



Quantum
Market
Research



Informing a National
Sexual Violence
Campaign:
Research Summary

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Quantum Market Research

Quantum Market Research is an independent market research agency based in Melbourne, Victoria. Quantum is accredited to the International ISO standard for market, social and opinion research, AS ISO 20252.

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Introduction

In 2021, Quantum Market Research was commissioned by Universities Australia to conduct primary and secondary research on how to promote respectful relationships among university students across Australia.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Understand how to empower young people, including a primary audience of young men (18 to 24 years old), to have open and positive conversations about sexuality, sexual experiences, and their right to make safe, responsible and respectful sexual choices.
- Understand how to support gender equality by promoting and normalising positive, equal and respectful sexual relations between women and men; and challenge harmful gender stereotypes about consent and sexuality that condone, justify or excuse violence.

This research involved the following:

- A review of the relevant literature on primary prevention campaigns in Australia and overseas.
- 12 online forums with university students that each ran for three days.
- 13 online mini groups with 2-4 university students that further expanded on topics raised in the forums.
- A quantitative benchmark survey designed to give a robust read on attitudes and road test some early advertising concepts.
- 18 online focus groups and 5 in-depth interviews to test the proposed campaign concepts with the target audiences.

In total, 192 students were involved in the qualitative phase and 519 students responded to the quantitative survey.



Key Research Findings

The university life stage

The university life stage was often characterised by students as a time for self-discovery. Students associated their university years with the freedom to explore new interests, meet new people, embrace opportunities and to experiment with different life choices. They thought of themselves as having transitioned from high school into young adulthood, but in a period where they were yet to have taken on any binding responsibilities.

Among student priorities, besides study, was to foster new relationships of all kinds. Freed from the boundaries of their high school peer group, students sought to create interesting connections. A common theme was for students to actively subdue cautiousness. University was conceived as a time for saying yes to opportunities, taking some risks, and not being too preoccupied with what they might regret.

Sex, dating and relationships at university

COVID-19 restrictions (such as remote learning and closure of hospitality venues) limited opportunities for socialising, and hampered students' ability to develop interpersonal and intimate relationships. Pandemic-related disruptions prevented students from realising their imagined potential, or ideal, student experience. Participants in the research collectively self-identified that they were living under this burden. In this environment, it was common for students to feel disenfranchised with the inability to socialise normally, ultimately creating some resentment toward dating.

Even in the midst of a pandemic, students felt a pressure to be sexually active. It was widely accepted that anyone not sexually active at university was 'oddball', unconventional and missing out. The social norm around being sexually active at university led some students to willingly go along with awkward, uncomfortable and potentially problematic sexual experiences. The absence of physical contact during the pandemic was also leading to relationships that were lacking in open communication, empathy and shared understanding.



“A big pressure is to be in a relationship... especially if you haven't been intimate before. If you've not had sex at this age, then you get marginalised as inexperienced and even un-dateable.”

- Male student

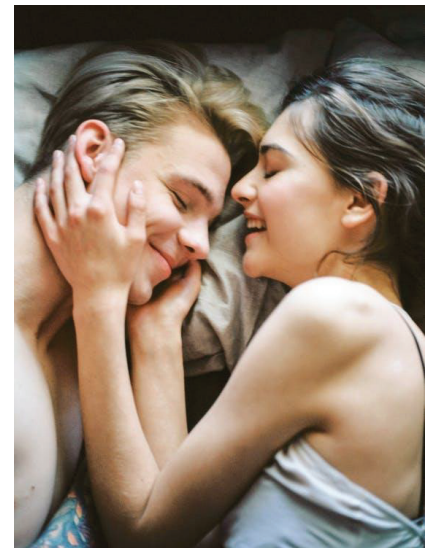
Young female students took a much more proactive approach to educating themselves on sex, dating and relationships than their male counterparts. Young women were significantly more likely to be utilising a wide range of information sources to inform their approach to the topic – from their peers and family members, to social media, podcasts and books. With such a diverse portfolio of references, women were far more empowered and adaptive to navigating different relationship situations. Although young men did engage with a variety of information sources about sex, dating and relationships, it was to a much lesser extent compared to young women.



Young men were significantly more likely to hold regressive attitudes concerning sex, dating and relationships than women. One in three young male university students agreed that “sexual jokes or nicknames are mostly harmless” (33% vs. 16%), while one in five (19%) agreed that ‘swiping right’ or indicating interest on a dating app usually means the other person is up for sex.

How young men engage with relationships

Young men conceptualised university relationships from low to high emotional investment. The less men were invested in the future of relationships, the less inclined they were to have open communication from the outset. As was evident through the way young men spoke about relationships, an environment which promoted low involvement relationships was one characterised by low empathy. As a result of the perceived increase in competition presented by social media/dating apps, young men often feel they have to be over-confident to get on an even footing with their peers and to advance with women.

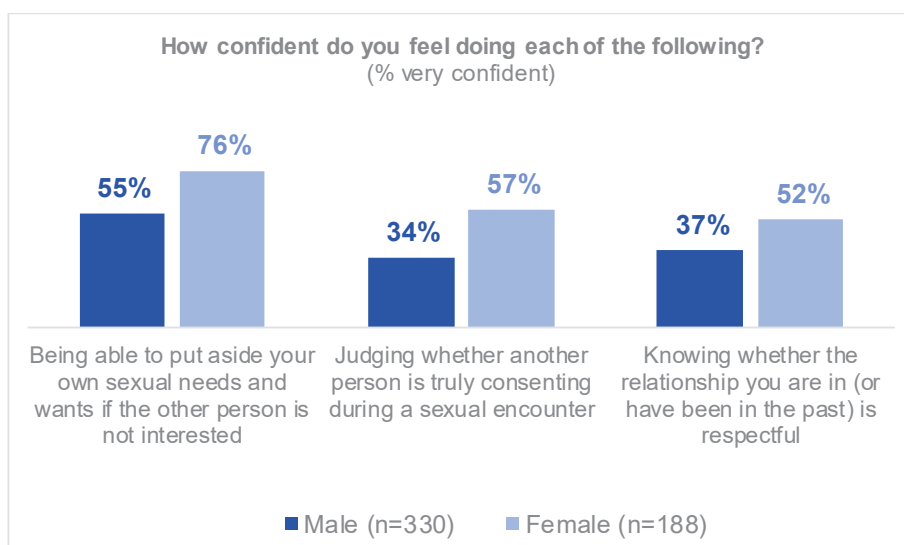


There was pressure to fulfil the role of the ‘confident man’ (i.e. a man who is as assertive, aloof, confident, ‘good with women’), an image driven and reinforced by traditional and modern media stereotypes. This pressure to be the ‘confident man’ left little room for uncertainty and promoted a fear of rejection. It ultimately prioritised male self-interest, placed an emphasis on outcomes (i.e. sex or sexual interactions) and downplayed the need for empathy in intimate relationships. ‘The confident man’ persona was seen as the antithesis to vulnerability. The societal pressure to be a ‘confident man’ encouraged men to view empathy and respect as secondary (even unnecessary) when engaging in intimate relationships.

“Persistence seems to almost be necessary when our generation are flooded with Tinder/social media messages and play cat and mouse games regularly.”

- Male student

In reality, many young men lacked the confidence to engage in behaviours that support the development of healthy relationships. Compared to women, young men were far less confident in their ability to communicate openly about sex and relationships or engage in other types of behaviours that support the development of healthy relationships (e.g. introspective/self-reflection, assessing non-verbal cues, having access to appropriate advice and information, etc.). For example, only 55% of young men felt confident in being able to put aside their own sexual needs and wants if the other person was not interested, compared to 76% of young women. This was further validated by qualitative discussions with young men, with many reflecting on the struggle to read and interpret women's wants and needs effectively.



Minority student cohorts (International students & LGBTQI+)

Male international students varied widely in how they adapted to participating in Australian dating culture. International male students tended to originate from cultures where dating and sex carried taboo and some were more likely to have retained a cultural association with men being the dominant player in dating interactions. Although equally likely to recognise communication as the solution to ensuring healthy, respectful relationships, additional cultural factors meant they faced even more pronounced barriers to putting theory into practice than Australian-born men.



“Australians are more progressive to modern forms of dating (hook ups, friends with benefits, etc). They don’t find it shameful or embarrassing. As compared to Asian societies where even it takes place, it is often done in secrecy and embarrassment.”

- International male student

Despite being more proactively engaged in the topic of sex, dating and relationships, under-representation of the queer experience meant LGBTQI+ men were lacking formal guidance. LGBTQI+ men were more likely to proactively engage (e.g. with queer podcasts, sex influencers/educators on Instagram, queer TV shows, etc.), but also self-identified as lacking a clear ‘rule book’ or established reference point for what’s right and wrong. In addition, a culture of promiscuity and hyper-sexualisation in the LGBTQI+ community ultimately blurred the lines of sexual violence. Sexually overt settings (e.g. gay clubs) in particular made it harder to recognise or call out instances of covert sexual harassment.

Understanding and practicing consent in sex and relationships

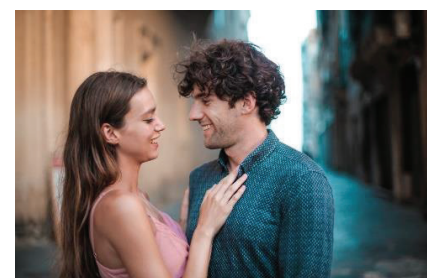
In theory at least, the fundamentals of consent were consistently well understood by young men. Young men were equally as likely as young women to acknowledge, or disregard, the need for consent. The vast majority (93%) of both men and women recognised that the act of ensuring relationships are consensual is the mutual responsibility of all involved.

However, in practice, judging what is right and wrong in sex and relationships was confusing. A simplistic model of consent was criticised as failing to fit neatly into the real world of how relationships unfold. Although the vast majority (90%) of young men agreed that men and women should play an equal role in relationships, they underappreciated the less overt forms of harm. Because of their subtlety, sexual jokes or having sex to appease a partner were some of the more ‘accepted’ harmful behaviours. There is a job to be done to raise awareness and empathy towards the range of ways harm can be caused, how it can be accumulative, and how it can manifest over time.

“I guess there aren’t any hard rules. I’ve heard that when you’re intoxicated at all you can’t consent, and hence you might be sexually assaulting someone. I understand the concept, but this is just impractical. What if both of you are drunk? What if you’re just slightly intoxicated?”

- Male student

Positively, this generation of young men actively embraced opportunities to grow personally and acknowledged the role they play in preventing sexual violence. Nearly nine in ten (87%) agreed that “having open conversations about sex is beneficial to relationships” and eight in ten (81%) agreed that they have a role to play in preventing sexual violence. Many also recognised that more could be done, with one in three (65%) agreeing that “I could be more active in having conversations about sex and respectful relationships”.

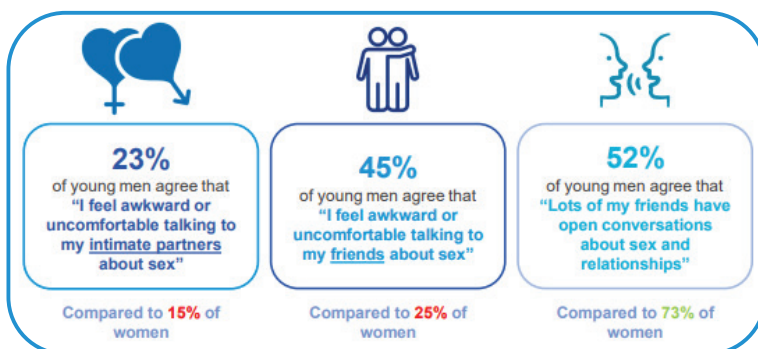


Barriers to open communication

Despite recognising the importance of open communication in sex, men were having far fewer conversations about the topic. Over eight in ten female students (81%) identified as having a conversation about sex, dating and relationships with friends or intimate partners at least sometimes, compared to 63% of male students.

It was common for young men to feel uncomfortable initiating a conversation about dating, sex or relationships with others (be it partners or peers). While in theory, 'you'd just ask', this was too intimidating to action practically – a reality validated by the two in five young male students (40%) who stated "it just doesn't come up" and one in four (24%) who said they "don't know how to initiate the conversation". In particular, there was a concern that women do not always respond to such vulnerability constructively – a key barrier expressed by one in three young men (32%).

Raising a discussion of sex, particularly outside of the bedroom, was seen as awkward, rude or taboo. As many as two in five young men (41%) indicated that general 'awkwardness' and 'discomfort' was a key barrier to open communication – the top barrier for males. A further four in ten males indicated the topic just doesn't come up. One in five (19%) young men feared that raising the conversation risked 'killing the mood' or otherwise be a set-back to them ascending scales of intimacy.



"I think I'd worry about making my partner uncomfortable or saying the wrong thing. It's just awkward, I don't know why. Even though I know it shouldn't be".
- Male student

Despite the majority of young men recognising that the presence of alcohol and drugs should not negate the need for consent in sexual interactions, this was pointed to as a key factor in instances where 'the line is crossed'. Such conditions, particularly at parties and bars/clubs, were an inhibitor to mutually respectful dialogue. Social pressure to be sexually active also prompted young people to skip past open communication.

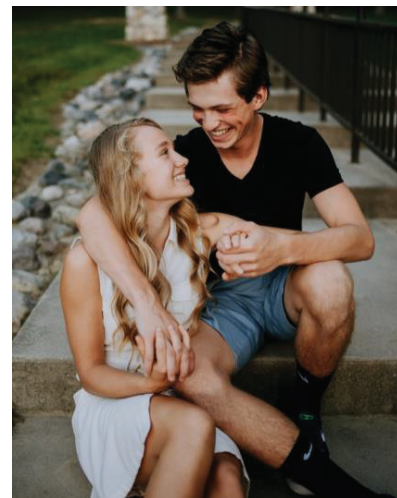
Drivers of open communication

For many men, it was aspirational to be progressive in relation to sex, dating and relationships. Progressive men wanted to see themselves as enlightened and progressive. More than one in three (36%) young men would be encouraged to engage in open communication if they thought the other person would appreciate it or if it would benefit themselves in some way.

Young men raised in feminine or maternalistic environments, or with close female friends, were more likely to take an empathetic position on the topic of sex, dating and relationships. These young men had a more complete awareness of how harm could manifest. This resulted in more respectful relationships and was a clear indicator that reinforcing such appreciation, and in turn empathy, could lead to more consistently positive outcomes.

While open communication appeared daunting, uncomfortable and undesirable at face-value, young men acknowledged that men who have the confidence and agency to engage in these conversations were naturally 'more mature' and therefore likely to be 'more successful with women'. Critical to young students' self-esteem is that they are more mature than their high school counterpart. This can manifest as a perception of being 'successful with women', as women are assumed to value more mature men.

Young men – particularly those with more regressive attitudes – may be likely to engage in open conversations if reassured that doing so would not result in negative outcomes on their behalf. For young men that held more regressive attitudes, self-interest was a more powerful driver than empathy. They did not want to stand out as 'creepy' or get a reputation for being abusive. Trust was also raised as an important consideration, with almost two in five (38%) young male students indicating that they would be more likely to engage in open conversations about sex, dating and relationships if they felt confident they could trust the other person, or if they thought the other person would be receptive to it (35%).



“Respect and communication is key to a healthy and respectful relationship. Individuals should analyse a situation, review what went wrong and then think of the best solution to resolve it in a respectful and healthy manner that is not causing harm on the other individual within the relationship.”
- Male student

Implications for Campaign Development

To positively influence young men's attitudes to gender equality, consent and sexual relationships, a campaign should:

- Leverage the openness many young men express with regards to growing and learning new things about themselves and others.
- Build on rather than reinforce understanding of the straightforward principles of consent.
- Overcome an implicit obstacle by normalising that awkwardness and imperfection are a part of open communication.
- Provide reassurance that open communication is congruent with their goals (e.g. by communicating that women in fact think that open communication is attractive).
- Challenge the pressure to embody the 'confident man' persona by positioning respect, open communication and empathy in relationships as an aspirational and desirable quality.
- Generate personal relevance by raising empathy for more subtle forms of harm.
- Provide young men with the skills and confidence to gain consent and talk more openly (e.g. by providing prompts for subtle check ins, or conversation starters that don't feel awkward or forced).



These elements and considerations interplay to:

- Address gendered drivers of regressive attitudes towards women and relationships.
- Challenge key barriers to engaging in behaviours that support respectful relationships (i.e. open communication etc.)
- Challenge harmful constructs of masculinity, in turn normalising behaviours that support respectful relationships.

Students are looking for guidance on a range of topics, including:

- Consent – beyond the basic concept, including knowing when to stop.
- Communication and reading body language.
- Promoting / normalising healthy and open communication.
- Navigating drugs and alcohol.
- Addressing issues which occur both in and out of the bedroom (don't only focus on explicit sexual consent).

Importantly, students insist that communications must be genuine, authentic, 'real-world' and direct. Consent and sex should be specifically mentioned, without the use of vague and unnecessary metaphors. Young people want to be treated as mature, so the campaign should leave no ambiguity in recognising students as sensible adults.

Appendix

Detailed Methodology

Literature Review – July 2021

- Review the relevant literature on primary prevention campaigns in Australia and overseas to help promote respectful relationships among young people.

Online Forums – July 2021

- 12 online forums were conducted with university students aged 18-24 (involving 150 participants in total).
- Each forum ran for three days, allowing participants to respond to tasks and activities at their own pace.
- Forums were structured according to gender (weighted to males as the core target audience of the proposed campaign) and attitudes to gender equality, violence against women and consent.
- Soft quotas were applied by State to ensure a broad geographic spread, and groups included one participant from Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander background.



Mini Groups – August 2021

- 13 online mini focus groups (2-4 people) with university students aged 18-24 (42 participants in total).
- These groups ran for 1.5 hours and were moderated by experienced researchers.
- Mini groups were structured according to gender (weighted to males as the core target audience of the proposed campaign) and attitudes to gender equality, violence against women and consent.
- Soft quotas were applied by State to ensure a broad geographic spread, and the group structure ensured participation from LGBTIQ+ students and students from Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander backgrounds

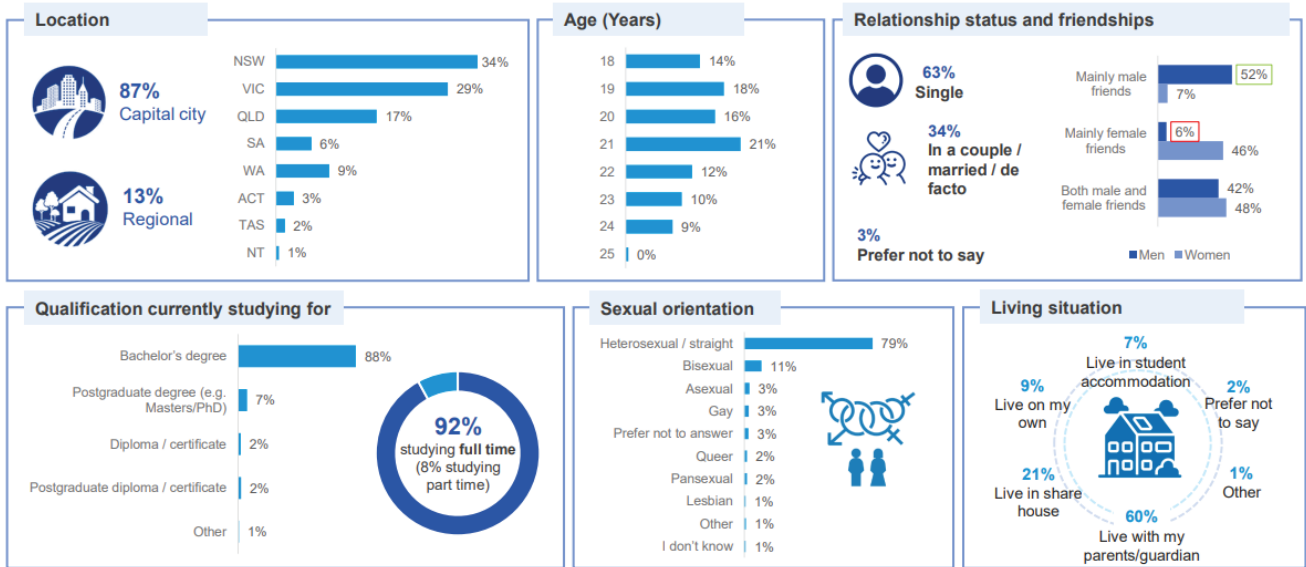


Quantitative Survey – August-September 2021

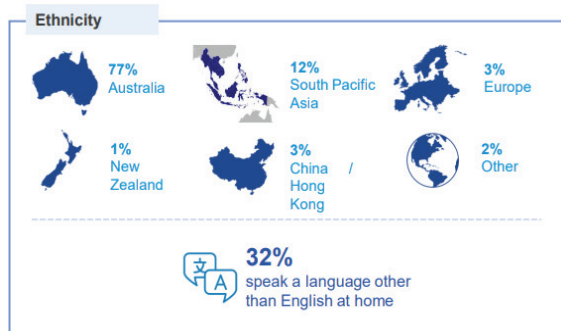
- 15-minute online survey with n=519 Australian university students aged 18-24.
- Sample was collected via panel providers, as well as through select student networks to bolster niche audience base sizes (e.g. International students, Indigenous students, etc.).
- The data was sampled according to ABS demographic (location, age) data about Australians aged 18-24, quotas were applied to skew the total sample towards male students (accounting for male students aged 18-24 being the primary target audience of the campaign).
- The maximum margin of error (at the 95% confidence interval) on the total sample size is +/- 4.3%.



Quantitative Sample Profile



Results reflected weighted data



Quantum Market Research

Level 3, 650 Chapel Street,
South Yarra, VIC 3141
Australia

qmr.com.au