

# MEN'S TALK ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIORS: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT-FOCUSED MODELS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

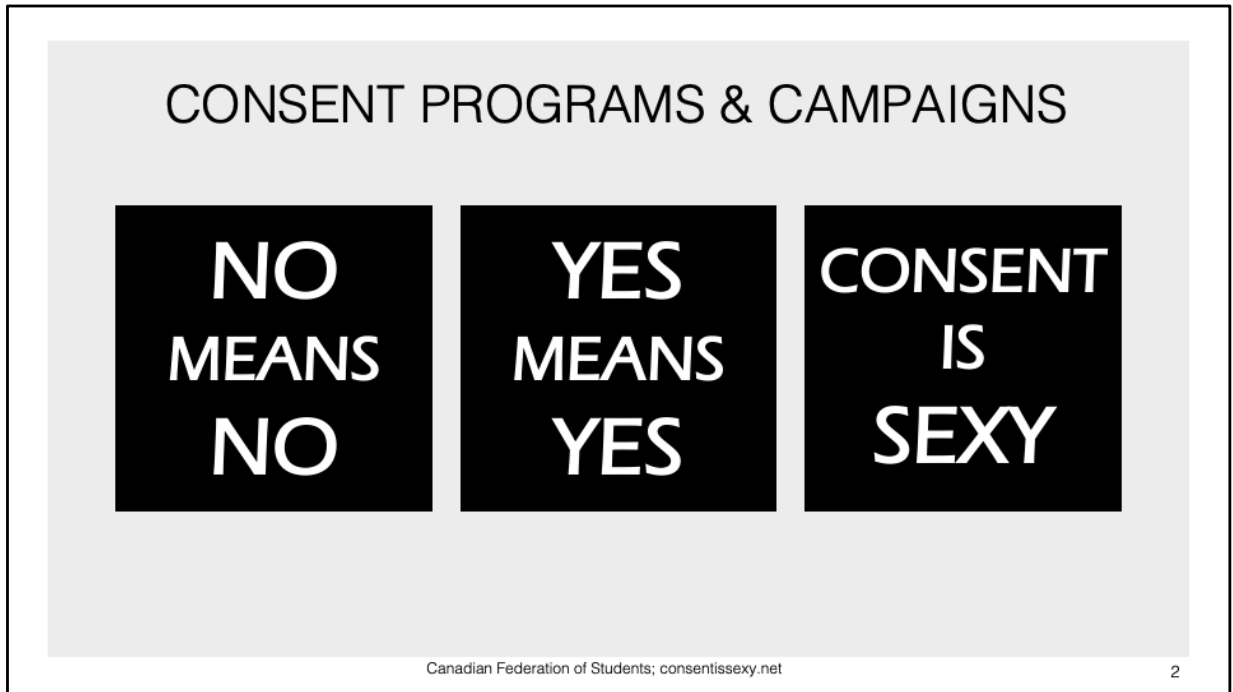
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## **Transcript:**

Hi to everyone watching. My name is Nicole Jeffrey. I'm currently a Research Associate at the University of Windsor, presenting on research and implications from my dissertation at the University of Guelph. Men's Talk about Sexual Behaviors: Implications for Consent-Focused Models of Sexual Violence Prevention.



**Transcript:**

Recently, consent-focused models of sexual violence prevention have really proliferated on university campuses in North America and beyond. These are awareness and education programs and campaigns that focus on the importance of consent in sexual relationships and include popular messages you've likely heard before such as "No means no," "Yes means yes," and "Consent is sexy." The underlying premise or assumption is that we can prevent sexual violence if we just teach women and men about the importance of consent.



**Transcript:**

But I argue, as others have, that a consent focus is inadequate for preventing sexual violence and also for promoting ethical sexual practice. Like Beres 2018, I argue based on my research findings that consent is too low of a standard and that these campaigns don't address the ways that heterosexual behavior is socially constructed. I also show how consent messages can and are being used by some men to justify and obscure sexual violence.

## OVERVIEW OF MY RESEARCH



### Focus Group Study

4 groups of 6-8 heterosexual university men talking about sex in dating relationships



### Interview Study

Individual interviews with 10 university men who had used sexual violence in a dating relationship

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### Transcript:

The findings and implications that I'll be talking about today come mainly from two of my dissertation studies. In one study, I used four focus groups with a total of 29 heterosexual university men in which they discussed sexual behaviors between intimate partners. They didn't necessarily focus on personal experiences, but talked more generally about typical expectations, sexual encounters, sexual communication, and so on between intimate partners.

In another study, I used interviews with 10 university men in which they described recent sexual violence perpetration against an intimate partner. Participants had been recruited based on a screening survey that uses behavioral language, so they didn't necessarily identify their behaviors as sexual violence. In this study I was interested in a range of behaviors that I define as sexual violence—from verbal pressure and coercion for sex, to physical force.

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS



- How did men talk about heterosexual behaviour & sexual violence?
- What does this say about the social construction of heterosexual behaviour & sexual violence?

Cameron, 2001; Gavey, 1989

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### **Transcript:**

Using discourse analysis, I was focused on how men in my two studies talked about heterosexual behavior and sexual violence, and on what this says about the social construction of heterosexual behavior and sexual violence. This was possible because, in discourse analysis, language and talk are understood as sources of evidence of prevailing societal norms or discourses, as speakers both produce and reproduce these norms.

Men relied on norms that positioned heterosexual behaviour as male-centered & supported / obscured sexual violence



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**Transcript:**

I found that men in my studies commonly relied on traditional patriarchal societal norms or discourses that positioned heterosexual behavior as male-centered and often worked to support and obscure men's sexual violence against women.

Men relied on norms that positioned heterosexual behaviour as male-centered & supported / obscured sexual violence

Implications for consent-focused models of sexual violence prevention

masculinity  
aggressive  
sexual urges  
coitus  
needs  
stress  
desire  
sex drive  
intercourse  
macho  
biological  
pressure  
available

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**Transcript:**

And of course, in this presentation, I focus on the implications of these norms and men's talk for consent-focused models of sexual violence prevention and promotion of ethical sex.



Men advocated for the importance of consent & communication...

**(FOR WOMEN ONLY)**

“ Consent is key ”

You need to communicate with your partner

You can't underestimate the importance of communication

Only yes means yes

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**Transcript:**

To begin, men in both of my studies sometimes advocated for the importance of consent and communication. They said things like: “Consent is key,” “You need to communicate with your partner,” “You can’t underestimate the importance of communication,” and “only yes means yes.” However, they placed the onus on women alone to do this work of clearly consenting or refusing. They pretty much exclusively gave examples of women’s need to communicate consent or non-consent. For example, one participant said: “if you don’t want the guy to do something, then you [i.e., the woman], should say something”. And those examples of women’s need to communicate consent or non-consent were usually in response to men’s actions. For example, another participant said: “you can’t underestimate the importance of communication...Say ‘no, please stop,’ or ‘yes, keep going.’” In describing an instance of sexual violence, one man explicitly recited the affirmative “only yes means yes” consent message that he had heard on campus but explained that his partner did not give a clear “yes” or “no,” which he claimed was part of what resulted in his coercive behavior. So, sure, only yes means yes, but according to participants, it’s women’s responsibility to communicate that “yes” and to do it clearly.




Limitations of  
Consent Programs

A FOCUS ON CONSENT MAY  
ALLOW MEN TO...

(1) Hold women responsible for communicating non-consent.

**Transcript:**

Men on the previous slide actively took up consent messages, yet these messages still allowed them to hold women responsible for (clearly) communicating non-consent—the first limitation of consent-focused models of sexual violence prevention. All of the examples men gave implied that consent is important for women and men don't hold responsibility for consenting on their own behalves or for clarifying women's consent. Essentially, a consent-focus is not enough to disrupt social norms and discourses about women and men's role in heterosex: men as actors and women as reactors or gatekeepers of sex.



Men argued that partners *always already* know what the other wants

“ You already know what that person likes and doesn't like ”

You already know she is okay with it

Consent positioned as unnecessary

Humphreys, 2007; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018

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**Transcript:**

Men in my focus groups sometimes explained that intimate partners supposedly always already know what the other is okay with, what they like, how to initiate with one another, and so on. They said things like: “it becomes less about talking about it...you already know what that person likes and doesn't like,” “...if you're going to initiate it...you already know she is okay with it.” In other words, consent was positioned as unnecessary in intimate relationships.

Men argued that verbal requests are awkward and kill the mood

“ That would be really weird to ask ”

That would just kill the mood

Consent positioned as disruptive of the natural sexual script

Waldby, Kippax, & Crawford, 1993 11

**Transcript:**

Men in my focus group study really emphasized that it’s “awkward,” “weird,” and “kills the mood” to ask for sex. They did this partly by referring to sex between women and men as always occurring according to a particular script or map from kissing to intercourse as the ultimate goal. And so verbal requests were then positioned as disruptive of that typical script or natural sexual progression and, therefore, as completely undesirable—at least for accomplishing men’s taken for granted end goal of intercourse. As one man said: “That would just kill the mood if like in the middle of building up to that you’re like ‘Can we have sex?’”

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- (2) Disregard the need for consent (e.g., in intimate relationships).

**Transcript:**

These results highlight a second shortcoming of a consent focus: it doesn't adequately disrupt these norms about heterosex as progressing naturally according to a pre-determined script or sequence, or about intimate partners always already knowing what the other desires. And so this focus seems to actually allow men to disregard the need for consent in many real-life circumstances and especially in intimate relationships.

## Men described violent and coercive ways that they sought consent

- Ignoring nonverbal non-consent
- Persisting following *ambiguous* non-consent

Jozkowski et al., 2017

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### Transcript:

In my interviews especially, men described violent and coercive ways that they sought consent. For example, they described ignoring a partner's nonverbal signs of displeasure or discomfort. They also described trying to persuade their partner specifically following ambiguous non-consent. For example, they continued trying after a partner said, "not now" or "later."

I think it's fairly clear that a consent focus will never be enough to stop men who choose to coerce and rape. My own and other research has found that men generally already understand women's verbal and non-verbal signs of non-consent. Sexual violence is predominantly not a problem of lack of understanding. But I'm also saying something a bit more than this.

Limitations of  
Consent Programs

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- (1) Hold women responsible for communicating non-consent.
- (2) Disregard the need for consent (e.g., in intimate relationships).
- (3) *Achieve* consent through violent and coercive means.

**Transcript:**

I'm saying that a consent-focus does not do enough to challenge these types of behaviors. "Yes means yes" and "no means no" messages, in particular, inadvertently suggest that it's acceptable to ignore non-verbal refusals or signs of discomfort and to continue trying if one has not received a clear verbal "yes" or "no." Simple consent messages tend to focus on whether or not consent was obtained and not on how it was obtained.

Limitations of  
Consent Programs



**Transcript:**

They imply that as long as one obtains a “yes” or doesn’t get a “no,” they can check the box—they’ve met the prerequisite for ethical sex.



Women sometimes consent to unwanted sex with intimate partners

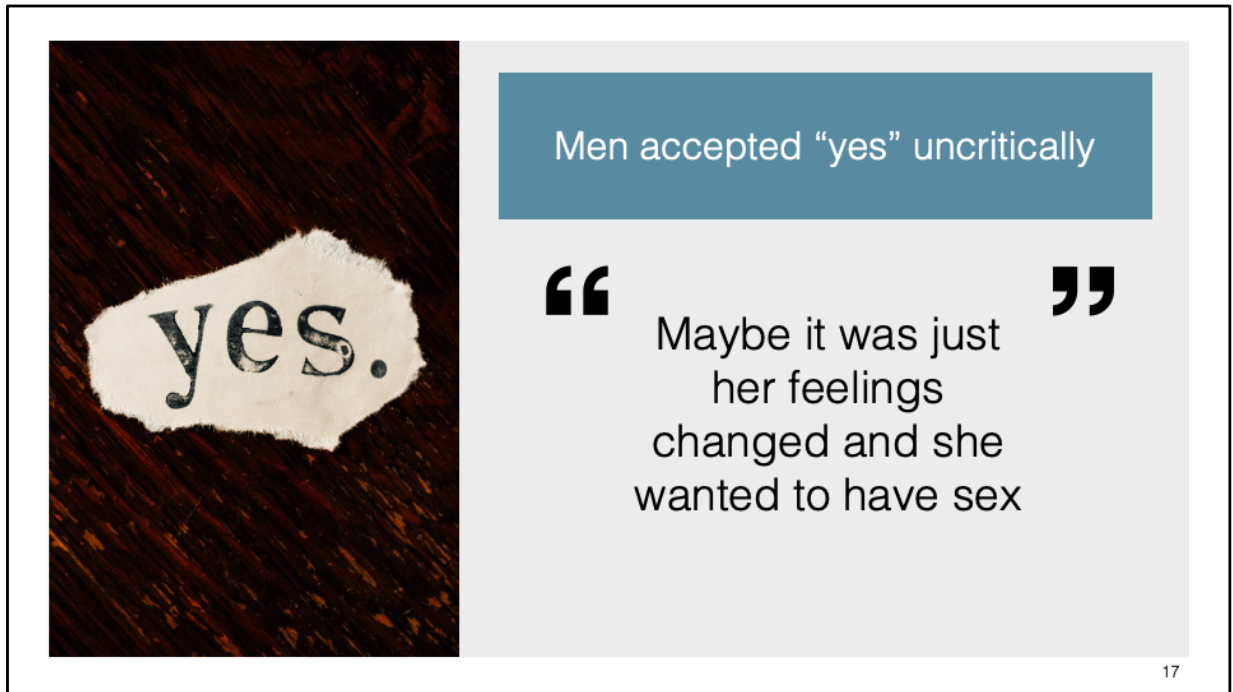
- To avoid an argument or hurting a partner's feelings
- To satisfy a partner
- Because of previous coercion

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**Transcript:**

Although not the focus of my current presentation, my research with university women also suggests that, especially in the context of intimate relationships, women sometimes agree or consent to unwanted sex even in the absence of immediate violence or coercion. They do this to avoid an argument or hurting a partner's feelings, to satisfy a partner and maintain the relationship, or because of previous sexual violence from the same or another partner.





Men accepted “yes” uncritically

“ Maybe it was just her feelings changed and she wanted to have sex ”

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**Transcript:**

And my research with men suggests that, while men might wait for a partner’s consent, they sometimes then accept this consent uncritically. For example, one man described continually asking his partner for sex at a party and, when she eventually agreed, he suggested that she must have just changed her mind and now wanted to have sex, without at all acknowledging the potential influence of his continual requests.

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Consent Programs

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- (3) *Achieve* consent through violent and coercive means.
- (4) Accept “yes” as unfettered consent.

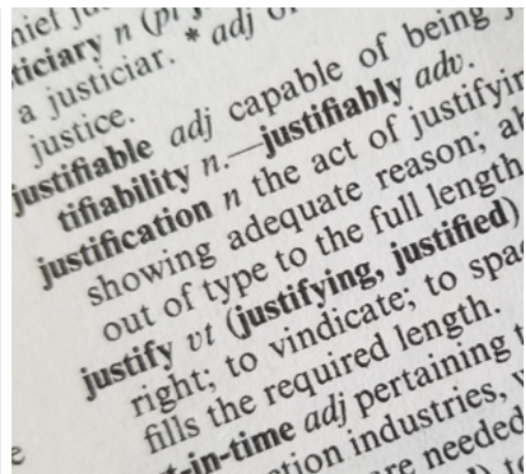
**Transcript:**

And so I argue that a focus on consent—especially “yes means yes” and other simple consent messages—actually allows men to uncritically accept “yes” as unfettered consent. It doesn’t adequately disrupt the social context around why women sometimes agree or consent to unwanted sex and allows men not to take this social context into account or to communicate about it with their partners.

“

I also told her to maybe be a bit more direct when it comes to ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ because she was providing answers that were a little cloudy. Which I know with all the consent stuff up on the walls here it’s, you know, ‘Only–only yes means yes’...

”



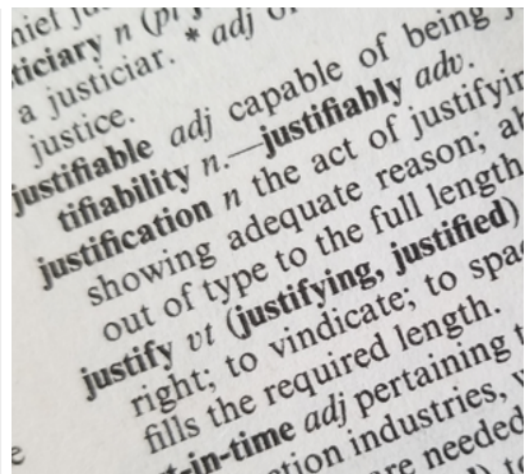
Men minimized and justified sexual violence (sometimes using consent messages)

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### Transcript:

Finally, and very much intertwined with all of the other topics I’ve talked about, men in my studies often minimized, justified, and obscured sexual violence, sometimes even by using consent messages. One man in my interview study, in explaining an instance where he had verbally pressured his partner into sex, said: “I also told her to maybe be a bit more direct when it comes to ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ because she was providing answers that were a little cloudy. Which I know with all the consent stuff up on the walls here it’s, you know, ‘Only–only yes means yes,’ so. [. . .] having that around you really puts that into perspective as well.” Although this message allowed him to highlight that he should have listened to his partner’s decline, it also allowed him (intentionally or not) to blame his partner’s “cloudy” responses because she didn’t give a clear “yes” or “no.”

- Minimizing by distinguishing persistence in response to *ambiguous* refusals from persistence to a clear “no”



Men minimized and justified sexual violence (sometimes using consent messages)

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### Transcript:

Some men distinguished (and thereby minimized) their persistence in response to a partner’s more ambiguous refusals from persistence in response to clear refusals. For example, one man claimed that he would only ever persist or push his partner when she said, “not now” or “later” to sex, never when she gave an unequivocal “no.”

Limitations of  
Consent Programs

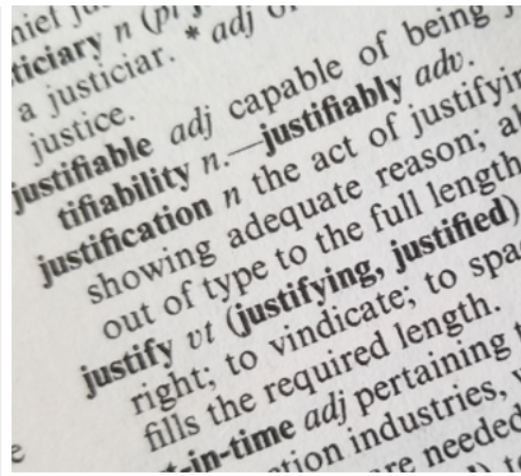
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- (3) *Achieve* consent through violent and coercive means.
- (4) Accept “yes” as unfettered consent.
- (5) Minimize & justify sexual violence.

**Transcript:**

Consent messages like “no means no” may actually support this minimizing because they suggest that other ways of indicating non-consent are less acceptable and so disregarding them doesn’t constitute sexual violence. So, consent messages helped men frame their behavior as something other than sexual violence—something more normal and acceptable.

- Minimizing one-time sexual violence by emphasizing that they *usually* seek consent



Men minimized and justified sexual violence (sometimes using consent messages)

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### Transcript:

Other men in my interview study minimized their one-time use of sexual violence by emphasizing that, aside from this one instance, they *usually* seek consent.

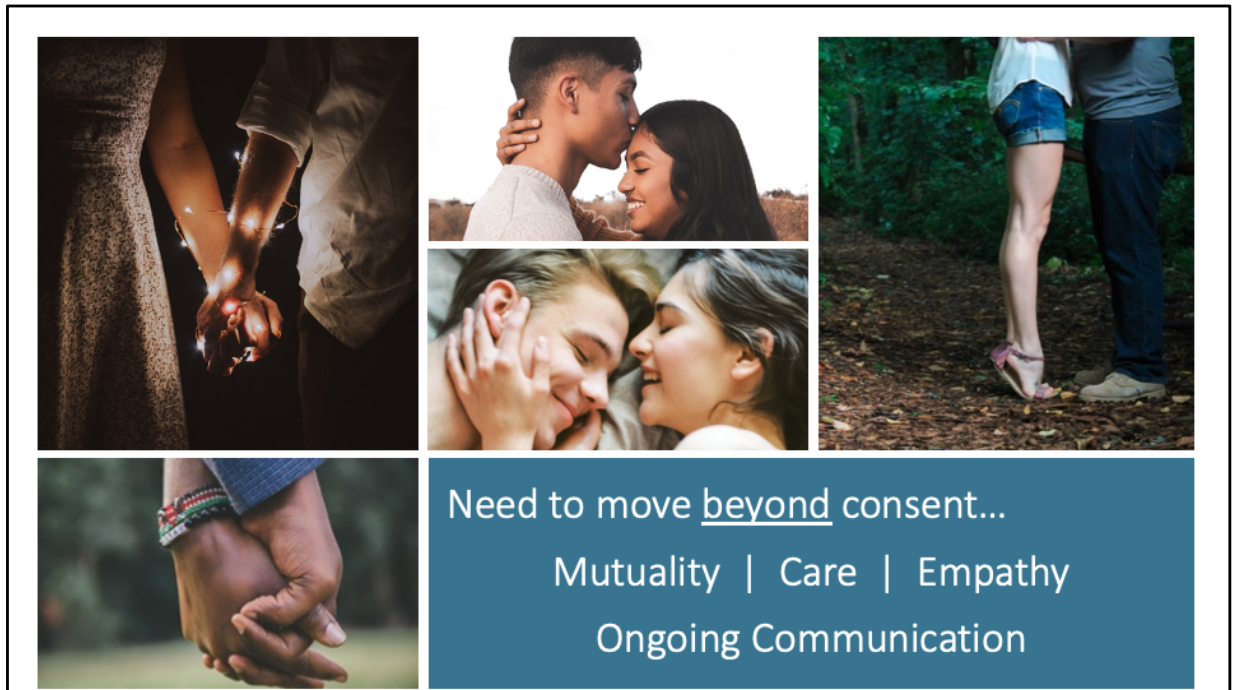
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- (4) Accept “yes” as unfettered consent.
- (5) Minimize & justify sexual violence.

**Transcript:**

Ultimately, men used consent messages to position themselves as good and modern men without appearing to make meaningful changes to their male-centered and violent behavior. These results also suggest that consent messages are easily co-opted and have become part of the vocabulary used to construct sexual violence in socially acceptable terms.



**Transcript:**

To more effectively prevent sexual violence and promote ethical sex, I argue that we need a focus that will much more thoroughly disrupt dominant gendered norms and discourses about heterosexual behavior and sexual violence. We must move beyond consent and really create space for versions of heterosexuality that include mutuality, care, empathy, and ongoing negotiation and communication.





THANK  
YOU

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**Transcript:**

Thank you so much for listening.