

***Critical media literacy approaches to violence prevention:  
A research note***

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**ABSTRACT**

Sexual violence is a global phenomenon needing sustainable interventions. The article extends findings from media literacy scholars by exploring ways that critical media literacy (CML) pedagogies can be used to teach affirmative consent education for the purposes of violence prevention. The article is not a curriculum blue-print, as the pedagogies are still being piloted for adolescents in Ontario. However, the rationales for bridging consent education and critical media literacy apply transnationally. Engaging educators and students with critical analysis of media and creative media production is key to transformative learning about consent, within and beyond the classroom. The article ends by outlining methods that will be used to test the hypothesis that a CML approach rooted in social justice frameworks and best practices in violence prevention will improve the way affirmative consent is taught to adolescents.

**Keywords:** *affirmative consent education, digital production, media literacy education, social justice education, violence prevention.*



## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy (CML) works to empower learners to develop a nuanced understanding of the ways in which information, power, media and ideology are inextricably linked (Kellner & Share, 2007).

CML teaches learners to analyze how texts in media and pop culture are vehicles for framing larger socio-political issues of race, culture, gender, class, and power (Luke, 1994). An effective and transformative CML must therefore move beyond superficial acceptance of media. Instead, it should position learners to challenge and subvert the dominant discourses represented in media by recognizing and analyzing how they reinforce power, learned behaviors and particular ideologies (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hobbs, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007). More recently, scholars and educators have also emphasized creative counter-production as a core element of CML (Pangrazio, 2016; Todorova, 2015) so that learners can recognize the role they have in sustaining and/or challenging media representations.

CML teaches skills to be used in classroom settings *and* in real-world contexts. Masterman (1994) declared that the ultimate goal of a CML is the development of critical autonomy, described as the critical questioning of media outside of the classroom and away from educators. Ferguson (2001) asserts that CML must also cultivate a sense of critical solidarity because people and information are always linked to structures of power. Taken together, critical autonomy and critical solidarity can interrupt an uncritical dependence on media (Kellner & Share, 2007) and foster democratic civic engagement for the purposes of social justice. Similarly, Hobbs (2010a) asserts that CML is vital to the curation of engaged and caring citizens as it enables learners to recognize personal, corporate and political agendas. CML can thus empower students through creative counter-production by providing the tools to represent a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that disrupt white supremacy, colonialism, capitalist heteropatriarchy, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other systemic oppressions.

Another foundational component of CML is the integration of popular culture as a pedagogical tool. Today's middle school students are part of the generation that is witnessing the unprecedented development of digital tools, technologies and social media. Mears (2012) asserts that youth are the most

“tech-savvy” generation, creating the need for educators to adapt to new modes of communication and learning styles. The integration of popular culture texts into classroom lessons, as suggested by numerous scholars, is an effective strategy to engage students, and to make meaningful content that relates to students' everyday lives (Mears, 2012).

Alvermann & Hagood (2000) draw upon Daiute's (1997) 'youth genre' in their promotion of the inclusion of popular culture in the classroom. Daiute's youth genre describes the phenomenon wherein television, popular music and other electronic media provide the discourse and themes of early childhood and adolescence. By incorporating media and examples from pop culture into lessons, educators can promote multiple intelligences and reflect an appreciation of students' learning styles which thereby enables them to reach more students (D'Angelo, 2010).

For example, D'Angelo (2010) used film and graphic novels to explore themes of power and social control with high school students. Hobbs (2010b) explored how students can use media and pop culture to reduce math anxiety and make math more relatable to everyday problems. Klosterman et al. (2012) analyzed how science teachers can use mass media to address socio-scientific issues such as sustainability. Pinkleton et al. (2008) used TV characters that were popular with youth to discuss sexual health myths, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and abstinence. Relatedly, Scull et al. (2014) also used TV characters in their sexual health program to discuss the sexual decisions of characters such as condom usage. This wide variety of examples demonstrates how media and pop culture can be used to enhance learning across curriculum.

### Gaps in the literature

While scholars have published widely on recommendations for how to incorporate media literacy across a range of subjects, there is limited research exploring how media literacy could be used for primary violence prevention. Primary violence prevention includes all activities that take place to prevent violence and victimization (e.g., legislation, education, and campaigns). Secondary prevention focuses on immediate responses after violence has occurred in order to mediate the short-term consequences of violence (e.g. emergency accommodation). Tertiary prevention engages with the long-term effects of sexual violence with both survivors and perpetrators in hopes of reducing the chances of sexual violence happening

again and mitigating negative impacts (e.g., therapy). Education has been identified as a key type of primary intervention because of its capacity to be delivered to entire cohorts before violence occurs (Schneider & Hirsch, 2018).

While some scholars advocate for sexual consent education because of its potential to prevent and reduce rates of violence (Bialystok, 2018; Mallet & Herbé, 2011), other scholars have noted that few studies have examined how young people negotiate consent (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Coy et al., 2016). Very few studies have examined effective methods for teaching affirmative consent. Additionally, consent education has yet to address the technological changes in communication and the frequency with which young people engage with media and technology. This paper thus provides scholarly rationales for teaching affirmative consent using critical media literacy pedagogies as a form of primary violence prevention.

Media literacy education has been used for teaching adolescents about comprehensive sexual health education (Scull et al., 2014), sexual health promotion in community college (Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Keefe, 2018), and sexual health promotion in middle school (Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Morgan-Lopez, 2018). While the last two papers' primary focus is sexual health promotion, both studies examined relevant topics related to consent and sexual violence.

Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik and Keefe (2018) examine the efficacy of a mobile health (mHealth) media literacy education program for sexual health promotion in older adolescents attending community college. While important, a sexual health focus is different than affirmative consent education and primary violence prevention. Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik and Keefe (2018) focused on risk and risky sexual behavior (e.g. lack of condom use, intoxicated sex, sex with multiple partners, inconsistent contraception, and STIs). While the program had students analyze and reflect on "media representations of gender roles, sexual violence and consent" (p. 166), the terms are not defined, leading readers to question whether the authors assume a shared definition of the terms for both readers and participants.

In the outcome analyses, rape myth acceptance is examined as a composite variable comprising the statements "He didn't mean to" (MT), "She asked for it" (SA), and "It wasn't really rape" (NR). Participants in the intervention group only reported less acceptance of rape myths at posttest on the Not rape (NR) scale, but significant changes were not found for the other two scales. Though (Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Keefe,

2018) did not expand on why this may be, research suggests that it may be due to low dosage. mHealth consisted of five self-paced lessons totaling two to three hours. Best practices in the field of violence prevention suggest that sufficient dosage is key for achieving significant change (Nation et al., 2013; Vladutiu et al., 2011). Additionally, mHealth emphasizes an awareness of media message influence on sexual behavior choices but does not analyze or evaluate media production.

Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik and Morgan-Lopez (2018) published the results of a randomized control trial of Media Aware. While the study looked at "sexual communication," this was limited to discussions of pregnancy, contraception, and STIs. While important in the context of discussing consent, Media Aware did not provide a comprehensive discussion. Sexual relations are more than biology, and the present article extends this discussion by engaging with a broader range of topics related to consent and violence prevention. Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Morgan-Lopez (2018) also examined "self-efficacy for refusing sex" as a secondary sexual health outcome, which the authors adapted from Soet et al. (1999, p. 721).

Focusing solely on an individual's self-reported ability to refuse sex runs the risk of reproducing victim-blaming narratives that places the onus on a victim to have effectively communicated that they did not want to engage in particular sexual relations.

Consent programs should emphasize consent as an ongoing process, in which each party involved has a shared responsibility to communicate and ensure that the other's autonomy is respected. It is crucial to address both the interpersonal nature of sexual interactions, such as power and dominance (Amaro, 1995; Soet et al., 1999; Yoder & Kahn, 1992) as well as intrapersonal factors such as personal empowerment and self-efficacy. In Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Morgan-Lopez's (2018) study, self-efficacy for refusing sex was not found to differ as a result of the program (p. 1059). Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik & Morgan-Lopez (2018) also measured dating violence acceptance and gender role acceptance as secondary sexual health outcomes, which were adapted from Foshee et al. (2004). Both measures were significantly impacted by the program.

This article responds to the gap in the literature by presenting a pilot program that extends and diverges from these findings in multiple ways. Firstly, the main focus of the program is sexual consent education. Secondly, the program is informed by critical theories from social justice education, critical media literacy, and best practices in sexual violence prevention. These

theoretical approaches diverge significantly from Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik and Keefe (2018) and Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik and Morgan-Lopez (2018). Third, the methodologies that will be used to test the approach build upon and extend the approaches used in existing media literacy programs. To our knowledge, there is a lack of social justice perspectives in the field of consent education, and thus the pilot program and methodologies for testing it make original contributions to the field.

The authors' approach to using critical media literacy that includes both critical analysis and production is informed by best practices in media literacy, and best practices in violence prevention. Programs that have been most effective use active and skills-based components (Lonsway, 1996; Nation et al., 2003).

Interactive programs may assist young people in exploring what is taken for granted about sexuality, and how some of these beliefs might impede healthy negotiation of intimacy in relationships. This is consistent with findings from Paul and Gray (2011) and DeGue et al. (2014) who found that participatory programs are more effective than ones that are simply instructional or based in group discussion. Other common elements of effective violence prevention include comprehensive programs that have multiple components (DeGue et al., 2014; Nation et al., 2003), programs that include community engagement (Nation et al., 2003), and programs that focus on structural factors such as poverty and racism (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Contextualized programming is also important to a program's success (e.g., programs conducted within peer groups and community settings; Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; Tharp et al., 2013).

In the sections that follow, we define and discuss affirmative consent and why we chose this framework. We then provide scholarly rationales for why critical media literacy approaches can be effective for teaching affirmative consent. Following this, we present the target demographic based on developmental literature and best practices in violence prevention, before presenting the critical media literacy (CML) approach for the pilot program. We then outline the mixed methods that will be used to measure the impact of the approach. Finally, we discuss the limitations and future directions for research.

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<sup>1</sup> We are intentionally gender-neutral here so as not to continue the erasure of queer, trans\* and non-binary peoples and

## Sexual Consent Frameworks in Education

We use a framework of affirmative consent because it weaves together communicative and legalistic understandings of consent in a realistic way that allows space for a multiplicity of sexual identities to have healthy relationships. It has also been used widely by sex educators in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand (Gilbert, 2018; Halley, 2016). *Affirmative consent* can be defined as the active, ongoing communication of willingness to participate in an offered activity through verbal and nonverbal cues. Affirmative consent education thus seeks to prepare learners for the reality that sex can be voluntarily desired, especially for girls and young people for whom this has historically been denied (Coy et al., 2016; Gilbert, 2018; Waites, 2005).

Affirmative consent emphasizes the right to bodily autonomy. This can be described as the right to say no and not feel pressured or coerced into saying yes, even if the boundaries are being articulated to a trusted individual, such as a partner, friend or family member. Additional emphasis should be placed on the notion of responsibility. All of us share a responsibility to co-produce safe environments in our communities, and this includes educational spaces. Respecting others' right to say no, refraining from pressuring, and stopping when consent is revoked are key elements to respectful relations. A framework of affirmative consent emphasizes consent as a process that involves both getting consent and giving consent. Getting consent involves active inquiry that places the other party's personal autonomy at the forefront, ultimately allowing them to make the decision. An example would be asking, "Do you want a hug?" as opposed to assuming that a person you would like to hug is willing and able to receive the hug in a given moment. Giving consent involves gestures or affirmation that signal to the other party that they enthusiastically agree to participate. It is additionally important to understand that consent can be revoked once it is given. For example, if Person A and Person B<sup>1</sup> start kissing and one of them wants to stop, in other words, *revoke consent*, this must be respected.

Furthermore, consent or revoking consent is not always articulated verbally. It can be communicated through body language, such as a lack of eye contact, crossed arms, not responding to prompts, pulling away, and signs of discomfort. In these instances, it is

relationships that persists in many conversations about consent, and in educational spaces.

important to stop and check in before proceeding. The concept of affirmative consent also dictates that not saying “no” does not equal an active yes. Additionally, consenting to an act one time does not imply ongoing consent. For example, consenting to sex once does not imply that further sexual acts are wanted, or consenting to kissing does not mean a person wants their clothing removed. Examples do not have to be sexual. If a person gives consent to being hugged one day, it does not mean they want to be surprised with another hug later. Surprise contact is not always wanted, even if it is affectionate or the person who wants to give the hug is well-intentioned. Consent is not about the intentions of the person giving, but about the boundaries of the person on the receiving end. The Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) has used a framework of affirmative consent since 1992 (Plaxton, 2015), shifting the question from “Did the victim say no?” to “Did the victim say yes?” The shift is meant to ensure that reasonable steps were taken to obtain consent as opposed to ensuring the victims refused sexual activity.

### **Social justice frameworks for media literacy and affirmative consent education**

While it is encouraging that legal frameworks are using a framework of affirmative consent, few scholars have examined effective frameworks for teaching affirmative consent to youth. Given that we live in a digital age, it is important that classroom work with youth include extended discussions about how consent is portrayed in popular media. In line with this, the pilot program uses a digital teaching tool and a subsequent set of guided conversations with students. Conversations in the classroom about affirmative consent contribute to the many necessary interventions that cumulatively seek to prevent and reduce rates of sexual and interpersonal violence. It is equally important to note that it is not merely a curriculum or policy document that creates changes. Over time, we hope that conversations are able to create a cultural shift in the way we understand and practice consent.

This article presents a pilot program rooted in theoretical understandings of progressive and comprehensive consent education, critical media literacy education, and primary violence prevention. The recommendations are grounded in critical theories from social justice education. While scholars and practitioners often diverge on defining social justice education, the authors understand social justice education as a set of critical paradigms that examine the

social and historical contexts in which oppressive power relations are created. Understanding oppressive power relations is key to proposing more equitable social relations (Bell, 1997; Hytten, 2015) and violence prevention because social structures often contribute to violence. The overarching objectives seek to transcend a case study and benefit multiple communities beyond academics (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) by empowering youth and educators to understand how their collective actions can contribute to the creation of a consent culture that may reduce rates of violence.

In this specific article, the authors’ thinking is informed by theories from intersectional feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 1984), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Matsuda et al., 1993), and decolonial methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). *Critical race theory* understands racism “not as isolated instances of conscious bigoted decision-making, but as larger, systemic, structural, and cultural, as deeply psychologically and socially ingrained” (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 5). *Intersectionality* is a way to understand how multiple forms of inequality compound, thus challenging “the conceptual limitations of the single-issue analyses” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). *Decolonial methodologies* can be described as methodologies that are concerned with the broader politics and strategic goals of indigenous research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 239).

Our primary audience includes scholars and educators working in the field of critical media literacy education, health and consent education, and feminist educators in public, private or community organizations. Discussions on consent, sexual and gender-based violence prevention, mental health, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, and two spirit (LGBTQ2S) youth can be woven into interdisciplinary subjects using popular media examples in a myriad of ways, and we encourage educators to collaborate with colleagues and students when thinking through their lesson plans and teaching philosophies. We acknowledge that sexual violence is a global phenomenon that needs transnational and sustainable interventions. However, we attend to geographic specificity by focusing on present-day Canada and the United States. Consequently, what may work as sustainable interventions in our communities may need to be adapted in transnational contexts for reasons including, but not limited to political climate, censorship, curriculum and policy limitations.

Consent education in North America could benefit greatly from a critical media literacy approach because

dominant understandings of consent are carried through media and pop culture. Adolescents in particular cite television and mass media as their main sources of information about sex and relationships (Brown et al., 2005; Pinkleton et al., 2008; Sutton et al., 2002). Many media messages are inaccurate, unhealthy or reproduce oppressive stereotypes about race, class, gender, sexuality and (dis)ability, making it vital for young people to be able to critically analyze the media they consume. A promising intervention into these harmful messages is the promotion of CML, which teaches critical analysis of power relations, so that learners challenge oppressive stereotypes and representations within and beyond the classroom (Kellner & Share, 2007; Masterman, 1994). More recently, media scholars have emphasized the addition of creative counter-production (Pangrazio, 2016; Todorova, 2015). By moving from simply analyzing and critiquing mass media to producing mass media, learners engage in “digital participatory choice culture” (Ellison, 2017, p. 25) which allows them to recognize the role they have in sustaining and/or subverting media representations. Creative counter-production provides one outlet for young people to resist systemic oppression and move towards social justice.

Peer-led approaches to implementing CML have been found to be effective for topics that may be uncomfortable to discuss, such as sex education. For example, Pinkleton et al. (2008) found that students learned more about STIs from a peer-led class than from a nurse-led class. Young learners often believe that their peers have more sexual health knowledge than adult facilitators. Whether factual or not, these perceptions lead to measurable knowledge gain (Dunn et al., 1998). Therefore, with the presence of an educator who can ensure information is factual, a peer-led discussion could be a very effective approach to learning about consent and healthy relationships. This also fits well with the work of critical media literacy scholars, who suggest minimizing lecture-based instruction, de-emphasizing written reports and creating opportunities for setting and reviewing personal norms/standards for young learners (Elias et al., 1997; Pinkleton et al., 2008).

CML also provides adolescents with the cognitive framework to understand and resist the influence of problematic media representations on their decision-making process (Pinkleton et al., 2008). Data shows that abstinence-only education is ineffective (Pinkleton et al., 2008; Santelli et al., 2017). It is an insufficient intervention in reducing unwanted teen pregnancies, reducing the spread of STIs, and reducing or preventing

sexual violence. Comprehensive, affirmative sex and consent education goes beyond anatomy. Sexual health and consent education are comprised of physical and mental health, and at their core, are about how to be in good relation to the self and others. This logic aligns with researchers’ emphasis on the need for pedagogy to be age-appropriate so that young learners develop the necessary skills to respond well in social situations (Elias et al., 1997).

## METHODOLOGY

### Target demographic and rationale

The CML pedagogical approach presented here is based on principles and best practices pertaining to critical media literacy education, affirmative consent and violence prevention. The approach builds on research demonstrating the efficacy of CML approaches on promoting healthy behaviour in adolescents (Bergsma & Carney, 2008) and on teaching comprehensive sex education (Scull et al., 2014) and sexual health promotion (Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Keefe, 2018; Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Morgan-Lopez, 2018). Given these findings, the critical media literacy and consent pilot program is designed for young learners aged 13-15, who in Canada are typically in grade 7 and 8.

It is crucial to engage this age group in consent education because 71% of youth in Canada reported being in a dating relationship by the age of 15 (Mahony, 2015). Among those that have engaged in a dating relationship, Statistics Canada found that 55% had their first dating relationship by the age of 12 (Mahony, 2015). Adolescents begin to experience greater sexual thoughts and feelings as well as sexual fantasies as a way of preparing for and understanding their sexual roles. During these years, the production of sex hormones leads to continued emotional and physical changes. Masturbation is likely explored, and students may develop sexual attraction and explore their sexual orientation.

Literature in violence prevention has also stressed the importance of timing interventions early enough to have developmental impact (Nation et al., 2003). For example, strategies aimed at reducing sexually violent behavior have been particularly effective in adolescent populations (Foshee et al., 2004). Given this data, it is essential that educators teach youth about healthy sexuality, healthy relationships and consent before their initial encounters. Behaviors taught and learned during

adolescence are highly likely to be maintained through adulthood (Wolfe et al., 2009) because peers increasingly influence social norms. Sexual aggression often first emerges in adolescence (White & Smith, 2004). In the Canadian context, Wolfe and Chiodo (2008) found a high prevalence of sexualized violent behaviors in high schools. Specifically, 30% of females and 24% of males reported that they had experienced physical victimization (being touched or grabbed in a sexual way). This is consistent with findings from Casey and Lindhorst (2009) that suggest that adolescence may be the best time for a preventative intervention because of the greater chances of curbing the development of coercive behaviors, rape-supportive attitudes, and sexual and gender-based bullying.

### **Method of research**

A mixed-method design allows for robust assessment of a peer-led CML approach informed by best practices in violence prevention. Quantitative data collection would involve pre-and post-test questionnaires before and after the CML approaches to teaching affirmative consent. The pre- and post-test questionnaires will be adapted from the Sexual Consent Scale-Revised (SCS-R; Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010), a 39-item self-report measure that assesses sexual consent attitudes and behaviors with five subscales: Perceived Behavioral Control, Positive Attitude Toward Establishing Consent, Sexual Consent Norms, Awareness and Discussion. Participants would indicate the degree of agreement with each of the items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Previous research has shown the SCS-R to be a reliable and valid measure of sexual consent (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010; Kilimnik & Humphreys, 2018). A sample of 50-60 participants provides enough power to detect a change in pre-post scores (Scull et al., 2014).

Qualitative data will include field notes and participants' media productions from the 6-lesson pilot program containing: (1) peer-led discussion and definitions of consent, (2) introduction to CML lesson, (3) practicing critical analysis of media messages and power relations, (4) participant analysis of age-appropriate TV or movies to provide context and stimulate further discussion about consent, (5) creative media productions demonstrating participants' understanding of sexual consent and healthy relationships in small groups, and (6) presentation and peer-led discussion of alternative media productions.

Creative media production is a key outcome variable to assess understanding of consent and ability to understand and apply social justice frameworks learned throughout the pilot program, which we detail below.

### **Peer-led discussions, CML and critical analysis (Lessons 1-3)**

Because definitions of consent may vary or be lacking across curricula, we propose that the lessons begin with peer-led class discussions and definitions. Students should be given the time and space in class to converse, explore, and conceptualize the key components of consent and to identify a list of behaviors that do and/or do not exhibit the offering of consent. This enables peer-to-peer learning while enabling educators to facilitate discussion when approaching potentially uncomfortable topics of conversation.

Following definitions, we recommend using examples from popular, current and age-appropriate television shows to stimulate classroom discussions about consent. The integration of popular culture as a pedagogical tool is also key to CML because of the important role that television and popular media plays in the lives of adolescents (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Mears, 2012; Scull et al., 2014).

Today's middle school students are part of a generation that has witnessed the unprecedented development of digital technologies and social media (Mears, 2012). This makes them the most "tech-savvy" generation in history, creating the need for a paradigm shift within the classroom to accommodate this distinct set of new learning characteristics along with student's preferred media of communication.

The integration of popular culture texts into classroom lessons is an effective strategy to engage students, to make content meaningful, and to relate it to students' everyday lives (Mears, 2012). By incorporating popular media examples that resonate with students, educators promote multiple ways of thinking and learning that enable them to reach more students (D'Angelo, 2010).

Class discussion of popular culture examples also provide opportunities for students to unpack stereotypes, dispel myths, discuss representation (or lack thereof) and dissect other problematic assumptions and behaviors that are frequently reproduced in media. The peer-led discussion of consent is in line with best practices from violence prevention because it is participatory in nature. It also simulates real-world communication, which is key to consent.

## Analyzing rape culture in popular media: current examples (Lesson 4)

To best illustrate how educators might work through analysis and class discussion when engaging with the topic of consent, we provide the following example from the popular television show *Riverdale* (Season 2, Episode 5, “When a Stranger Calls”), acknowledging that many other examples may be more relevant. The clip shows two young characters, Veronica and Nick. Nick is visiting Riverdale from New York City while his wealthy parents negotiate a business deal with Veronica’s parents. In the scene, the two are discussing their evening when Nick suddenly places a hand on Veronica’s knee while complimenting her. Veronica refuses his advances, saying, “Nick, I am sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but I am with Archie”. Nick persists despite Veronica’s ongoing rejections and statements that they are “just friends”. Nick moves to kiss Veronica and climb atop her, at which point Veronica pushes him off. This prompts Nick to aggressively call Veronica a “flirt” and a “tease” before threatening to ruin Veronica’s parents’ desired business partnership if Veronica should fail to provide him with the attention he desires. The scene ends with Veronica slapping Nick and leaving the room.

Many things happen in the clip (or any other example a teacher might choose) and should be followed with more peer-led discussion addressing two key questions. Firstly: Was consent sought in this clip? Why or why not? Secondly: What myths around consent are being shown in this clip? Common problems and myths that should be discussed in this example include the fact that Nick does not ask for consent. He also does not stop when Veronica removes his hand from her body – an act that communicates both the lack of consent to touch, as well as Veronica’s discomfort. Nick persists until the point where Veronica physically resists. A discussion of the fact that physical resistance may often lead to further and/or greater violence also warrants further discussion. Furthermore, it is highly problematic that Nick threatens Veronica by referencing his parents’ business deal with her father as a reason that Veronica should owe him. It should be made very clear that this is not a necessary or sufficient condition for consent in educational or legal terms. Rather, Nick’s demand for “appreciation” are displays of his sense of male entitlement that implies that sexual favors are something one is “owed.” Nick then reproduces slut-shaming narratives in phrases such as “you were all over me” and “same old Veronica.” Slut shaming describes various forms of criticizing other’s

physical appearance and behaviors. It includes, but is not limited to, criticizing or banning particular forms of dress perceived as sexual or provocative, criticizing sexual choices, questioning victims and survivors of violence, etc.

It is also important for educators and students to discuss Veronica’s reactions and the implicit messages that are reproduced and normalized in the scene. Veronica tells Nick, “I’m with Archie” as a reason she does not want to be touched. It is important for viewers of the show to understand that they have the right to say “no” whenever they are uncomfortable, and to have that right be respected, regardless of relationship status. Veronica’s response is problematic, but unfortunately common. It may reinforce the idea that a man has the right to demand certain things of his wife, a problematic notion that was encoded in Canadian law until 1983 when amendments were made to the Criminal Code of Canada (C-127). After great pressure from feminists, the United States went through many legal processes from the 1970s until 1993 to ensure that marital rape was considered a crime in all 50 states under sexual offense codes. What should be made clear in discussions is that consent is about bodily autonomy, not ownership or possession.

Acknowledging that all of these examples are of a particular American and Euro-centric perspective, students should also be asked to think of other popular media sources where consent or lack of consent is evident. Within a CML framework, awareness of learners’ backgrounds, social histories and prior literacies is paramount. To mediate this, students and teachers can also bridge topics of consent with discussions on representation (or lack thereof), and the need for a multiplicity of identities and stories to be communicated. We acknowledge the under-representation of particular marginalized identities within popular culture (e.g. queer and trans\* identities and relationships, people of colour in leading roles that do not reify stereotypes, etc). Other examples from Hollywood pop-culture include but are not limited to: *13 Reasons Why* (bullying, coercion, sexual assault, rape), the classic tale *Sleeping Beauty* (in which Aurora is unable to consent because she is asleep or unconscious), the popular book and movie series *Harry Potter* (e.g., when Romilda Vane drugs chocolates with love potion in an attempt to seduce Harry, but Ron eats the chocolates and is immediately infatuated with the idea of Romilda). Students can also be asked to think of other popular media sources where consent or lack of consent is discussed. Examples that are more culturally relevant

(e.g., Bollywood or Chinese films) can also be used to discuss consent, given that sexual and gender-based violence is a global problem. We understand that generational and cultural differences may make this difficult, and thus encourage educators to ask students to help generate examples that speak to students' interests and experiences. We also encourage educators to address any potential transgressions, such as inappropriate language use (Moore, 2011). While transgressions could be interpreted as negative disruptions in the classroom, there is also potential to scaffold transgressions into teachable moments by engaging the class in further discussions.

### From critical analysis to alternative production: transformative media pedagogies (Lesson 5)

Following thorough discussions of consent and media representations, students can work in groups of two or three to engage in a creative production that shows their understanding of consent or healthy relationships. When doing so, students should be asked to ensure that they do not reproduce harmful myths and stereotypes that are common in popular media or television. Upon completion, all students will present their media productions to the class for further discussion and feedback.



Figure 1. Sample storyboard depicting a healthy negotiation of consent, and respect of boundaries between two students.<sup>2</sup>

To demonstrate how this lesson might look, we created an example (see Figure 1) using the free, online platform Storyboard That<sup>3</sup> to create a storyboard. Storyboards use an average of four to six frames consisting of cartoons and text to convey messages.

The pedagogy was designed after thorough review of best practices in critical media literacy education. Puchner et al. (2015) have emphasized the need for educators to encourage students to move beyond analysis and provide them with the technical skills to

produce media. By doing so, student productions are likely to represent a multiplicity of perspectives and have the potential to generate counter-narratives that challenge and cumulatively shift problematic representations and stereotypes. Media literacy scholars have emphasized that choice allows students to produce at their creative best (Ellison, 2017; Prensky, 2010). We therefore recommend giving students the option of using other media tools of their choice to showcase their understanding. This could include, but is not limited to:

<sup>2</sup> Student A expresses discomfort to Student B about a prior act. Despite having initially sought and received consent, Student B understands that affirmative consent must be active and ongoing in healthy and mutually respectful relationships.

This example shows one possibility for a scene depicting a queer relationship or friendship, and healthy masculinity.  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.storyboardthat.com/storyboard-creator>

a podcast episode, radio or other audio production, video production, and various forms of visual art. We intentionally chose the digital platform Storyboard That as an example because it is fairly easy to learn and share, and free to use. It also addresses the importance of making educational tools accessible to low-income schools, as well as families that might like to participate alongside their children. To ensure students are supported in their media productions, we suggest providing class time for students to familiarize themselves with the media platform, as part of a lesson on “digital literacy”.

Pangrazio (2016) has emphasized that the development of students’ digital literacies is crucial to the production of alternative narratives in media. By moving from simply analyzing and critiquing mass media to producing mass media through storyboards, students take an active role in “digital participatory choice culture.” (Ellison, 2017, p. 25) Similar to Ellison’s (2017) study design, students who participate in the pilot program can represent characters and relationships however they choose, such as inter-racial and/or queer relationships. Further discussion on who is left out of media in popular culture and/or the classroom can follow student presentations.

In order to participate in Ellison’s “digital participatory choice culture” to their fullest, students must learn to identify the role that they play in the sustaining and subversion of messages in these texts through their explorations of self-positionality and critical autonomy. Discussions of self-positionality in critical media literacy are vital to students’ ability to critically analyze how they use and/or resist media messages on the basis of their sociocultural locations (Luke, 1994). This can include conversations on topics such as age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, geographical location, immigration status, and languages spoken. Self-positionality is related to the growth of critical autonomy (Ferguson, 2001; Kellner & Share, 2007; Masterman, 1994). Critical autonomy can be defined as “the process of internalizing the tools of self-reflection, critical analysis and communication for one’s own purposes and motives” (Hobbs, 1998, p. 23). The goal of critical autonomy is to provide students with the tools to confidently deconstruct the texts that shape our social understandings and to position themselves to critically interrupt potential manipulations.

Creative counter-production also fosters the development of young learners’ critical autonomy, as it allows them to imagine and create more equitable futures. Engaging the students in this process aids in the

goal of them being able to both critically question media and produce alternative media on their own, not simply in the presence of a teacher, so that critical literacy continues beyond the classroom (Kellner & Share, 2007). This is encouraged through the presentation of the media productions to peers. By presenting to peers for feedback and peer- assessment, conversations about consent and media can be linked to a broader, “real-world” conversation about race, class, sex, genders, and (dis)ability, and the politics of representation in media (Kellner, 1998; Hammer, 2011). Students could also be encouraged to write reflections as a form of self-assessment, to engage in critical reflections that take their peers’ feedback into account. Both the peer discussions and the critical reflections give students space to engage in critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993), taking the lesson from media analysis and production to an understanding of broader social structures and power relations.

We are confident that the CML pilot program will improve participants’ understandings of consent because it was designed after careful review of violence prevention literature. Paul and Gray (2011) and DeGue et al. (2014) suggested that skills-based, participatory programs had greater effectiveness than ones that were simply instructional or based in group discussion. The creative production and discussion components are both skills-based and participatory. The pilot program also incorporates an “ecological approach” (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009, p. 92) that targets violence at multiple levels, including the individual, relationship, institutional and structural level (Flood, 2011). Both the analysis of media and the creative production provide relevant context rather than abstract examples. There is also a great deal of opportunity for peer learning, engagement and feedback that allows participants to develop a more positive relationship with their peers (Vladutiu et al., 2011) and with how they feel about their ability to communicate in a variety of relationships (Nation et al., 2003).

Follow-up focus groups will be conducted after the CML pilot program and the post-test surveys to discuss participants’ experience of the program. Focus groups are a popular method for assessing understanding of health-related behaviors (Basch, 1987), and are used in research that seeks to empower participants, who become an active part of the analysis (Kitzinger, 1995). Each focus group will have five to six participants, who could be randomly assigned to minimize selection bias. Alternatively, focus groups could be female-only and male-only. Research has found that male-only

conversations have been conducive to males addressing more difficult questions about deep-seated beliefs about gender, sexuality, and violence (Ricardo et al., 2011). Similarly, female-only focus groups may allow a degree of comfort for females to give honest feedback about instances in which they felt dismissed or ridiculed for being vulnerable (Hollander, 2011).

### **Method of analysis**

A mixed-method framework allows for robust assessment of a peer-led CML pedagogical approach in teaching affirmative consent. Quantitatively, this will be tested using a single-group, pre-post design, such as the one used in Scull et al. (2014). Follow-up designs would benefit from the inclusion of a control group (Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik, & Keefe, 2018). Previous research indicates that a sample size of 50-60 will provide enough power to detect the hypothesized effects (Scull et al., 2014).

Quantitative analysis will include descriptive statistics and ANOVA to examine if significant differences exist in pre-post test scores on the SCS-R. While quantitative analysis shows effect sizes for change in understanding consent and allows for comparable results across studies, qualitative analysis illuminates how, when and why understandings of consent are constructed, interrupted and changed. Thus, field notes, all media productions and focus group data can be analyzed using coding software, such as QSR International's NVivo 12 software (2018), which can be used to code analytical themes vital to consent and violence prevention (e.g., "gender", "race" or "harm"). Coding allows for major themes, which are meaningful indicators of how and when consent is understood, to emerge across the data (Saldana, 2013). Such themes and indicators may provide insights for larger studies with control groups, and studies with longitudinal data.

### **Program assessment and fidelity of implementation**

As the proposed program is new, and requires extensive knowledge of media literacy, violence prevention, and social justice frameworks, the program is being piloted by the first author. Teachers are a key component to sex and consent education, but they are often inadequately trained in the area or not trained at all (Kelly, 2017; Meaney et al., 2009). This lack of training often translates into a lack of confidence both in the development and delivery of curriculum. A future direction for research could/should be the training of

teachers or other facilitators in both media literacy education and best practices in violence prevention. This professional development would help teachers get the support they would need in their practice, and have teachers feel that they are better able to ensure that their communities reduce rates of sexual and gender-based violence. Student assessment of the program will be done throughout by coding field notes, as well as the follow-up focus groups, though it could also be done through follow-up questions that are open-ended related to what students learned, what they still want to know more about, and likes/dislikes of the program.

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

We acknowledge the limitations of the storyboardthat.com platform itself, but suggest that this critique, or a critique of other chosen media platforms be part of the lesson plan. This allows educators and students to reflect on who gets left out of popular media representations as well as the creative productions and why. For example, people with disabilities are not represented as character choices on the platform. Although the platform itself is limited, the discussion on the limits can be rich with conversations and readings from critical disability studies, disability representation, and accessibility. We are also hopeful that other media scholars, disability activists and other creative folks might come up with more inclusive, accessible platforms.

The platform may also make it difficult to bring in discussions about the connections between sexual violence and settler colonialism, or relatedly, the process of creating consent culture and decolonizing. Sexual violence violates a person's right to bodily autonomy and consent, while rape culture normalizes such interactions of violence. Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event (Wolfe, 2007). It can be described as the non-consensual occupation (i.e. theft) of Indigenous lands, as well as the combination of structures that uphold and seek to normalize settler governments occupation of land. It is interesting to note that definitions of "consent" in educational documents such as curriculum or sexual violence policies are often limited to discussions of bodily autonomy and the creation of "consent culture". Most consent educators have yet to incorporate teachings from Indigenous scholars and organizers who have always recognized the connection between the wellness of the land and the wellness of our bodies (Women's Earth Alliance & the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2017).

A sustainable and transformative consent culture must be about the creation of a community of people responsible to one another *and* to shared land. As Indigenous feminist scholar Smith (2005) reminds us, “[b]ecause sexual violence has served as a tool of colonialism and white supremacy, the struggle for sovereignty and the struggle against sexual violence cannot be separated” (p. 137). Communities invested in reconciliation and decolonization must deal with the crisis of sexual violence, and those interested in sexual violence prevention and anti-violence advocacy must apply a decolonial lens. If they do not, the roots of rape culture will remain, and everyday relations of violence will be reproduced. Rape culture is incubated through colonial ways of being in the world that give perpetrators of violence a sense of entitlement in a different, albeit related way that settlers develop a sense of entitlement to land and property. Given the fact that Indigenous people have been resisting colonial forms of violence, impositions, and transgressions of boundaries since colonial contact, Indigenous land education and decolonization practices have many teachings to offer us. We acknowledge that a more thorough discussion is beyond the scope of our article. However, the topic deserves greater attention, and we are hopeful that scholars in critical media literacy will engage more deeply with the critical work produced by Indigenous, anticolonial and decolonial scholars.

A final limitation is that the program outlined here is still being piloted, and we intend to have a rigorous conversation about results in the near future. This article is thus a research note seeking to spark conversations and invite other scholars working in critical media literacy education, consent education and violence prevention to adapt our pedagogies and test their effectiveness. Preliminary testing of the pedagogies and methods with educators and graduate students in faculties of education, gender and feminist studies, and psychology, as well as educational scholars, has been promising.

### CONCLUSIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

This article provides a theoretical rationale for using a critical media literacy approach to teaching affirmative consent education. By testing this theory, scholars and educators can get a deeper understanding of how adolescents currently understand consent, how problematic perceptions of consent can be changed, and how affirmative consent can be effectively taught and discussed with youth. In the future, this may impact

curriculum design, educational policy, and theories about consent, critical pedagogy and the importance of media literacy in the classroom. The overarching objectives transcend the classroom by empowering youth and educators to understand how their collective actions can contribute to the creation of a consent culture that may reduce rates of violence.

Given the significant results of a study in which media literacy education was used to teach adolescents comprehensive sexual health education (Scull et al., 2014; Scull, Kupersmidt, Malik & Morgan-Lopez, 2018), we are confident that the CML pilot program will result in deeper understanding of consent. The suggested pedagogies engage with these topics in order to move towards a series of sustainable interventions that prevent and reduce rates of sexual and interpersonal violence. We encourage other educators and schools in critical media literacy and/or violence prevention to test, refine, and/or expand this work in hopes that the collaborations scaffold transformative solutions.

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