



BEYOND JUST A "YES"



How MSU Undergraduates Learn, Understand, and Apply Consent

BACKGROUND

Sexual education aims to support healthy sexual practices and relationships; however, its coverage in secondary institutions varies. Many students enter university with incomplete information, often shaped by abstinence-only programs that exclude topics of consent, sexual communication, and gender or sexual diversity. As scholars note, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of consent, thus leading to confusion as students understand it differently. This study explores how MSU undergraduates learn about, define, understand, and communicate sexual consent.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does sexual education influence MSU undergraduates' understanding and application of consent?

How do MSU undergraduates define consent?

How do MSU undergraduates communicate and practice consent within their romantic and sexual relationships?

DATA COLLECTION

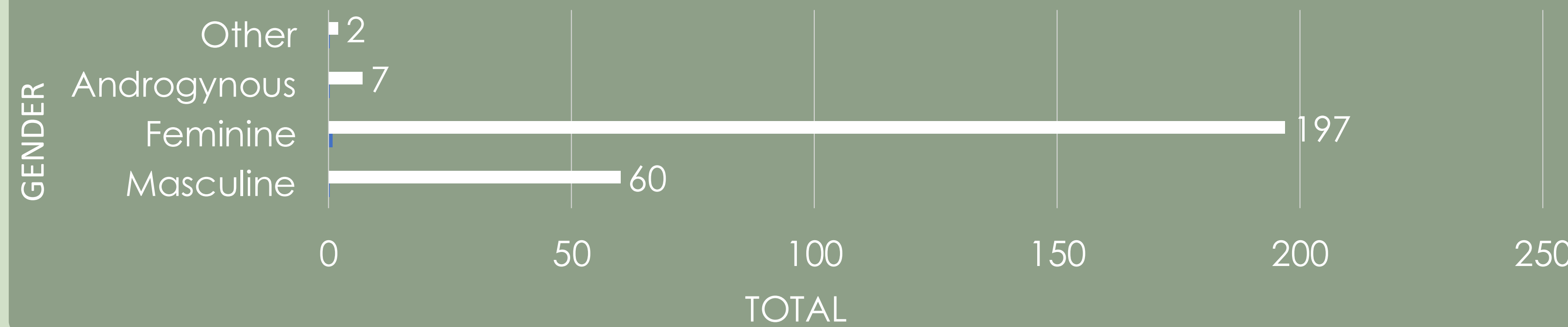
Survey: Survey data were collected via a Qualtrics questionnaire distributed to MSU undergraduate students, yielding 279 responses.

Journal Entries: Journal entries were collected from SOC 100, SOC 214, SOC 216, and SOC 316 courses across Fall 2022, Spring 2023, Fall 2023, and Spring 2024. Using a systematic random sampling approach, every third entry was selected to produce a sample of 90 out of 487 entries, with 10 entries drawn from each class per semester. (N = 90)

SURVEY: DATA

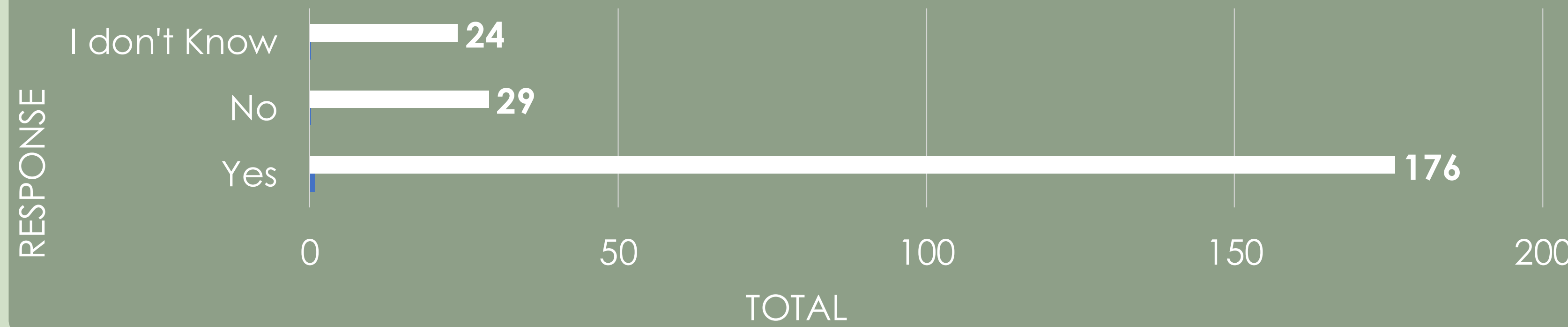
Gender Identity

N = 266



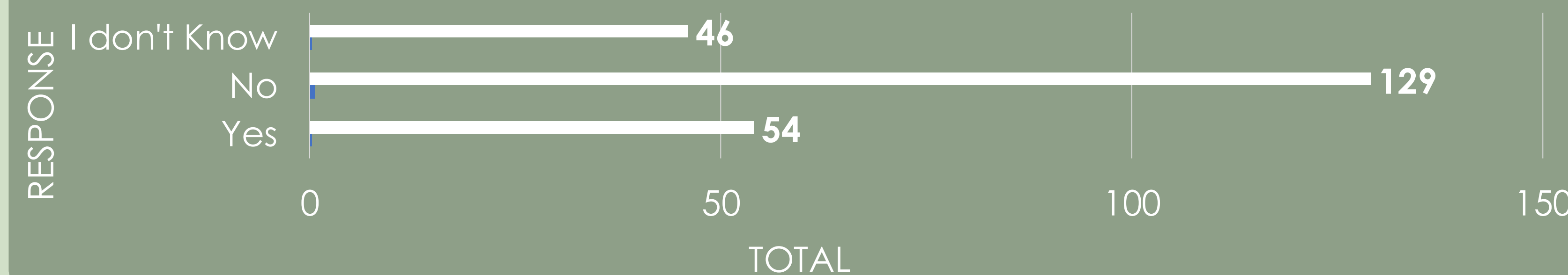
Was consent talked about during your sexual education?

N = 229



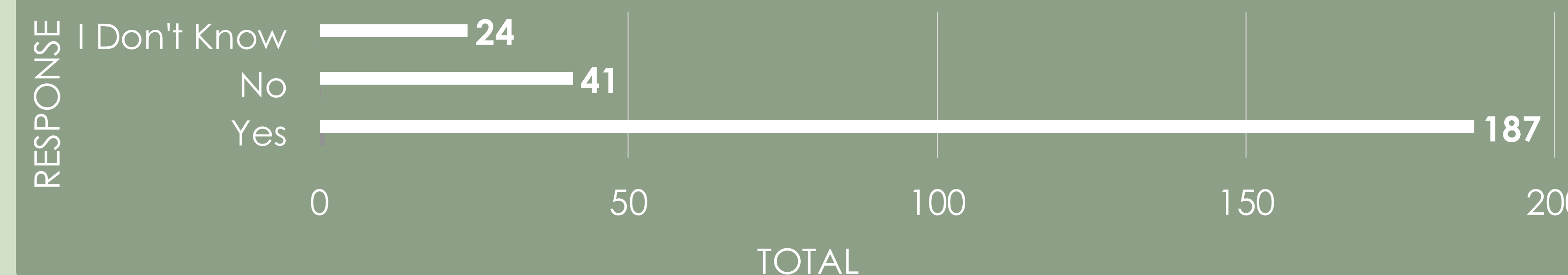
Did your sexual education include information on hookups?

N = 229



Do you talk about consent before you engage in sexual activities with others?

N = 252



CONCLUSION

Survey data and journal entry analysis indicate that most participants recalled learning about consent in their sexual education, though topics like consent in hookups were rarely addressed. Despite these gaps, most students actively practice consent, and journal entries reveal they understand it as mutual, voluntary, enthusiastic, and ongoing, communicated through honest conversations, check-ins, and safe words. However, 65 respondents reported "no" or "I don't know" when asked about discussing consent before sexual activity, highlighting that many may not consistently engage in consensual communication.

Future research would benefit from a more diverse sample, as 197 of the 266 respondents identified as female. Additionally, examining how socioeconomic status influences responses, reflecting differences in sexual education across income levels, would be valuable. Finally, expanding the focus to include MSU undergraduates' understanding of sexual assault and available resources could further deepen the conversation on consent.

REFERENCES

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Marcantonio, T., Jozkowski, K. N., & Wen-Juo, L. (2018). "Beyond 'just saying no': A preliminary evaluation of strategies college students use to refuse sexual activity." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 47(7), 341-351.

Muehlenhard, C. L., Humphreys, T., Jozkowski, K. N., & Peterson, Z. D. (2016). "The complexities of sexual consent among college students: A conceptual and empirical review." *Journal of Sex Research*, 53(4), 457-487.

JOURNAL ENTRY: DATA

What does "consent" mean to you?



Participants frequently described consent as a **clear, mutual, and voluntary agreement**, defined by an **enthusiastic "yes"** and the **absence of coercion or intoxication.**

How do you talk about consent in your relationships?

Participants described consent in their relationships as **ongoing, verbal communication through check-ins, permission, and boundary-setting**, while some reported no discussion or no relationship experience.

