptions and support adolescents in navigating sexual ambiguity.

The reoccurrence of identically worded definitions of consent in the free-text data, such as “everyone is in on it” and “both are up for it” indicates that the participants of this study drew on sexual scripts when defining consent, meaning that cultural norm and socially shared beliefs seep into consent perceptions. Research has shown that the genderedness of sexual scripts, largely informed by sociocultural heteronormative power dynamics, can create obstacles in sexual communication and shape consent cultures, which means that consent communication will ultimately be coloured by these factors (Fournier et al., 2023; Setty, 2021; Masters et al., 2013). This challenges the robustness of relying on scripts like “everyone is in on it” or “a no means no” in sexual interaction and the ability for youth to base their sexual literacy on them. Basing consent perception on sociocultural scripts is even riskier when sexual partners are new to each other, previous experience lacks or there are drugs or alcohol involved (Muehlenhard et al., 2013). Girls’ association with scripts like “no means no” and “everything but yes means no” confirms previous research that has linked girls’ attitudes towards explicit affirmative consent to their more egalitarian views (Javidi et al., 2020). Meanwhile, boys’ association to more non-verbal and indirect consent scripts like “both are in on it” may be connected to consent cultures that frame women as gatekeepers and men as pursuers, making them more acquainted with the subtle communication forms of consent through their experience as observers.

The boys in this study rated their sex literacy based on what they learned in school set sex education as higher than girls, which aligns with research indicated that boys tend to overestimate their capacity to manage sexual health issues and further highlights the importance of gender awareness-informed consent- and sex education (Abreu et al., 2024). There is a growing body of research that is suggesting that boys overestimate female sexual interest, while also failing to perceive girl’s sexual refusal, placing gender as a focal point for consent misconception (Chen et al., 2025; Stavang et al., 2025; Lindgren et al., 2008). If non-verbal and indirect cues are overestimated as affirmative, the actual boundaries of willingness of those involved are threatened. Boys’ sexual overperception bias and the sociocultural, gendered expectations within sexual scripts are factors that crucially need addressing in the context of consent- and sex education to align youth sexual literacy with the requirements of consent communication. While boys entrust their capacity to navigate sexual interactions expressed through more subtle communication forms, relying on both intuition and observation, they may not be all aware about the gendered scripts that inform their perception.

Considering that most perpetrators of sexual assault in Sweden are male, consent education in the school context is an opportunity for sexual violence prevention (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2025b; Muscari et al., 2023). In line with the apparently different needs of boys and girls suggested by the findings in this study, research from Sweden examining adolescent boys’ attitudes and behaviours tied to sexuality has suggested that they may benefit from diverse and more supportive approaches in upper secondary school sex education (Makenzius et al., 2009).

The new consent law in Sweden requires a high level of sexual literacy and capacity to understand even subtle cues implying if a sexual interaction is not or is no longer consensual. Youth need to be provided with the educational foundation for navigating these encounters and school set sex education has a critical role in aligning young people’s readiness with these requirements. The differences in consent perception among the diverse groups in this study demonstrate the importance of consent conversations that can generate awareness about the many ways through which consent is expressed and perceived. It is critical to acknowledge its ambiguity, along with how different gendered and sexual realities, perspectives and experiences may present challenges in the understanding of the term and its practical reality (Righi et al., 2021).

Implications for school set sex education

The findings of this study that indicated that adolescents, especially boys, perceived consent principally in implicit and indirect terms, emphasise the critical role of consent education to support youth’s consensual and safe sexual practices, by providing realistic guidance and relevance in the management of sexual ambiguity. Considering the complexity of consent communication and its multidimensional nature, dialogue about the diverse ways through which it is perceived, expressed and defined is crucial. These dialogues also provide a significant opportunity to examine sociocultural beliefs, biases and scripts that permeate sexual communication.

Research has continuously emphasised the benefits of comprehensive sex education (Goldfarb & Liebermann, 2021; Schindele et al., 2023; Pavanello Decaro et al., 2025). The same approach of inclusivity, reflection and self-examination needs to inform youth consent education, which should be aimed at depicting the nuanced reality of consent communication, while also stimulating youth’s own participation in generating meaning around how they understand themselves and each other in ambivalent settings. This is only possible by giving youth the opportunity to examine their own knowledge and beliefs and the sociocultural scripts they are informed by. Consequently, sex education can promote positive consent attitudes that centre around self-efficacy, agency and safe communication practices, while also acknowledging the cultural biases of gender roles, power dynamics and hegemonic sexual scripts that inform these interactions (Maheux et al., 2025).

Strengths and limitations

Although this mixed-methods study integrated qualitative and quantitative elements, it could have benefitted from triangulation and a more in-depth examination, prolonged engagement and persistent observation - qualitative methods which all contribute to credibility (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As shown in the qualitative study by Whittington (2021), using creative, participatory and action-based research methods, even if adolescents first relied on certain scripts, deeper reflection was generated through the exchange inherent to the choice of data collection methods. Since the qualitative data of this study was collected through a free-text answer with no possibility of follow-up questions, the consent perceptions analysed need be viewed as point-in-time data, reflecting the immediate associations of meaning tied to consent for the participants, rather than their more profound considerations.

Quantitatively, this study's ecological variety and sample size strengthen its transferability and the study's findings are likely not unique for the specific upper secondary school - still generalisability should be done with caution.

The study could have been more inclusive towards LGBTQIA+ people by providing more options when specifying sexual orientation. The analysis would have been more comprehensive of non-binary and transexual participants if clear distinctions between sex and gender could have been made. Differentiating legal sex, which implies the biological aspects of being male or female, from gender, which is where on the gender spectrum a person identifies, is an important matter in health research, especially to acknowledge diversity (Kaufman et al., 2023). Excluding people with intellectual disability from this study was not meant to diminishing the importance of sexual education within these groups but was connected to ethical considerations tied to limitations of the study's framework.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the diversity of consent perceptions among adolescents, underlining the complexity of consent communication. It was indicated that although the participants primarily perceived sexual consent as an implicit process, expressed non-verbally and understood through entrusting intuitive understanding of mutual agreement of those involved, there were significant differences tied to gender and sexual orientation, with girls and LGBTQIA+ participants being more likely to define consent also in explicit terms, thus having more diverse consent perceptions. Further discrepancy among adolescent consent cultures was indicated by boys being more confident about their ability to navigate consent communication based on subtle and non-direct communication forms, while also, along with participants born outside of the Nordic countries, being less likely to agree that consent education was important. The findings of this study that suggested that sex education was experienced as more complete, useful and relatable for boys and heterosexual students, stresses the importance of sex education giving space to the needs of girls and LGBTQIA+ identifying youth, who in this study were more closely associated with experiencing gaps in their sex education.

Without addressing the intersections of genderedness and heteronormativity in sex- and consent education, inclusivity, reach and relevance to young people's actual experience of sexual communication risks to be lost. Youth's tendency to rely on insubstantial or unrealistic sexual consent scripts to perceive consent, highlights the need to spread awareness about the influence of gendered cultural norm in these interactions. Sex education has a crucial role in providing youth with the chance to reflect critically on these dynamics and thus has the potential to bridge the gap between young people's knowledge and the inherent challenges tied to consent communication. Consequently, by transcending over-reliance on simplified, binary narratives and by addressing youth's multiple sexual and gendered realities, consent education can enable a more nuanced continuum of affirmative consent perceptions, inclusive of different perspectives and communication modes.

1. The sexual orientation response categories reflected established Swedish survey practice and included the term 'homosexual'. We acknowledge that this term may carry deprecatory connotations in some English-language contexts. However, the Swedish equivalent, *homosexuell*, is routinely used in official and academic contexts and is not generally perceived as stigmatising. Accordingly, the original wording has been retained in the English-language reporting to ensure fidelity to the questionnaire and to preserve the intended meaning of the response categories.

Declarations

Competing Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. MM and ÅS applied for and received the grants and planned and were involved in data collection. MM drafted the ethical proposal. EP designed the analysis plan, conducted the statistical and qualitative analyses, and drafted the manuscript, with input from ÅS and MM. The manuscript was subsequently revised by EP, with continuous contributions from all authors. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

Code Availability

Not applicable.

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Figures

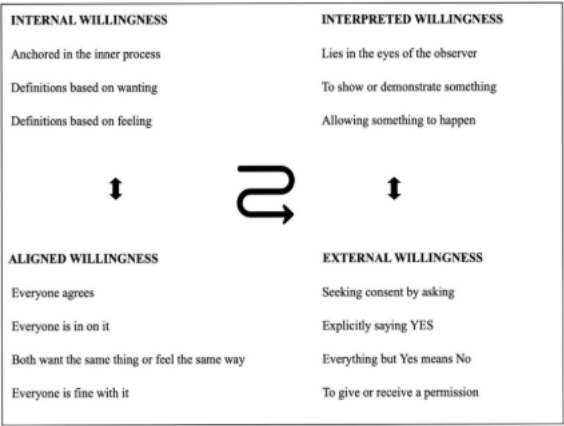


Figure 1

Two conceptual models for organising participants' perceptions of sexual consent, informed by the consent continuum (Whittington, 2021), the internal/external consent framework (Willis et al., 2019), the willingness typology (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), and descriptions of intuitive consent communication (Abreu et al., 2024).

Supplementary Files

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