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Standing up for our bodies: It’s on us

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Reports of forcible sexual offenses continue to rise at universities throughout the United States. In response to this trend, President Obama and the government Task Force launched the “It’s on Us” campaign in 2014 to bring awareness, challenge social norms, and decrease misconceptions about sexual assault. According to statistics, 1 in 5 women are sexual assaulted during their time at college, roughly 12% of those assaults are reported, and 9 out of 10 college women know their offender personally. In spring of 2014, college students enrolled in a health communication at a Midwest university, developed and launched the “Stand Up For Your Body” campaign that focuses on preventing unwanted sexual advances. Communication privacy management theory (CPM; Petronio, 1991), the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), and the stages of behavior change model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) informed the campaign designed by college students. Students also used national and campus-centric data to create the campaign that educates others on campus that everyone has the power to prevent unwanted sexual advances, with prevention as the ultimate goal. The campaign is currently being updated to support the national It's On Us campaign (“It’s on us,” n.d.). Students in research methods continued collecting data in fall 2014 with an eye toward campaign enhancement and sustainability.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 257 females (64%) and 147 males (36%). The age of the of the participants ranged from 17 to 19. Ethnically, participants identified equally as American and German (9.9% each), and racially primarily as Caucasian/White (81.3%), and secondarily as African American/Black (7.8%). Respondents reported being involved in many activities including social events, organizations, and athletics, as well as holding work-related positions, such as Resident Advisers.

Procedure

In Fall 2014, communication research methods students were required to utilize network sampling, or the snowball technique, to recruit respondents to complete a survey. Initial respondents to the survey had to be students attending the same Midwest university. Respondents also completed follow-up surveys, allowing researchers to collect data at different times of the semester and gauge the change in responses between time periods. Specifically, data was collected across four time points, including before campaign design, immediate post, delayed post, campaign re-launch, and extended post. We report data from one wave of data.

The campaign construction itself is unique because of the Community Based Participatory approach employed by the lead researcher. Student participants have fully embraced the design, two continuing with the project as an independent study, and three continuing after university graduation.

Attitudes about Sexual Advances

The Stand Up For Your Body campaign team adapted the “Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale,” (IRMA) assessing students’ perceptions related to unwanted sexual advances, specifically at BGSU. The term “rape” was replaced with “unwanted sexual advances.”

The men and women in our sample differed significantly on all of the subscales measuring the word with men being significantly more accepting of almost every single item (e.g., Subscale 1: She asked for it; Subscale 2: He didn’t mean to; Subscale 3: It wasn’t rape; Subscale 4: She lied). The Stand Up For Your Body campaign focused specifically on the questions of the updated scale belonging to Subscales 3 and 4. Questions from Subscale 3 included “If a girl doesn’t say “no” she can’t claim unwanted sexual advances were made.” Questions from Subscale 4 included “Sexually related accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.”

While most respondents (n=326) strongly disagreed or disagreed with questions from Subscale 3, nearly half were neutral, agreed, or strongly agreed that women lie about being victims of unwanted sexual advances. Interestingly, only 22 people responded that they had experienced sexual assault, yet 91 told us they did not report it. Regardless, a very small portion of our sample actually reported their assault (7/22 or 7/91). People who reported experiencing sexual assault consistently reported significantly lower mean scores per item of the updated scale, leading us to conclude they are more accepting of myths associated with a sexual assault/unwanted sexual advances culture.