



**(DÉ)CONSTRUIRE  
LE SCÉNARIO**  
**AGIR ENSEMBLE**

**Sexual Consent and Gender  
Norms among Youth in Quebec  
(Ages 15-25)**

Chaire de recherche

SUR LES **VIOLENCES  
SEXISTES ET SEXUELLES**  
en milieu d'enseignement supérieur

Summary Report – March 2026

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### The summary report can be consulted at the following address:

[chairevssmes.uqam.ca/publications/rapports-de-recherche](http://chairevssmes.uqam.ca/publications/rapports-de-recherche)

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Québec 



# Table of contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Target population	6
2.2	Recruitment and data collection	6
2.3	Data collection tools	7
2.3.1	Online questionnaire	7
2.3.2	Focus group guide	9
2.4	Analyses conducted	9
2.5	Ethical considerations	9
2.6	Participant profile	10
<b>3</b>	<b>MAIN FINDINGS</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1	Attitudes toward establishing sexual consent that vary by gender, sexual orientation and age	12
3.2	Attitudes and behaviours that support ongoing consent	15
3.3	More favourable attitudes and behaviours toward communicative sexuality among plurisexual youth	18
3.4	Attitudes and behaviours more opposed to subtle coercion among sexual and gender minority individuals	20
3.5	Comparison of results by sexual victimization	23
3.6	Endorsement of sexual gender norms as a barrier to sexual consent	25
3.7	Groups more likely to engage in sexual activities without really wanting to	26
3.8	Youth recommendations for the prevention of sexual violence and for sex education	28
<b>4</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>38</b>





# 1 INTRODUCTION

Sexual consent is a central theme in sexual violence prevention programs developed by community, academic and government sectors. In Canada, education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Each province and territory therefore has its own sex education program, with content that varies; some programs include content on sexual consent, while others do not (Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, 2019). In Quebec, sexual consent is part of the mandatory sex education content in the Culture and Citizenship in Québec program at the high school level (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2024). Moreover, 83% of sexual violence prevention activities offered in Quebec higher education institutions address sexual consent (Hébert et al., 2018).

Despite these prevention efforts, adolescents and emerging adults remain the groups most affected by sexual violence. According to Statistics Canada, people aged 15–24 (Cotter, 2021) and women (Cotter, 2021), together with people from sexual and gender minorities (Jaffray, 2020) are among the groups reporting the highest rates of sexual assault in Canada. These data underscore the need to examine how young people perceive, interpret and apply sexual consent, and to explore the factors that shape, and sometimes complicate, how it is practised.



It is in this context that the *Chaire de recherche sur les violences sexistes et sexuelles en milieu d'enseignement supérieur* carried out the project **(Dé)construire le scénario : agir ensemble**, with financial support from Women and Gender Equality Canada. The project aims to **improve understanding of the factors influencing attitudes and behaviours toward sexual consent among Quebec youth aged 15 to 25, including endorsement of sexual gender norms**. It seeks to clarify young people's understanding of sexual consent and advance the prevention of sexual violence, one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence.



**This summary report aims to address the following objectives:**

- 1** Explore young people's attitudes and behaviours toward sexual consent according to their gender, sexual orientation, age and experiences of sexual victimization.
- 2** Examine the link between endorsement of sexual gender norms and young people's attitudes and behaviours toward sexual consent.
- 3** Explore the reasons why some young people engage in sexual activities without really wanting to.
- 4** Explore young people's recommendations regarding the prevention of sexual violence and sex education and positive sexual relationships for students at their grade level.




**About the *Chaire de recherche sur les violences sexistes et sexuelles en milieu d'enseignement supérieur***

Created in 2018 with funding from the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, the Chaire focuses on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence in higher education in Quebec and Canada.

Its research program is structured around three complementary axes:


- 1 Observing** the issues and impacts associated with sexual and gender-based violence (prevalence, risk factors, etc.) and the needs of victims.
- 2 Developing and evaluating** prevention programs and policies for postsecondary institutions.
- 3 Mobilizing knowledge** among academic and non-academic groups to inform preventive interventions.

There are various definitions of sexual consent, and legal definitions vary across countries. However, it is widely defined as a person's voluntary agreement to a sexual activity that results from a free and informed choice. The Criminal Code of Canada<sup>1</sup> defines sexual consent and establishes the criteria for valid consent. For clarity, we present the definition from the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (2024), which is based on the Criminal Code of Canada.



**Sexual consent is a person's voluntary agreement to a sexual activity. This consent can be expressed through words or actions and must be given freely and at the time of the sexual activity.**

<sup>1</sup> Criminal Code (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46), s. 273.  
<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/>



## Sexual consent is absent in the following circumstances:

- The person has not expressed agreement to the activity through words or actions.
- The person expresses, through words or actions, a lack of agreement to the activity.
- After consenting to the activity, the person expresses, through words or actions, a lack of agreement to its continuation.
- The agreement is expressed through the words or actions of a third party.
- The person is unable to give consent (e.g., is unconscious or intoxicated).
- The person is influenced to engage in the activity through abuse of trust or authority.
- One of the persons is in a position of authority or trust and uses threats, force or fraud to obtain consent.
- Consent is given by a person under the age of 16.



2

Methodological  
approach

## 2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study's mixed-methods approach allowed for the combination of a first quantitative phase via an online survey, followed by a second qualitative phase involving focus groups. The following sections detail the methodological and ethical considerations specific to each phase.

### 2.1 Target population

For both the online survey and the focus groups, the target population was young people aged 15 to 25 enrolled in a Quebec educational institution. In addition to age and student status criteria, participants were required to be able to communicate in French.

### 2.2 Recruitment and data collection

Data collection through the **online survey** took place from March to July 2025. Calls for participation (social media carousel, emails and posters) were sent to Quebec associations and organizations working with youth, to certain public institutions (e.g., municipal libraries), and to public figures popular with young people. Individuals and organizations that agreed to share the call for participation did so mainly through their social media channels or by email to their members. Promotional materials were also posted on the Research Chair's website and social media accounts.

To encourage youth participation, \$25 prizes were initially offered through a draw to those who completed the online questionnaire. To overcome recruitment difficulties, this strategy was replaced with a \$5 financial compensation offered to each person who completed the questionnaire in full. At the end of the questionnaire, those who wished to enter the draw or receive the \$5 could click on a link leading to a separate, independent questionnaire to provide their name and contact information.

For the **focus groups**, participant recruitment was carried out by adding a question at the end of the online survey inviting interested participants to provide their contact information. The research team contacted all individuals who had left their contact information in order to collect sociodemographic data and their availability. This information made it possible to form focus groups based on the young people's level of education (high school, college, or university). The focus groups were conducted between July and September 2025 via Zoom. Their duration ranged from 50 to 80 minutes. A \$30 compensation was offered to participants.



## 2.3 Recruitment and data collection

### 2.3.1 Online questionnaire

#### Sociodemographic data

The questionnaire includes questions on participants' sociodemographic characteristics, including age, type of educational institution attended, gender, sexual orientation, membership in a visible minority or Indigenous identity.

#### Attitudes toward the establishment of sexual consent

This section includes 10 items drawn from a shortened and translated version (Meek-Bouchard et al., 2024b) of the Sexual Consent Scale, Revised, by Humphreys and Brousseau (2010), and from the original version by Humphreys and Herold (2007). For each item, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from "1 – Strongly disagree" to "7 – Strongly agree." Reverse scored items were recoded for analysis. A high score indicates positive attitudes toward the establishment of sexual consent. Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

Complementing the *Sexual Consent Scale*, the *Process-Based Consent Scale* (Glance et al., 2021; translated by Meek-Bouchard et al., 2024a) was used to collect information on behaviours and attitudes toward sexual consent understood as an **ongoing process in which partners mutually ensure that the other wants to engage in sexual activity, throughout the entire sexual encounter**. This instrument consists of 17 items divided into three dimensions: ongoing consent, communicative sexuality and subtle coercion. For each item, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from "1 – Strongly disagree" to "7 – Strongly agree." This instrument was completed exclusively by respondents who indicated that they had already previously engaged in consensual sexual contact. Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency for the instrument ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

#### Ongoing consent

This dimension includes five items designed to assess the extent to which a person understands sexual consent as ongoing and ensures the continuous reaffirmation of consent. A higher score indicates more favourable attitudes and behaviours toward ongoing consent ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

#### Communicative sexuality

This dimension includes six items measuring how comfortable a person is with explicit communication during and about sexual activities. A higher score indicates more favourable attitudes and behaviours toward communicative sexuality ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

#### Subtle coercion

This dimension includes six items assessing the extent to which a person exhibits behaviours and attitudes favourable to using verbal pressure on a sexual partner to persuade them to engage in sexual activity. A higher score indicates attitudes and behaviours less supportive of subtle coercion ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).



### **Sexual victimization (sexual assault)**

Two questions drawn from Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (Cotter & Savage, 2019) were used to collect data on sexual assault (forced sexual intercourse and unwanted touching) experienced before and after the age of 15. For analysis, a dichotomous variable was used (sexual victimization: yes/no).

### **Endorsement of sexual gender norms**

Endorsement of sexual gender norms was measured using the Scale for the Assessment of Sexual Standards Among Youth (Emmerink et al., 2016). This instrument consists of 19 items (e.g., "Girls should act in a more reserved way concerning sex than boys."; "I think it is normal for boys to take the dominant role in sex"), to which participants indicated their level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from "1 – Completely disagree" to "6 – Completely agree." A higher score indicates stronger endorsement of sexual gender norms. Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency for the instrument ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

### **Reasons for engaging in sexual activity without really wanting to**

This section was presented only to participants who answered "Yes" to the question: "Sometimes people engage in sexual activities without really wanting to. Have you ever participated in a sexual activity for reasons other than wanting to?" Reasons for engaging in sexual activity without really wanting to were documented using an adapted version of the *Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex Scale* (Humphreys & Kennett, 2020), which includes 25 items.<sup>2</sup> On a Likert scale ranging from "1 – Not at all" to "7 – Completely," participants indicated the extent to which each item represented a reason they had previously engaged in sexual activity without really wanting to. Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency for the instrument ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

<sup>2</sup> The original instrument was initially designed for a heterosexual female sample. To ensure that the measure would be inclusive (i.e. not limited solely to reasons cited by young heterosexual women), we consulted with an organization for men who are survivors of sexual violence and an organization representing the rights of sexual and gender minorities. These consultations led to the addition of another seven reasons.



### 2.3.2 Focus group guide

The focus group guide consisted of five sections. The first four sections explored participants' interpretations of quantitative results related to attitudes toward establishing sexual consent, subtle coercion, reasons for engaging in sexual activity without really wanting to and the relationship between traditional gender norms and sexual consent. The fifth section aimed to identify strategies for preventing sexual violence and for sex education recommended by the young people.

## 2.4 Analyses conducted

For the online survey data, descriptive and bivariate analyses were conducted to observe general trends, identify differences between groups and examine relationships between variables. All analyses (ANOVA, correlation, chi-square) were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 30). The threshold for statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

For the focus groups, the research team synthesized the exchanges with youth participants to document their interpretations of the survey results and their recommendations for sexual violence prevention and sex education. Selected excerpts are presented in this summary report to accompany quantitative data.

## 2.5 Ethical considerations

This research project received approval from Université du Québec à Montréal's *Comité institutionnel d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains* (Institutional Research Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Participants) (#2025-6895). Measures were taken to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. No data from the quantitative component could identify participants. Interviews were anonymized for the qualitative component. To ensure participants' well-being, a list of support resources was made available to them.



## 2.6 Participant profile

**For the quantitative phase**, the study focused on a final sample of 380 youth aged 15 to 25. This section presents selected sociodemographic characteristics of the sample<sup>3</sup>.

Age (n = 380)	
15 - 16	15%
17 - 18	24%
19 - 25	61%

Type of educational institution attended (n = 377)	
Secondary school or vocational/trade school	24%
College	34%
University	42%

Gender (n = 379)	
Woman	70%
Man	26%
Nonbinary, other gender, or questioning	4%

Sexual orientation (n = 354)	
Heterosexual	67%
Gay, lesbian or homosexual	6%
Plurisexual (bisexual, pansexual or queer)	23%
Unsure or questioning	4%

Visible minority status <sup>4</sup> (n = 380)	
Yes	16%
No	84%

Indigenous identity (n = 353)	
Oui	6%
Non	94%

**For the qualitative phase**, the focus groups are made up of 14 young people split according to their educational level.

- 4 high school students aged 15 to 17 (3 women and 1 man)
- 4 college students aged 18 to 24 (2 women, 1 man, 1 person questioning their gender identity)
- 6 university students aged 21 to 25 (2 women, 3 men and 1 nonbinary person)

<sup>3</sup> In total, 573 questionnaires were collected via Qualtrics, the platform hosting the online questionnaire. Of these questionnaires, 193 were removed from the sample for three reasons: 1) 79 individuals did not meet the inclusion criteria related to age and student status (they were redirected to a page indicating their ineligibility, with no option to complete the other sections of the questionnaire); 2) 67 individuals had not completed any of the study's four core measures; 3) the platform hosting the questionnaire identified 47 questionnaires as potentially completed by bots. Bots are recognized as the primary threat to the quality of results. They were detected using Google's invisible reCAPTCHA, a Qualtrics feature used to assess the likelihood that a respondent is human. A score equal to or greater than 0.5 indicates that the respondent is likely human, whereas a score below 0.5 suggests the probable presence of a bot (Qualtrics, 2025). Despite recruitment efforts, the final sample (n = 381) is smaller than the target sample (n = 900). These data collection difficulties align with observations by Statistics Canada (2025), which notes that response rates to social surveys have declined significantly over the past 25 years, a trend further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> Visible minorities are individuals, other than Indigenous peoples, who do not identify as White or are not perceived as White.



## 3 MAIN RESULTS

### 3.1 Attitudes toward establishing sexual consent that vary by gender, sexual orientation and age

Overall, the sample obtained a mean score of 5.70 (SD = 1.03) on the scale measuring attitudes toward establishing sexual consent. **This suggests that the young people in the study hold positive attitudes in this regard** (the response scale ranged from 1 to 7). Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses for each item on the instrument. The seven response options were recoded into three categories (agree, neutral and disagree).

*For the entire chapter on the main results, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number, which explains why the total does not always equal 100%.*

#### Young people's thoughts on the second statement

In the focus groups for university students, participants reported that sexual activities were subject to a kind of hierarchy: kissing and caressing are often seen as not necessarily requiring consent, while giving consent to penetration is often taken to imply consent to other sexual activities in the same encounter.

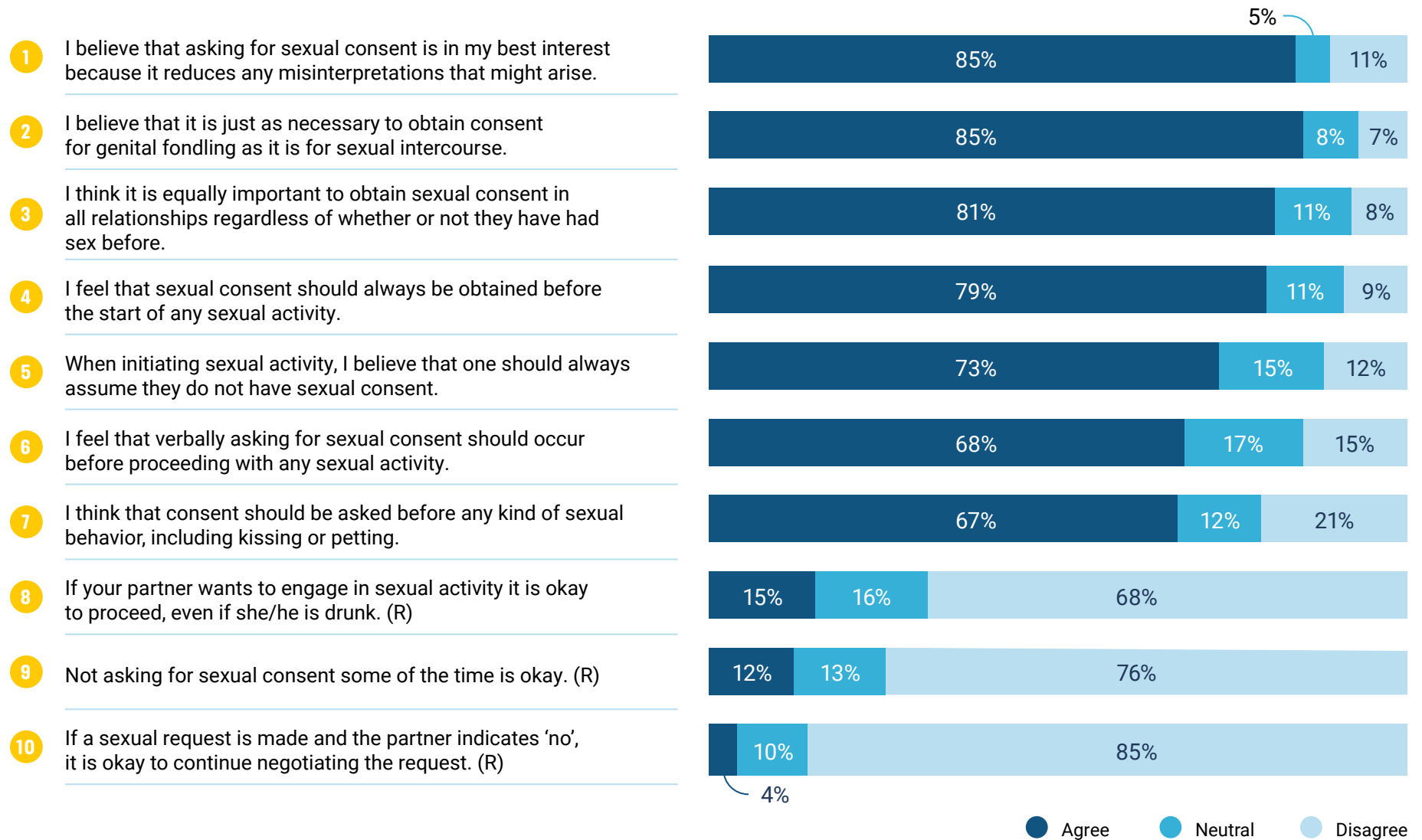
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“I think a lot of people take it for granted that if you say yes to penetration, you’re saying yes to caressing and kissing, because I feel like penetration is seen as something more intimate than caressing and kissing, so if you say yes to that, you’re automatically saying yes to caressing and kissing.”

*Man, 24, university student*



Figure 1. Prevalence of statements reflecting attitudes toward establishing sexual consent (n = 359)

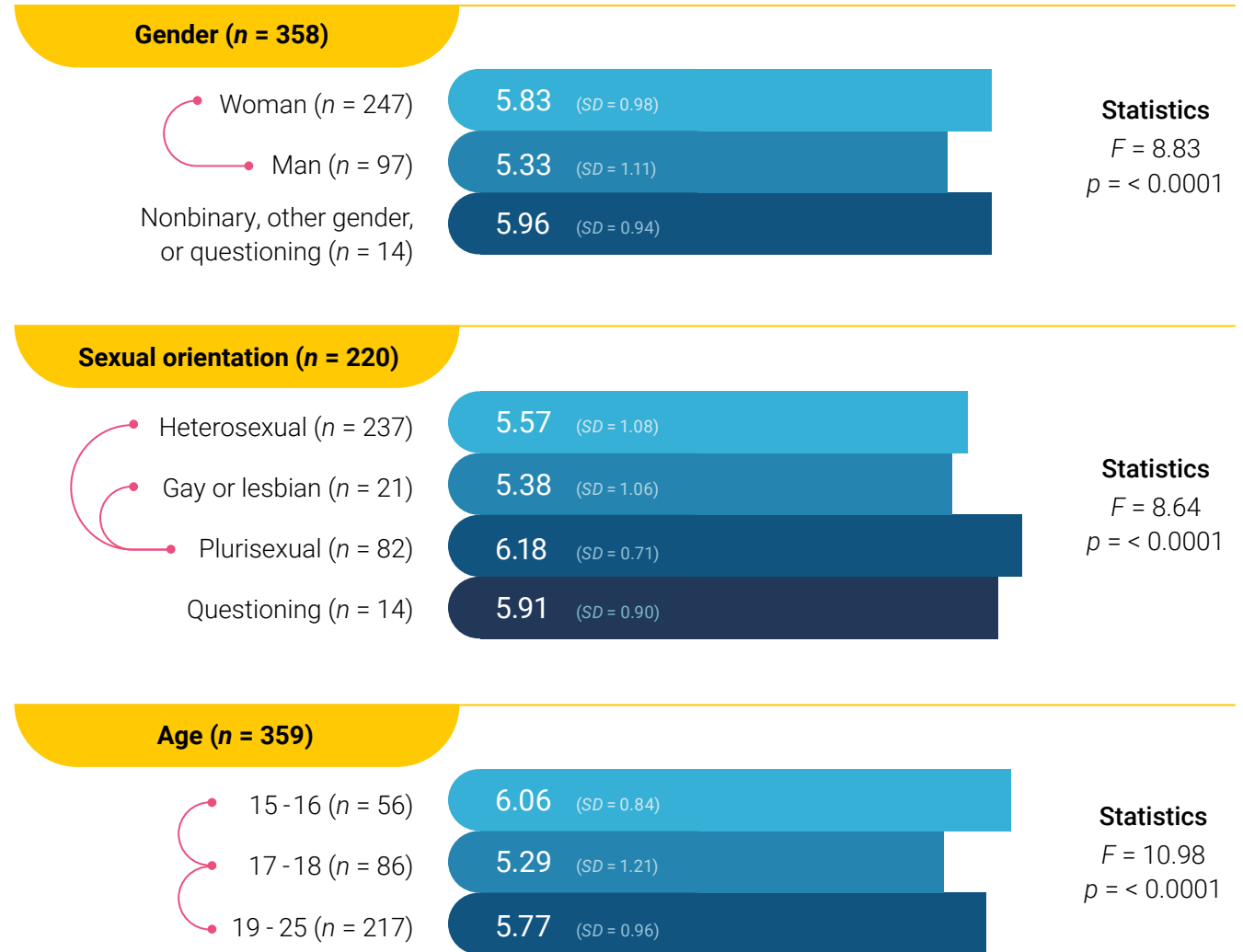


For the calculation of the mean score on the scale measuring attitudes toward establishing sexual consent, the statements followed by the letter (R) were reverse scored.



**Figure 2. Comparison of mean scores on the scale measuring attitudes toward establishing sexual consent, by gender, sexual orientation and age (n = 244)**

Figure 2 shows the mean scores for each group and the significant differences observed between certain groups. The results show that **women** have more positive attitudes toward establishing sexual consent than men. **Plurisexual youth** also have more favourable attitudes toward establishing sexual consent than heterosexual and gay or lesbian youth. Finally, **youth aged 15–16 and 19–25** express more positive attitudes toward establishing sexual consent than their peers aged 17–18.



Note. Groups connected by a pink curve differ significantly from each other ( $p < 0.05$ ).



The following three sections (3.2, 3.3, 3.4) present the results on the *Process-Based Consent Scale* (Glance et al., 2021; translated by Meek-Bouchard et al., 2024a), which was used to collect information on behaviours and attitudes toward sexual consent understood as an ongoing process in which partners mutually ensure that the other wants to engage in sexual activity, throughout the entire sexual encounter. This instrument was completed only by participants who reported having previously engaged in consensual sexual contact ( $n = 245$ ).

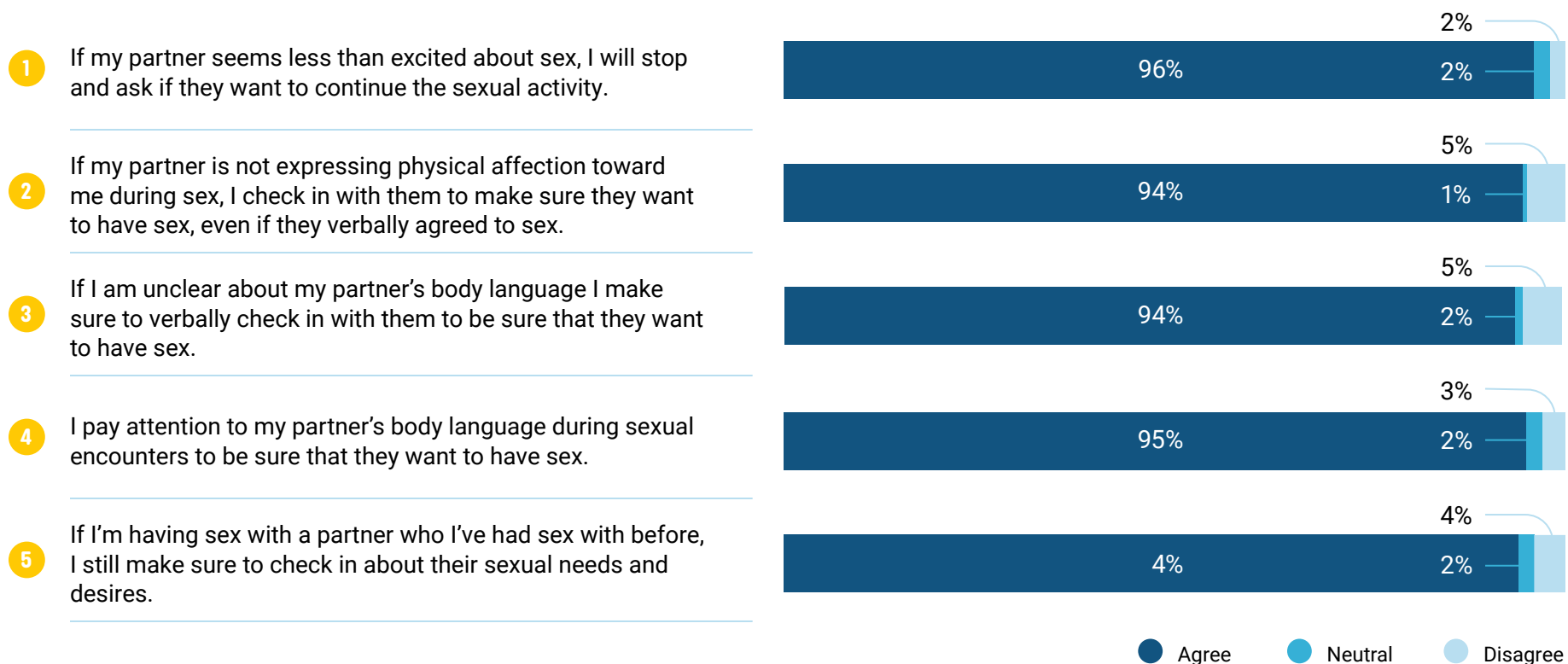
### 3.2 Attitudes and behaviours that support ongoing consent

Regarding the ongoing consent dimension, the subsample of participants who had previously engaged in consensual sexual contact obtained a high mean score (6.39;  $SD = 0.85$ ) (the response scale ranged from 1 to 7), **indicating that the majority of participants view sexual consent as an ongoing process (rather than a one time event) and report behaving accordingly**. Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses for each item in this dimension of the instrument. The seven response options were recoded into three categories (agree, neutral and disagree).



The youth who participated in the focus groups emphasized the importance of checking consent throughout sexual activity, including paying attention to non-verbal cues, especially when changing sexual practices.

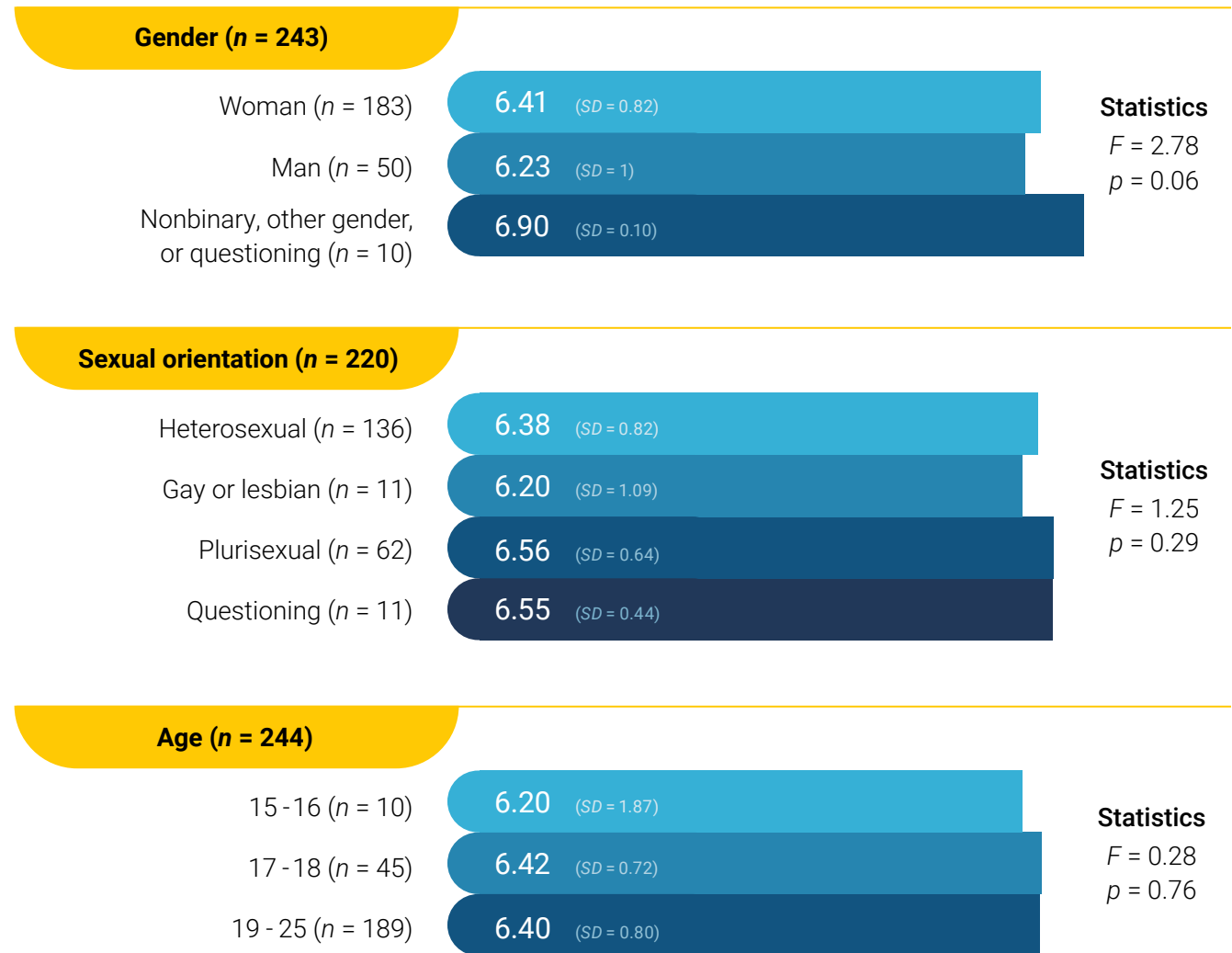
Figure 3. Prevalence of statements reflecting attitudes and behaviours supporting ongoing consent (n = 244)





**Figure 4. Comparison of mean scores on the ongoing consent dimension by gender, sexual orientation and age**

Figure 4 shows the mean scores for each group and the significant differences observed between certain groups. The results indicate that the mean score on the ongoing consent scale does not vary significantly by gender or age. Regarding sexual orientation, no single group differs significantly from the others when compared individually. **Attention to ongoing consent thus appears consistent across all groups.**

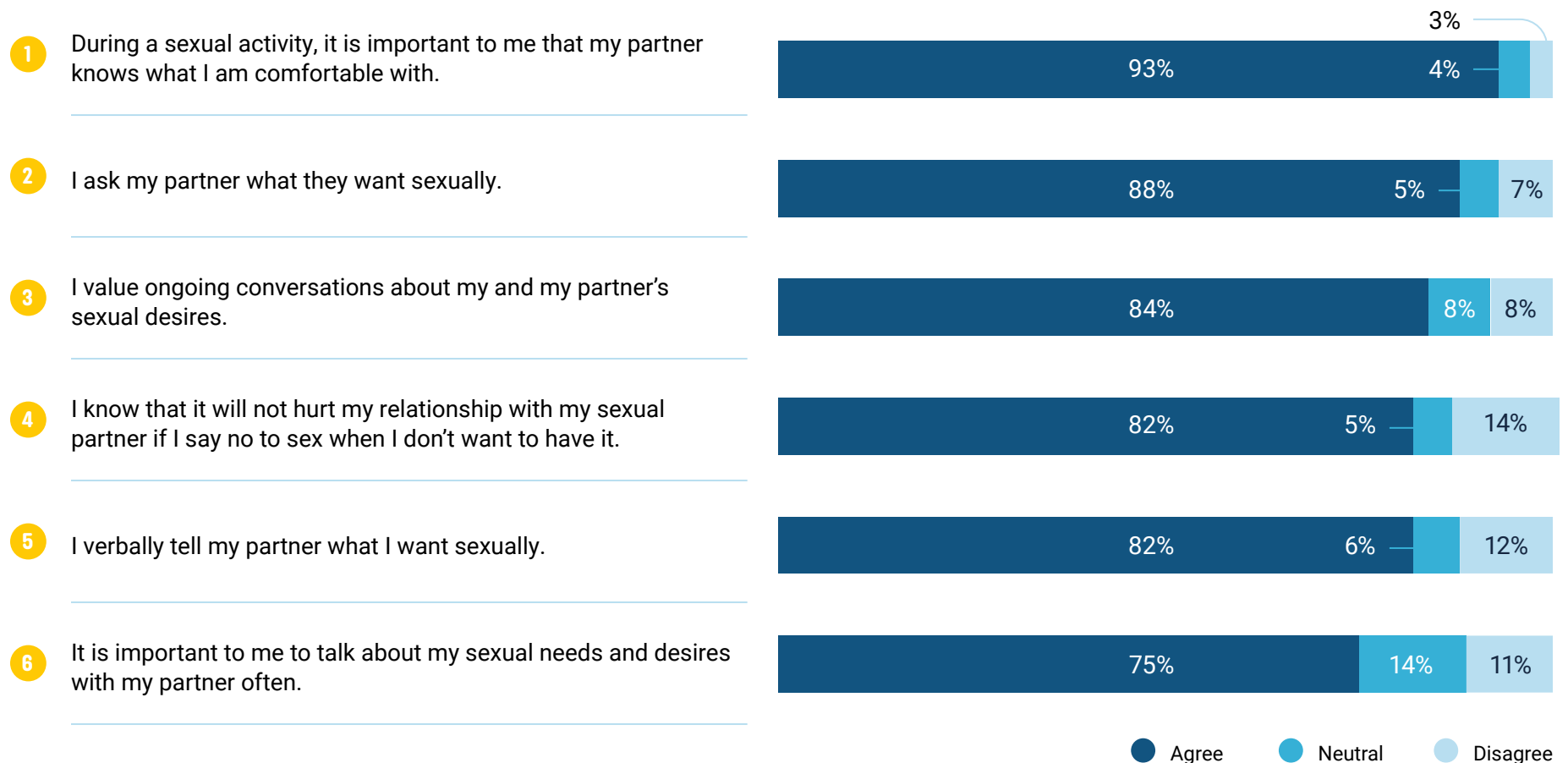




### 3.3 More favourable attitudes and behaviours toward communicative sexuality among plurisexual youth

Regarding the communicative sexuality dimension, the subsample of participants who had previously engaged in consensual sexual contact obtained a mean score of 5.71 (SD = 1.01), **indicating attitudes and behaviours supportive of communicative sexuality** (the response scale ranged from 1 to 7). A large majority of these youth agree on the importance of communicative sexuality between partners and report discussing sexuality with their partner(s). Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses for each item on the instrument. The seven response options were recoded into three categories (agree, neutral and disagree).

Figure 5. Prevalence of statements reflecting attitudes and behaviours supporting sexual communication (n = 245)

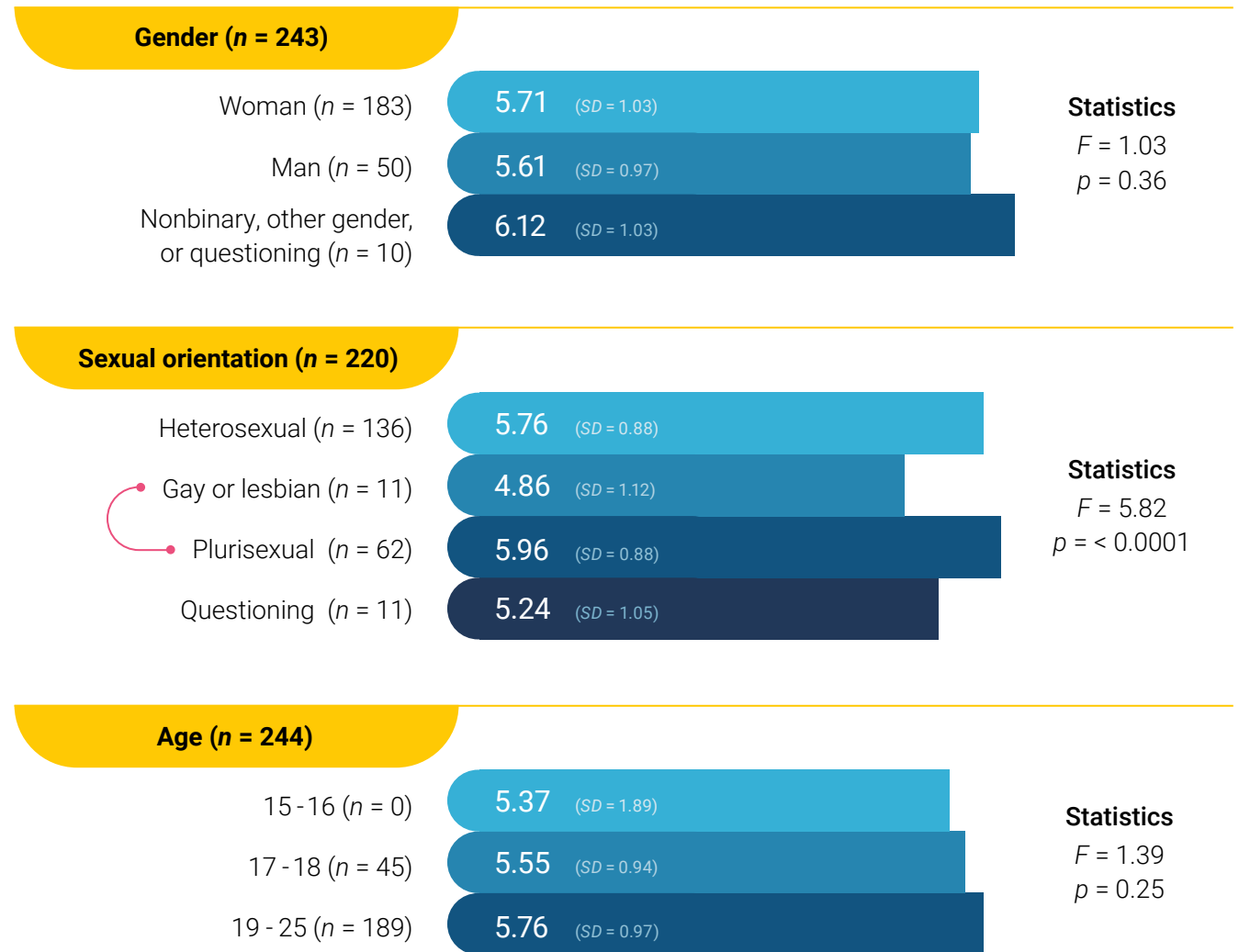


● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree



Figure 6 shows the mean scores for each group and the significant differences observed between certain groups. The analyses reveal significant differences by sexual orientation: specifically, **plurisexual youth have more favourable attitudes and behaviours toward sexual communication than gay or lesbian youth**. However, the mean score does not vary by gender or age.

**Figure 6. Comparison of mean scores on the communicative sexuality dimension by gender, sexual orientation and age**



Note. Groups connected by a pink curve differ significantly from each other ( $p < 0.05$ ).



### 3.4 Attitudes and behaviours more opposed to subtle coercion among sexual and gender minority individuals

Regarding the dimension of subtle coercion, the subsample of participants who had previously engaged in consensual sexual contact obtained a mean score of 6.21 (SD = 1.08), **reflecting attitudes and behaviours strongly opposed to using verbal pressure to persuade a sexual partner to engage in sexual activity** (the response scale ranged from 1 to 7). Figure 7 shows the distribution of responses for each item on the instrument. The seven response options were recoded into three categories (agree, neutral and disagree).

The youth who participated in the focus groups reported that people who try to convince their partner to engage in sexual activities after a refusal focus more on their own needs than on their partner's, putting their own desires above respect for consent.

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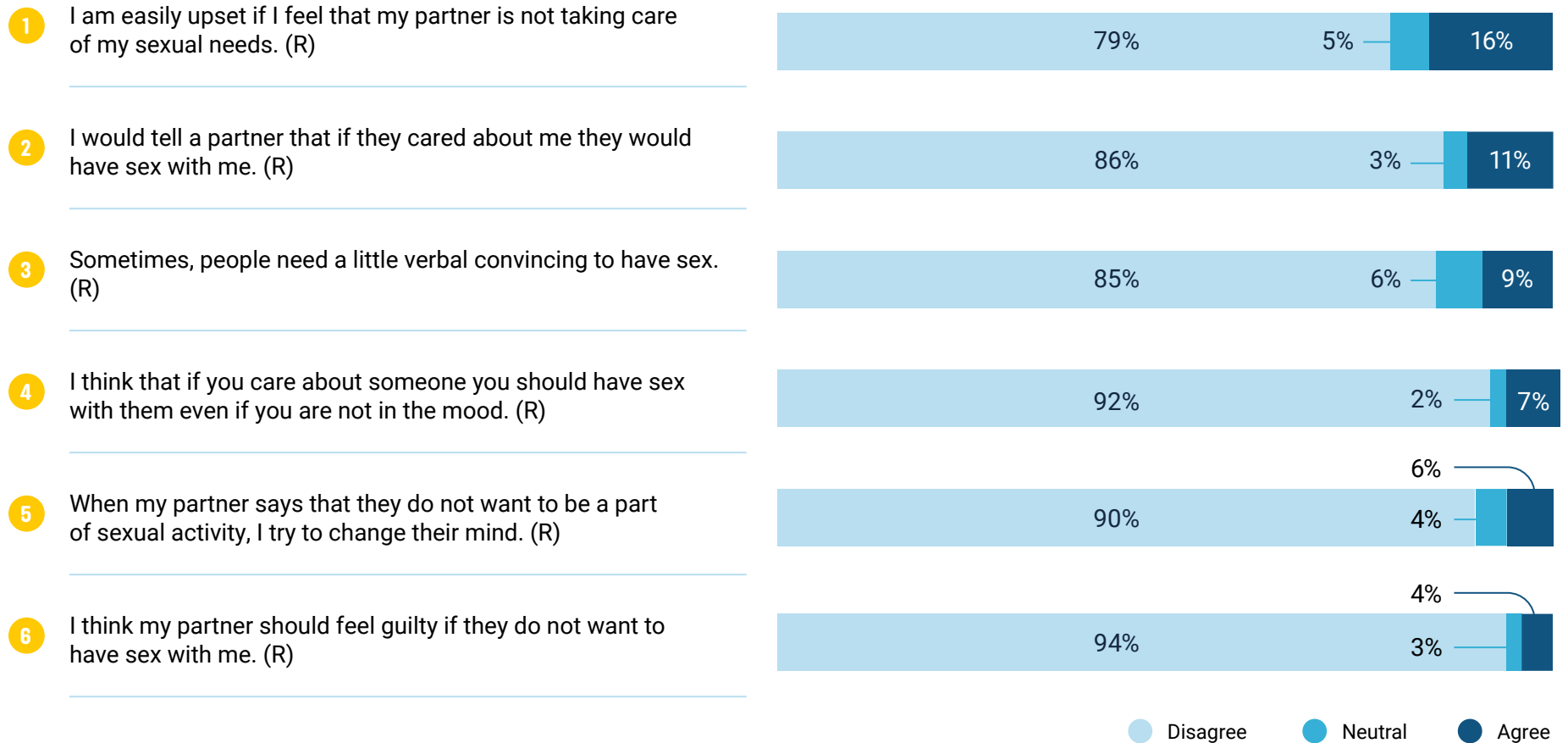
“I think when people push, they’re thinking more about their own needs than the other person’s. I think if you push, you’re thinking about what you want and not really listening to the other person.”

*Woman, 17, high school student*





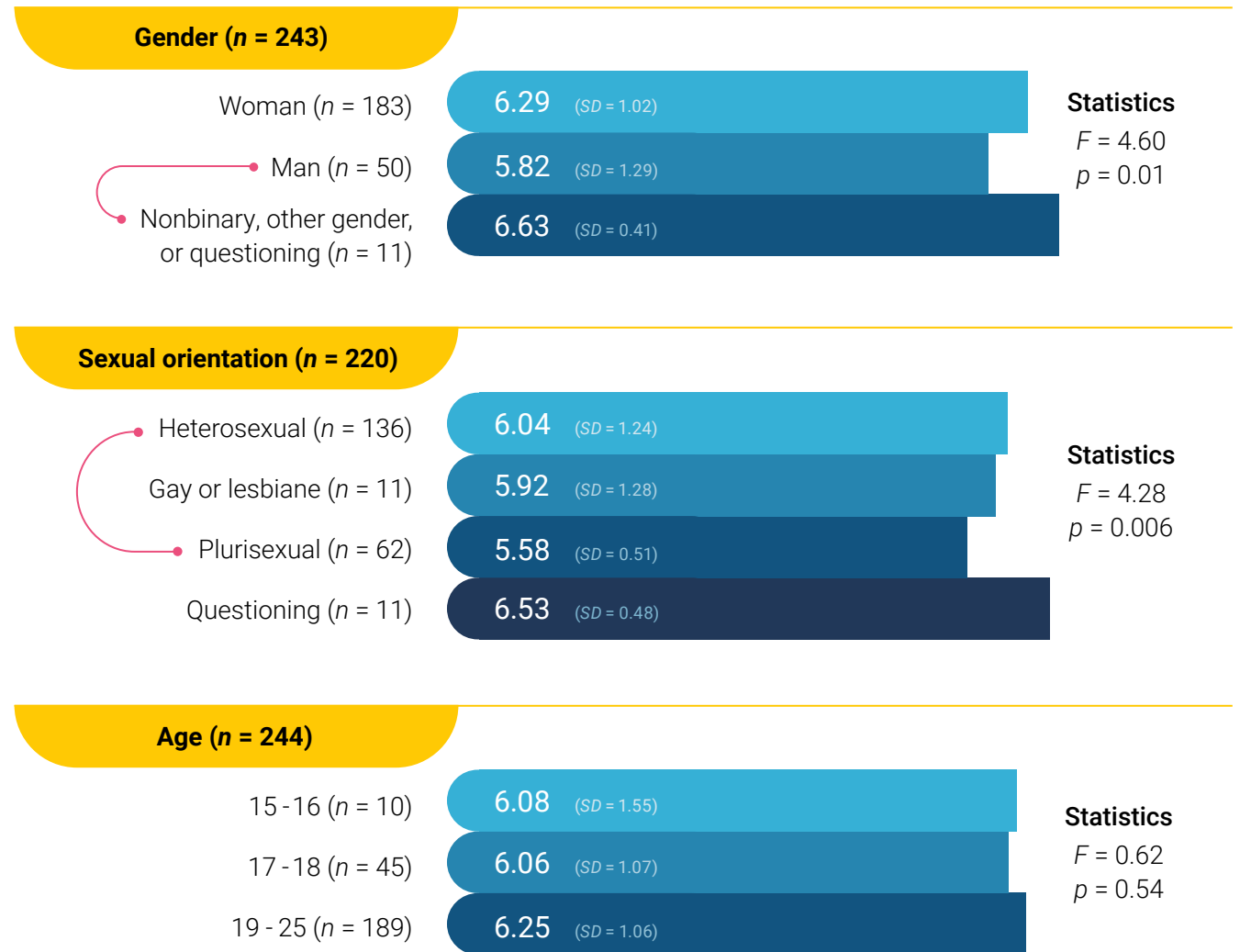
**Figure 7. Prevalence of statements reflecting attitudes and behaviours toward subtle coercion (n = 245)**



For the calculation of the mean score on the scale measuring subtle coercion, the statements followed by the letter (R) were reverse scored.

**Figure 8. Comparison of mean scores on the subtle coercion dimension by gender, sexual orientation and age**

Figure 8 shows the mean scores for each group and the significant differences observed between certain groups. The results reveal significant differences by gender and sexual orientation. **Nonbinary, other-gender or questioning individuals** show attitudes and behaviours significantly more opposed to subtle coercion than men. **Plurisexual youth** also show attitudes and behaviours significantly more opposed to subtle coercion than heterosexual youth. No significant differences are observed across age groups.



Note. Groups connected by a pink curve differ significantly from each other (p < 0.05).

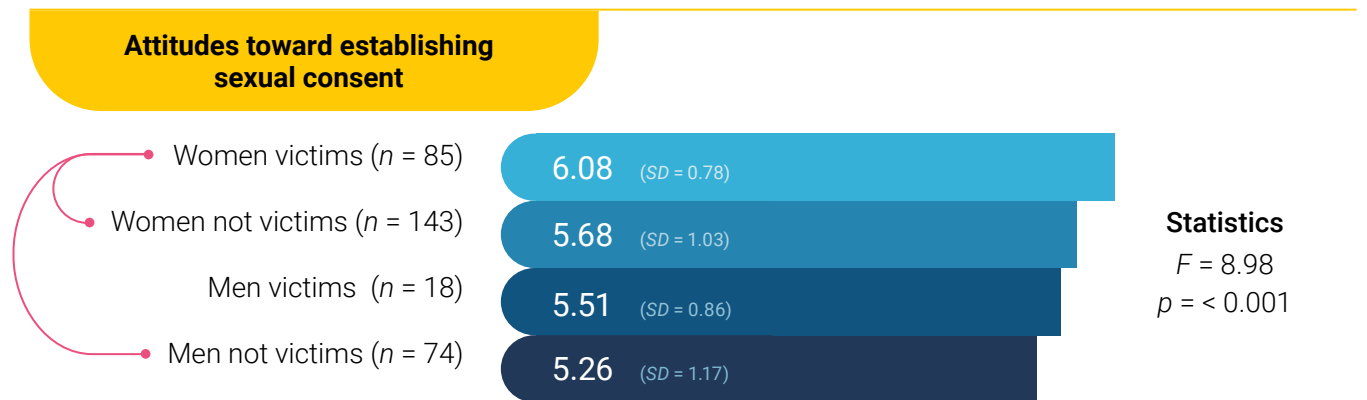


### 3.5 Comparison of results by sexual victimization

One objective of the study was to examine whether young people's attitudes and behaviours regarding sexual consent varied according to experiences of sexual victimization. In the sample, 37% of women, 20% of men, and 73% of nonbinary, other-gender, or questioning individuals reported having experienced sexual assault at some point in their lives (including forced sexual intercourse and unwanted touching).

Comparative analyses by gender and sexual victimization reveal that **women who have experienced sexual assault have attitudes significantly more favourable toward establishing sexual consent** than women and men who have not (Figure 9).

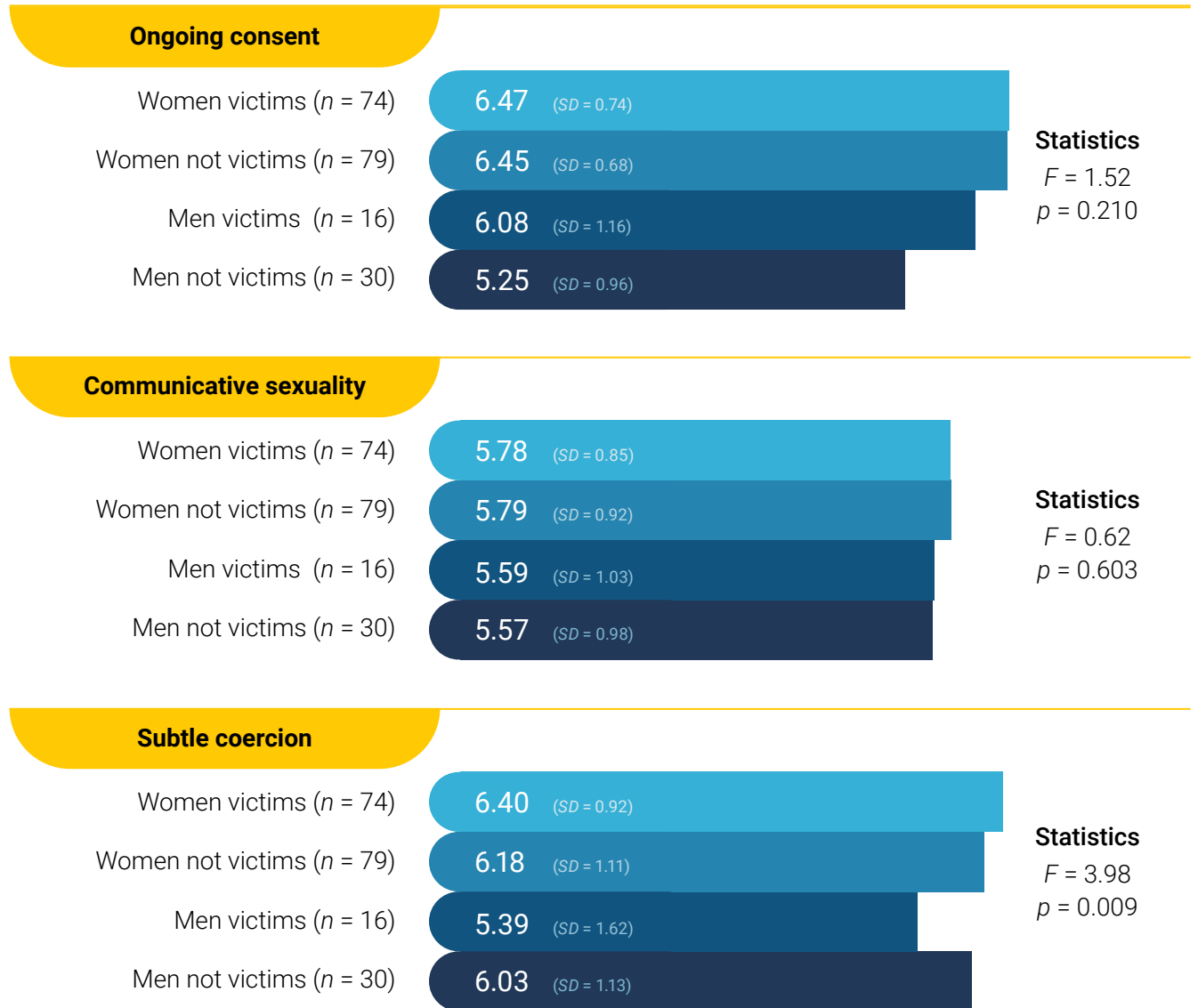
**Figure 9. Comparison of mean scores on the dimension of attitudes toward establishing sexual consent by gender and sexual victimization**



Note. Groups connected by a pink curve differ significantly from each other ( $p < 0.05$ ). Unfortunately, the small number of nonbinary, other-gender or questioning participants ( $n = 15$ ) does not allow for comparative analyses for this group.



**Figure 10. Comparison of mean scores on each dimension of the Process-Based Consent Scale by gender and sexual victimization**



Comparative analyses were also conducted for ongoing consent, communicative sexuality, and subtle coercion. However, when the results for each group are compared across these dimensions, no group stands out (Figure 10).

Note: Only the participants who have previously engaged in consensual sexual contact completed these three survey sections.

Note. Unfortunately, the small number of nonbinary, other-gender or questioning participants (n = 15) does not allow for comparative analyses for this group.



### 3.6 Endorsement of sexual gender norms as a barrier to sexual consent

The questionnaire included a tool assessing endorsement of sexual gender norms (Emmerink et al., 2016). The analyses presented in Table 1 show that endorsement of sexual gender norms is negatively associated with positive attitudes toward sexuality, ongoing consent, communicative sexuality, and disapproval of subtle coercion. These results suggest that **endorsement of sexual gender norms hinders the development of attitudes and behaviours that support sexual consent.**



According to the participants in the focus groups, traditional gender norms are often taken for granted and reproduced in relationships, which can lead to a lack of verification of consent.

“I think that (...) if it’s the norm (...) we’re not going to ask for consent. (...) Since it’s ‘normal’ for boys to have a more dominant role, there won’t be any boys who will ask girls ‘do you want me to be more dominant or not?’”

*Woman, 17, high school student*



**Table 1. Correlations between endorsement of sexual gender norms and the different dimensions of sexual consent**

	Mean score on the scale of endorsement of sexual gender norms	
Mean score on the scale of attitudes toward establishing consent	$r = -0.247$	$p < 0.001$
Mean score on the scale of ongoing consent	$r = -0.478$	$p < 0.001$
Mean score on the scale of communicative sexuality	$r = -0.255$	$p < 0.001$
Mean score on the scale of (disapproval of) subtle coercion	$r = -0.657$	$p < 0.001$

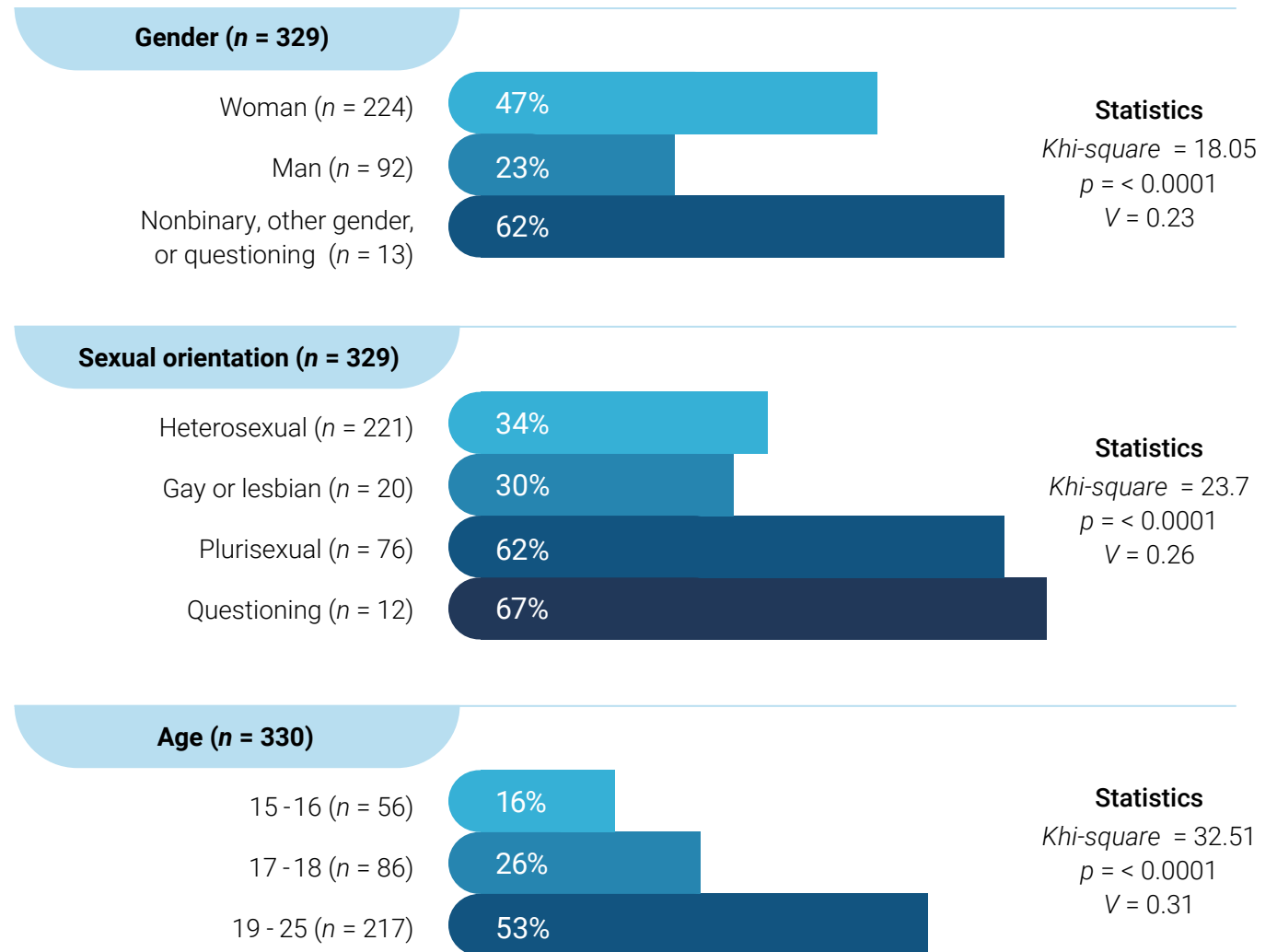
The strength of the correlations (effect size) was assessed using Pearson’s  $r$  ( $r \leq 0.30$  weak correlation;  $r \approx 0.50$  moderate correlation;  $r \geq 0.70$  strong correlation [Cohen, 1988]).



### 3.7 Groups more likely to engage in sexual activities without really wanting to

In the sample, 41% of young people reported having engaged in a sexual activity without really wanting to. **This percentage is even higher among women, plurisexual people and youth aged 19 to 25.** Conversely, men, heterosexual people, and youth aged 15–16 and 17–18 are significantly less likely to report having engaged in sexual activities for reasons other than wanting to. No significant differences were observed for the other groups.

Figure 11. Proportion of people reporting having engaged in a sexual activity without really wanting to, by gender, sexual orientation and age



Notes. The values in each cell (except for the Statistics column) represent the percentage of respondents followed by the adjusted residuals in parentheses. The strength of the associations (effect size) was estimated using Cramer's V (V < 0.10 = negligible association; V between 0.10 and 0.19 = weak association; V between 0.20 and 0.39 = moderate association; V between 0.40 and 0.59 = fairly strong association; V between 0.60 and 0.79 = strong association; V between 0.80 and 1.00 = very strong association [Cohen, 1988]).



Participants who reported having engaged in a sexual activity without really wanting to (41% of the sample) completed a measure documenting the reasons for engaging in unwanted sexual activity (Humphreys & Kennett, 2020). They indicated the extent to which each statement represented a reason for having engaged in unwanted sexual activities. Table 2 shows the **five reasons with the highest mean scores**. The seven response options were recoded into three categories (1 = Does not reflect one of my reasons; 2 = Reflects one of my reasons to some extent; 3 = Fully reflects one of my reasons).



“There are people whose libido is like 20%, and that’s their life, at 20%, so it’s not important to them, but their boyfriend or girlfriend or whoever is at 110%, so it’s like ‘I decided to be in a relationship with this person [...] at some point you have to find a middle ground,’ you know, ‘you have to make sacrifices’.”

*Woman, 24, college student*

As in the previous sections, analyses were conducted to compare responses by sociodemographic characteristics. **While no significant differences were observed by age, differences were observed across gender and sexual orientation for some of the given reasons.** The results of the analyses can be found in the appendix.

**Table 2. Most common reasons young people aged 15 to 25 reported having engaged in sexual activities without really wanting to (n = 131)**

	Does not reflect one of my reasons	Reflects one of my reasons to some extent	Fully reflects one of my reasons	Mean (Standard deviation)
1 I felt guilty for not participating in the unwanted sexual activity.	10%	64%	26%	4.92 (1.89)
2 I felt it was necessary to satisfy my partner’s needs.	18%	60%	22%	4.47 (2.12)
3 I didn’t want to hurt my partner’s feelings.	18%	65%	18%	4.31 (2.06)
4 They verbally pressured me to participate in the unwanted sexual behaviour..	21%	55%	24%	4.21 (2.28)
5 I was unable to say no or did not know how to say no.	26%	53%	21%	4.16 (2,30)

### 3.8 Youth recommendations for the prevention of sexual violence and for sex education

During the focus groups, 14 young people shared their opinions on certain findings from this study, particularly regarding sexual consent and sexual gender norms. These interviews also gathered youth recommendations for the prevention of sexual violence and for sex education. This section presents recommendations for each school level (high school, college and university), except for four suggestions common to all three groups.



<sup>5</sup> Heteronormativity refers to the set of normative ideologies that assume the binary of sex (male/female), gender (man/woman), social roles (e.g., father/mother) and sexual orientations (heterosexual/homosexual), and the correspondence of these dimensions (female sex/woman/mother/heterosexual; male sex/man/father/heterosexual) (Chaire de recherche sur la diversité sexuelle et la pluralité des genres, 2017, p. 3).



### Recommendations shared across all three groups

- Expand sex education and discussions of sexual consent beyond a heterocisnormative perspective.
- Address sexual consent in a nuanced way, beyond the binary principle of “yes” or “no.”
- Value and normalize sexual consent (given and received) by showing that it can be “sexy.”
- Emphasize that sexual consent can change and be withdrawn at any time.

### High school youth recommendations

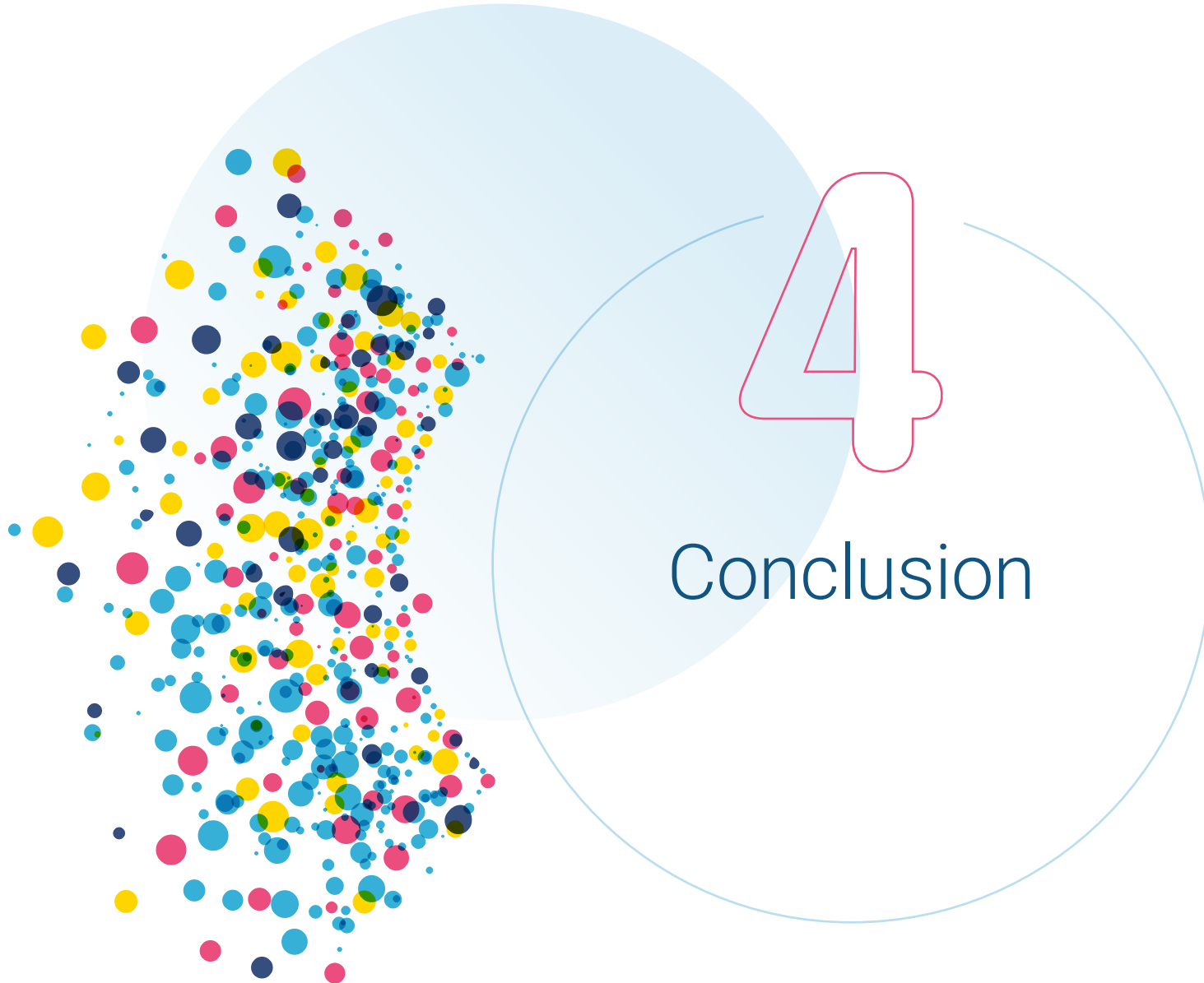
- Deconstruct gender stereotypes in sexuality.
- Focus more on positive sexuality.
- Address issues of violence and provide strategies to distinguish healthy and unhealthy relationships.

### College-level youth recommendations

- Acknowledge that coercion or pressure to engage in sexual activity are not acceptable behaviours and should not be trivialized.
- Deconstruct the association between sexuality and performance as well as the scenarios portrayed in pornography.
- Use clear and precise language (e.g., using the “real” words) to convey accurate and concrete information.

### University-level youth recommendations

- Promote engaging prevention and education programs offered throughout the academic pathway (rather than one-off initiatives).
- Sexual violence prevention programs should recognize that consent relies on a series of indicators (both verbal and nonverbal) that together communicate another person’s consent or non-consent.
- Emphasize that sexual consent is essential in all types of relationships (e.g., long-term partner or one-night partner), regardless of duration or level of intimacy between partners.
- Deconstruct social pressures and expectations related to sexuality in relationships and acknowledge that sexuality should not be a measure of love or a person’s worth.
- Normalize that each person experiences their sexual life at their own pace.



Conclusion



## 4 CONCLUSION

This summary report presents the main findings of the study *(Dé)construire le scénario : agir ensemble*, which aims to improve understanding of the factors influencing attitudes and behaviours toward sexual consent among Quebec youth aged 15 to 25. Since sexual consent, a central element of sexual interactions, is strongly influenced by gender norms, this study examined the link between endorsement of sexual gender norms and sexual consent from late adolescence to early adulthood. This section summarizes the main recommendations put forward by the research team for the prevention of sexual violence and for sex education among adolescents and young adults.

First, a large proportion of the participating youth aged 15 to 25 show positive attitudes toward establishing sexual consent and view sexual consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Young people also show a certain level of comfort with communicative sexuality and report attitudes and behaviours that are generally unfavourable toward subtle coercion. Nevertheless, variations in attitudes and behaviours are observed based on gender, sexual orientation and age.

**With regard to gender**, women show more positive attitudes toward establishing sexual consent than men. Nonbinary individuals, other-gender individuals and those who are questioning their gender also show more opposed attitudes toward subtle coercion than men.

**In respect to sexual orientation**, plurisexual youth express the most favourable attitudes toward establishing sexual consent (compared to heterosexual, gay or lesbian youth) and toward communicative sexuality (compared to gay or lesbian youth), as well as the least favourable attitudes toward subtle coercion (compared to heterosexual youth).

**As for age**, youth aged 15–16 and 19–25 show more positive attitudes toward establishing consent than youth aged 17–18.

**These results highlight the importance of increasing awareness efforts among certain groups, particularly young men. They also invite further reflection on the factors associated with a stronger valuing of sexual consent among plurisexual individuals, who appear to have developed attitudes and behaviours that are more supportive of consent.**



Experiences of sexual victimization does not emerge as a determining factor in the sample. Those who have been sexually victimized do not differ from those who have not on measures of communicative sexuality, ongoing sexual consent, or subtle coercion. However, women who have experienced sexual assault hold more favourable attitudes toward establishing sexual consent than women and men who have not. **These findings suggest that prevention programs should help those who have not experienced sexual assault develop more favourable attitudes toward establishing sexual consent.**

Endorsement of sexual gender norms is negatively associated with positive attitudes toward establishing consent, communicative sexuality, ongoing consent and disapproval of subtle coercion. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that men who endorse stereotypical masculinity more strongly are more likely to use coercive tactics when a partner refuses to engage in sexual activity (McKinnon et al., 2024). According to Fournier et al. (2023), men who more strongly endorse gendered sexual scripts may feel that their masculinity is threatened when a sexual partner rejects their advances and may resort to sexual coercion to reestablish their masculinity. Taken together, these findings suggest that endorsement of sexual gender norms hinders attitudes and behaviours that support sexual consent. **Sexual violence prevention programs should therefore work to deconstruct sexual gender norms.**



In the sample, 41% of young people reported having engaged in sexual activity without really wanting to, a proportion that was markedly higher among young women (47%), plurisexual youth (62%) and those aged 19 to 25 (53%). The most frequently reported reasons for engaging in sexual activity without really wanting to were guilt about not engaging in sex, feeling obligated to meet the other person's needs, wanting to avoid hurting the other person, exposure to verbal pressure and difficulty saying no. These findings highlight the limits of a binary understanding of sexual consent that draws a strict dichotomy between desired sexual activity and sexual assault. According to Beres (2021), heteronormative scripts sometimes lead individuals, especially women, to feel obliged to consent to unwanted sexual activity in order to conform to social norms.

**As a result, sexual violence prevention should not be limited to teaching how to communicate sexual consent, but should also address gendered socialization norms, common misconceptions about intimate relationships and relational dynamics that can lead young people—mainly women and plurisexual individuals—to engage in sexual activity they do not really want.**

When people agree to engage in sexual activity out of a sense of duty or obligation, they experience negative consequences that impact their sense of self as sexual beings (Gavey, 2018), their mood, self-esteem, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (Himanen & Gunst, 2024). **Sexual violence prevention programs should therefore aim to deconstruct the norms that place pressure on young people so that everyone can experience their sexuality in a positive way, free from pressure or constraint.**

Lastly, the 14 young people who took part in the focus groups shared recommendations based on their own experiences and the needs they perceived among other young people in their social circles. **Such an approach should be systematically included when working with adolescent and young adult populations: consulting young people is essential to developing prevention programs that respond to their needs, concerns and real-life experiences.**

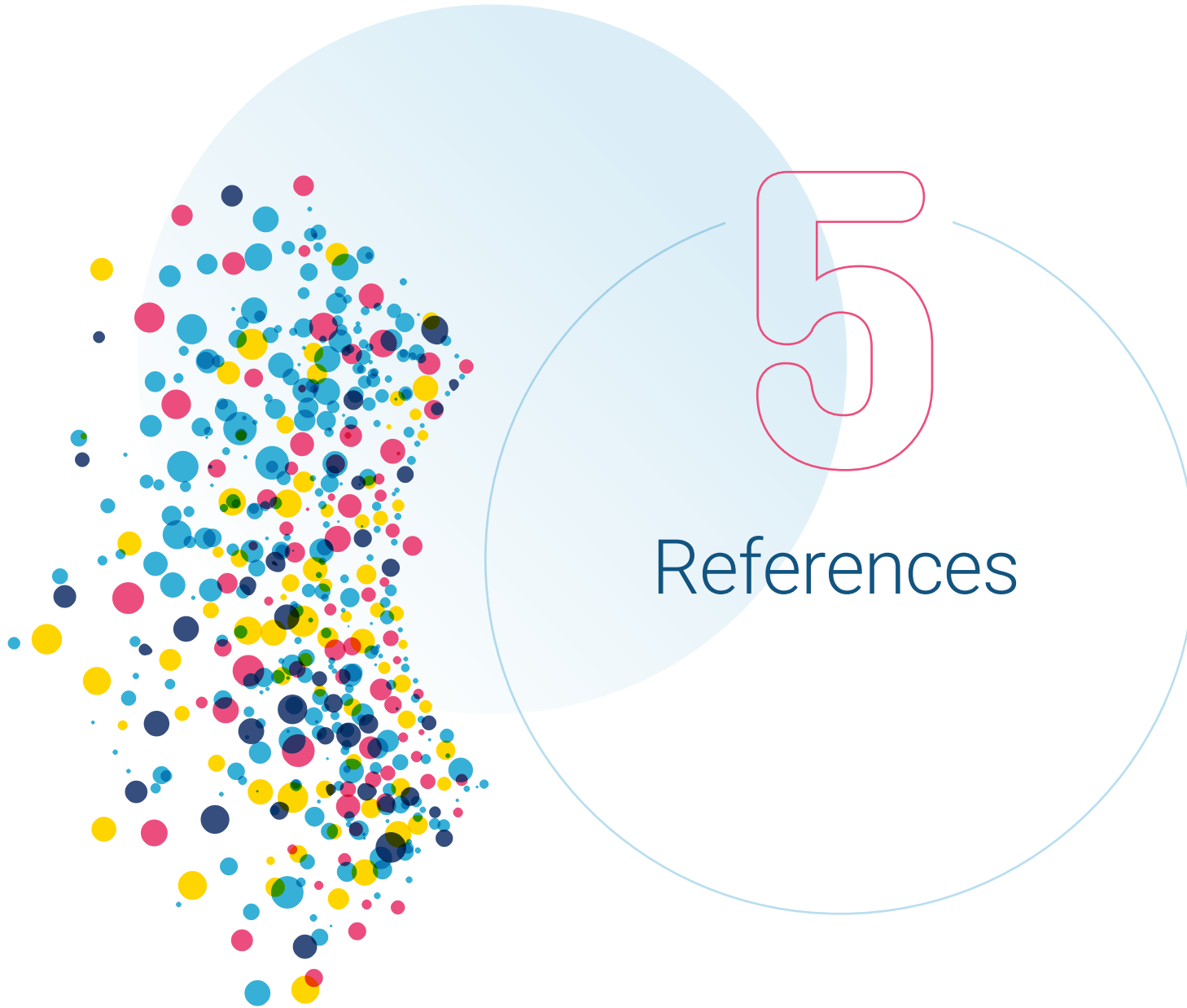


**In Quebec as in Canada, sexual violence prevention programs continue to be largely heteronormative.** Like the Public Health Agency of Canada (2008), both the young people consulted in the focus groups and the Research Chair emphasize the importance of developing prevention and intervention strategies that are inclusive of the needs and realities of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. In this regard, the research team draws attention to the publication of the recommendation guide for postsecondary institutions *Prévenir les violences sexuelles subies par les communautés 2SLGBTQIA+* (Preventing Sexual Violence Experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ Communities) (Després et al., 2023).



**Through this project, the research team sought to contribute to efforts to prevent sexual violence among adolescent and emerging adult populations in Quebec.**

Despite the previously noted challenges in recruiting the sample, the production of knowledge on attitudes and behaviours related to sexual consent is clearly relevant and informative for educational settings and community organizations specializing in sexual violence. These settings can draw on the main findings of this project to improve current practices and develop new programs. The research team presents this report as a tool for reflection for all practitioners involved in sexual violence prevention and sex education for young people aged 15 to 25. In accordance with the perspective promoted since its creation, the *Chaire de recherche sur les violences sexistes et sexuelles en milieu d'enseignement supérieur* encourages grounding the prevention of these forms of violence in a comprehensive, collaborative, inclusive, and continuous approach (Bergeron et al., 2020).



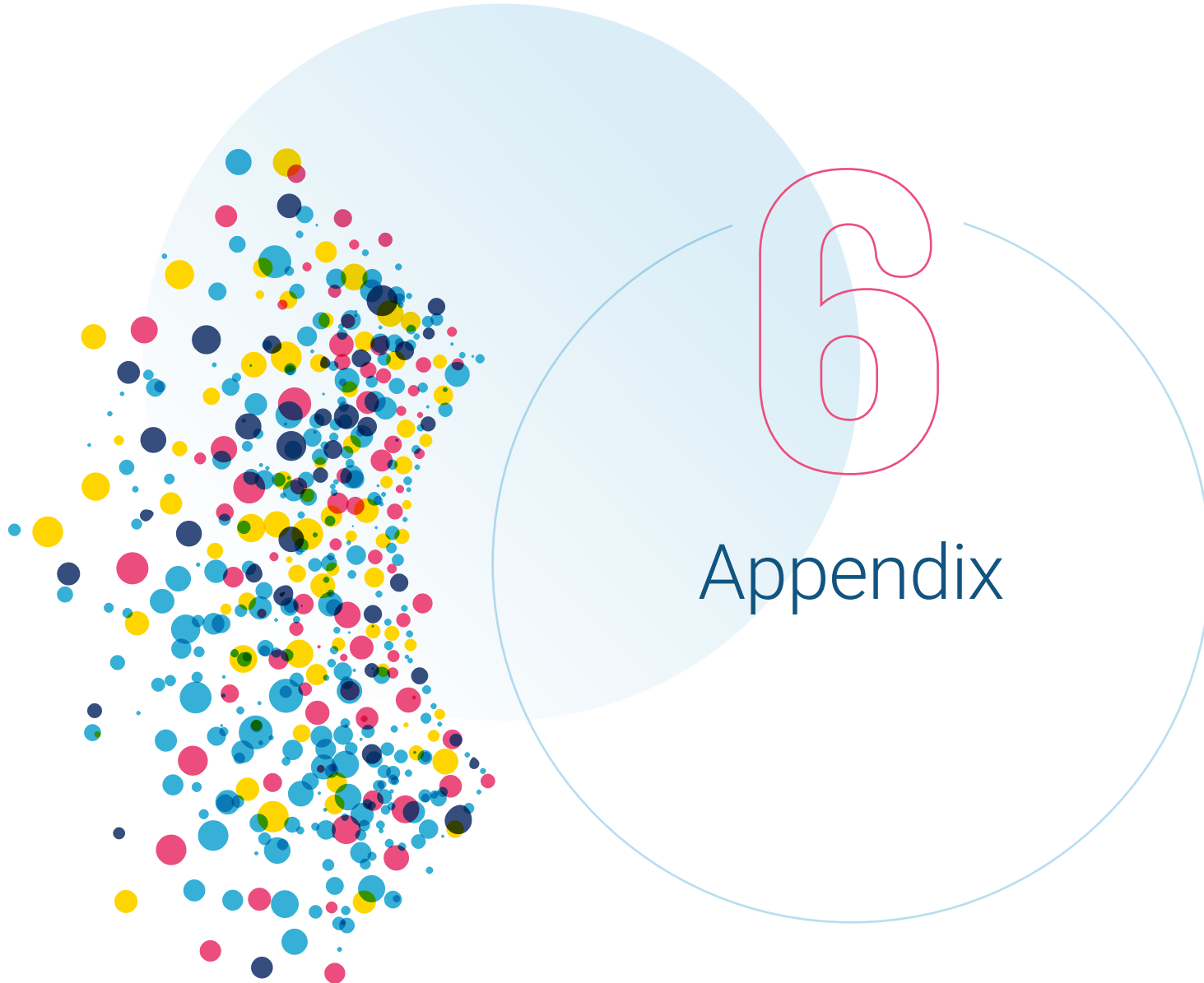


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## 6 APPENDIX

This appendix reveals the most frequent reasons reported by young people aged 15 to 25 for engaging in sexual activity without really wanting to, by certain sociodemographic characteristics.

Statements for which level of agreement varies by gender, sexual orientation or age are shown in bold. Different letters (a, b) indicate groups with significantly different means ( $p < 0.05$ ). Groups sharing the same letter do not differ significantly. Letters should be compared horizontally..

By gender		Women (n = 102)	Men (n = 20)	Nonbinary, other gender, or questioning (n = 8)	Statistics
1	I felt guilty for not participating in the unwanted sexual activity.	5.02 (1.88)	4.25 (2.12)	5.25 (1.28)	$F = 1.52$ $p = 0.22$
2	I felt it was necessary to satisfy my partner's needs.	4.53 (2.11)	4.15 (2.41)	4.50 (1.85)	$F = 0.26$ $p = 0.769$
3	I didn't want to hurt my partner's feelings.	4.41 (2.06)	3.60 (2.04)	4.88 (2.17)	$F = 1.61$ $p = 0.203$
4	<b>They verbally pressured me to participate in the unwanted sexual behaviour.</b>	<b>4.42<sub>a</sub> (2.25)</b>	<b>2.60<sub>b</sub> (1.85)</b>	<b>5.38<sub>a</sub> (2.07)</b>	<b><math>F = 7.03</math></b> <b><math>p = 0.001</math></b>
5	I was unable to say no or did not know how to say no.	4.32 (2.29)	3.40 (2.06)	4.38 (2.67)	$F = 1.40$ $p = 0.250$



By sexual orientation		Heterosexual (n = 72)	Gay, lesbian or homosexual (n = 6)	Plurisexual (n = 45)	Questioning (n = 8)	Statistics
1	I felt guilty for not participating in the unwanted sexual activity.	4.60 (1.93)	4.50 (2.81)	5.31 (1.56)	5.88 (2.03)	$F = 2.18$ $p = 0.093$
2	I felt it was necessary to satisfy my partner's needs.	4.32 (2.12)	4.50 (2.81)	4.56 (2.05)	5.38 (2.20)	$F = 0.626$ $p = 0.600$
3	I didn't want to hurt my partner's feelings.	4.24 (2.01)	4.67 (2.34)	4.22 (2.10)	5.25 (2.25)	$F = 0.667$ $p = 0.574$
4	They verbally pressured me to participate in the unwanted sexual behaviour.	3.78 (2.17)	4.00 (2.68)	4.76 (2.37)	5.13 (1.89)	$F = 2.23$ $p = 0.088$
5	<b>I was unable to say no or did not know how to say no.</b>	<b>3.57<sub>a</sub> (2.18)</b>	<b>6.00<sub>b</sub> (0.89)</b>	<b>4.62<sub>a,b</sub> (2.37)</b>	<b>5.50<sub>a,b</sub> (2.00)</b>	<b><math>F = 4.77</math></b> <b><math>p = 0.003</math></b>

By age		15 - 16 (n = 8)	17 - 18 (n = 19)	19 - 25 (n = 104)	Statistics
1	I felt guilty for not participating in the unwanted sexual activity.	4.25 (2.44)	4.42 (2.12)	5.06 (1.79)	$F = 1.45$ $p = 0.238$
2	I felt it was necessary to satisfy my partner's needs.	3.38 (1.41)	4.47 (1.87)	4.56 (2.20)	$F = 1.16$ $p = 0.317$
3	I didn't want to hurt my partner's feelings.	3.38 (2.07)	4.42 (2.19)	4.37 (2.04)	$F = 0.89$ $p = 0.415$
4	They verbally pressured me to participate in the unwanted sexual behaviour.	4.00 (2.56)	4.42 (2.32)	4.18 (2.27)	$F = 0.12$ $p = 0.886$
5	I was unable to say no or did not know how to say no.	3.63 (2.39)	4.74 (1.82)	4.10 (2.37)	$F = 0.86$ $p = 0.428$

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