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### The More You Know: Relationship comfortability and applications of consent

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# The More You Know: Relationship comfortability and applications of consent

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## Abstract

When participants are asked about their consensual behaviors in sexual encounters, previous focus group research indicates that practices perceived to be appropriate to obtain and submit consent are circumstantial. In fact, data indicate that some people believe consent is not at all applicable in their personal encounters, such as long-term partnerships (Beres 2014). Thus, the level of comfort (or lack thereof) between sexual partners and the duration of a sexual relationship has the potential to alter consensual practices. This poster analyzes trends in consensual behaviors as a result of comfort or discomfort with a partner and length of time sexually involved with that partner. Data is taken from a survey of undergraduate students at a midsize northeastern university where participants were asked questions about their most recent hookup experiences. Results are analyzed across relationship history and trends in consensual practices.

## Background

Prior sexual interaction with a person, such as hooking up with someone who is a consistent hookup partner or being in a long-term relationship, changes how consent is exchanged during a hookup. This happens as contextual variables act upon sexual script theory and change the nature of sexual interactions between people. Additionally, prior research indicates that the first sexual encounter is viewed as the 'most important' for obtaining consent, as there is not yet a familiarity between partners (Humphreys 2007). During the initial hookup encounter, there is a greater chance that nonverbal cues will be mishandled, leading to potential sexual coercion or assault. As a relationship develops, it is assumed that partners become more intimate with one another and more apt at reading body language, as well as develop a better sense of comfortability about what the other person desires. However, hookup partners may also choose to operate under a precedence assumption, which understands previous actions as conditions for future or current behavior as they develop their own 'hookup script.' If the couple has hooked up in the past, it is likely that given similar conditions, their partner will want to hook up again.

Even if two partners have not yet hooked up, it can be assumed that those who are closer socially (such as close friends) have more contextual variables for their relationship than strangers. As such, social distance also influences consensual practices. However, it is unknown if social distance has the same effects on consent as a preexisting hookup history.

## Hypotheses

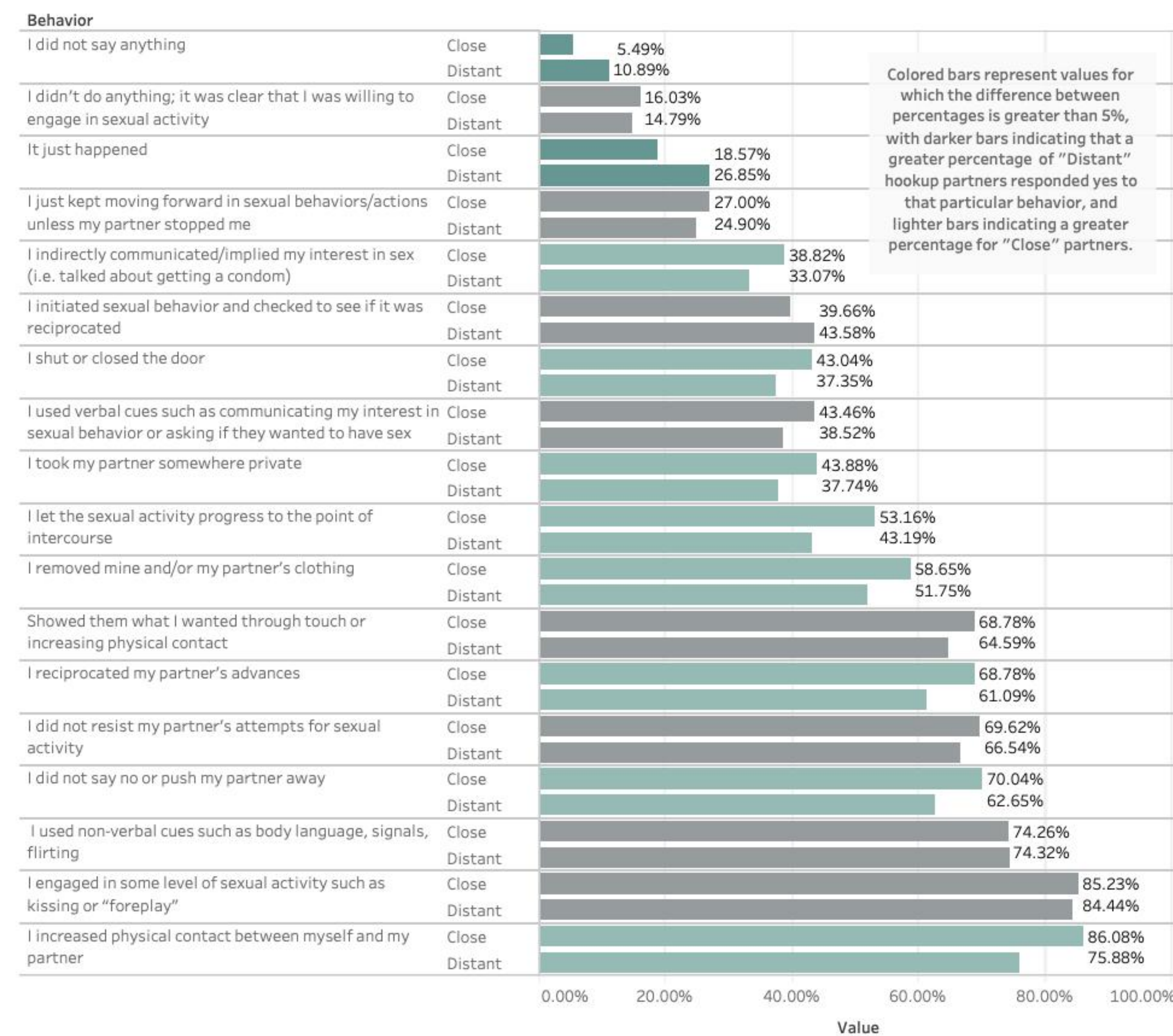
H<sub>1</sub>: Partners who have a close social proximity will use implicit methods to consent more so than distant partners, due to preexisting contextual variables about their relationship.

H<sub>2</sub>: Due to the precedence assumption, hookup partners who have a preexisting relationship will presume they have obtained consent.

H<sub>3</sub>: Previous hookup partners and those with a closer social distance will rely more on nonverbal than verbal behaviors to consent.

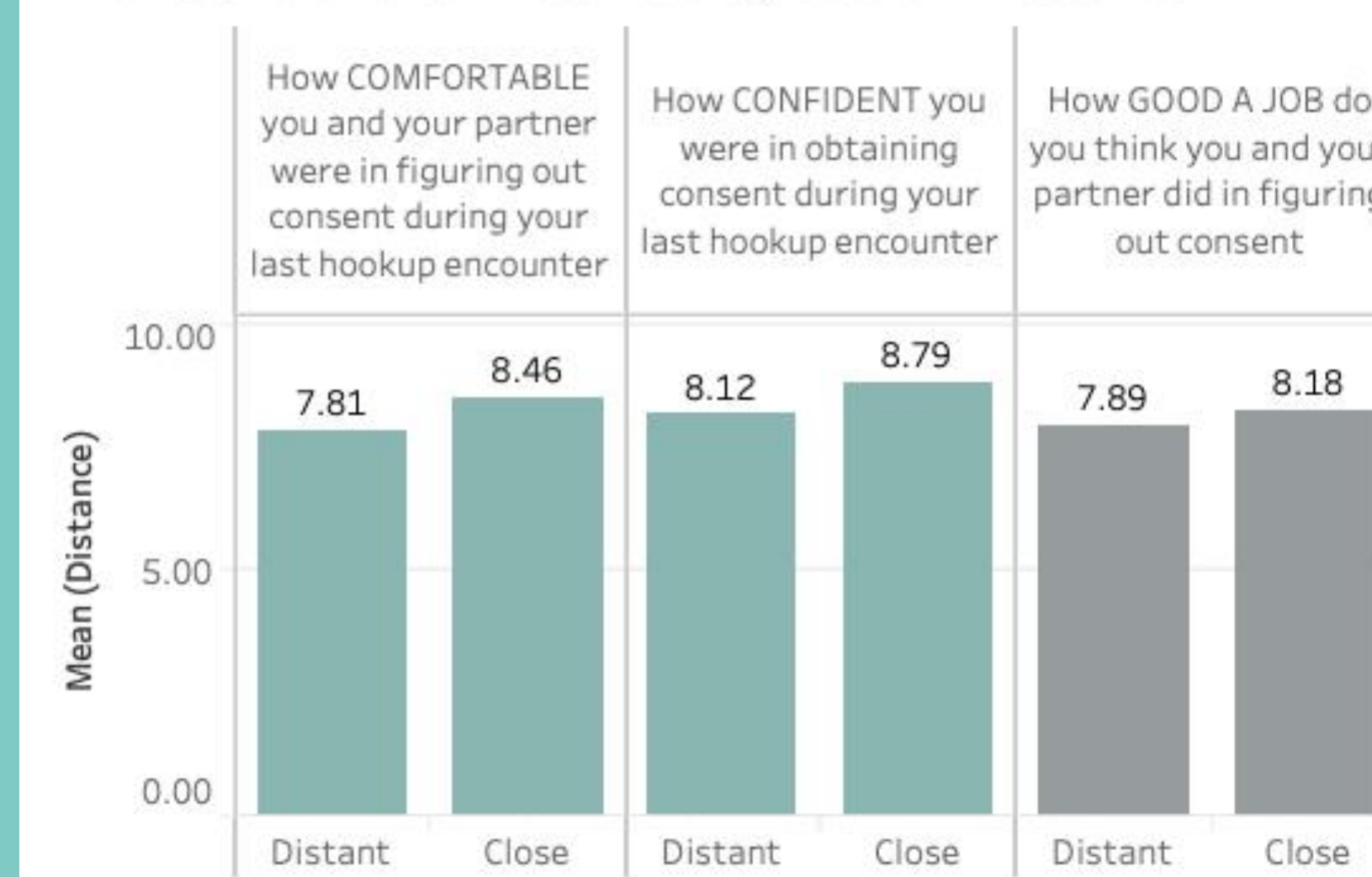
## Results

F1: In your most recent hookup encounter, which of the following methods did you use to indicate consent?



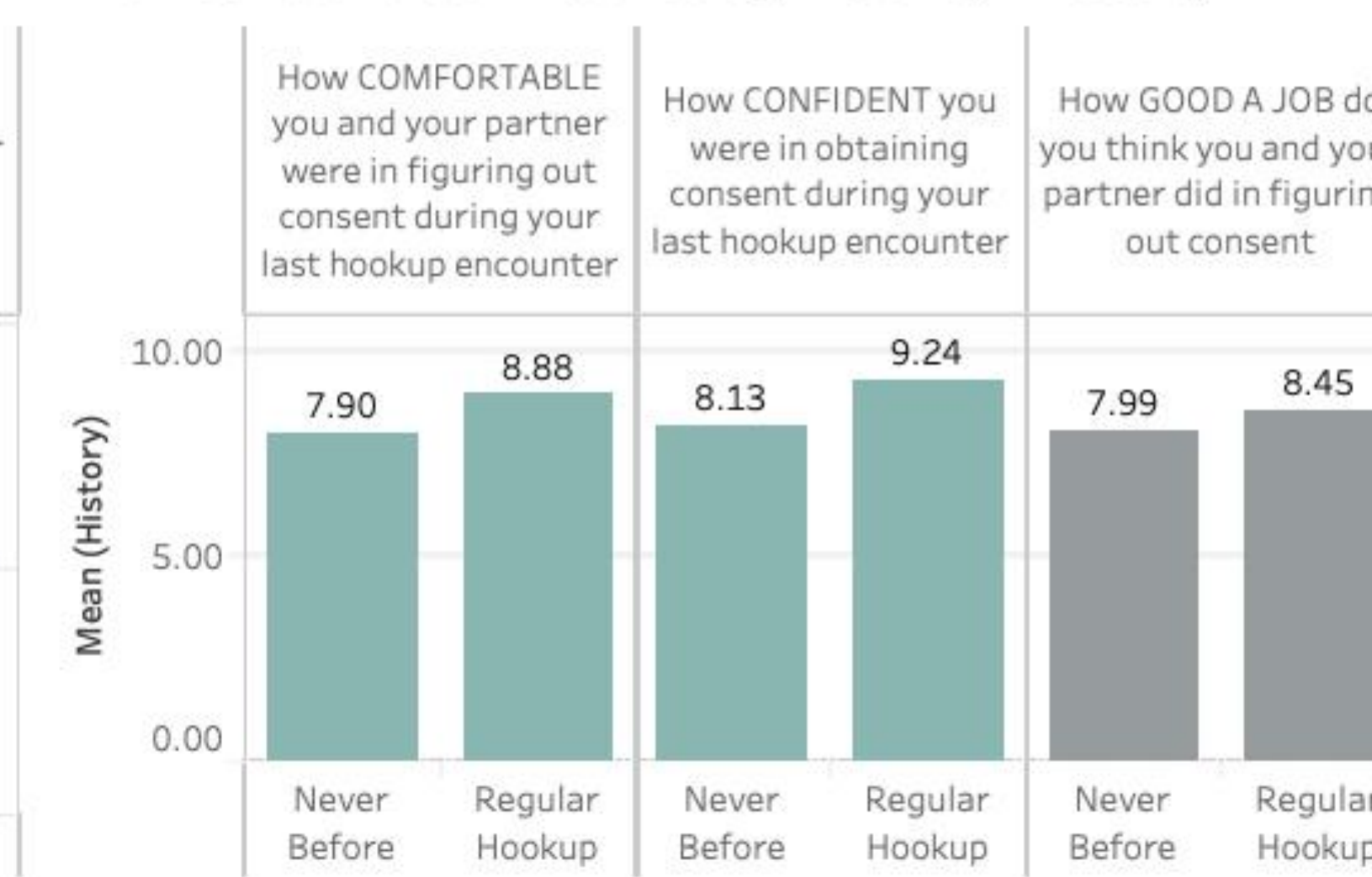
Values indicate percentages of respondents in the "Distant" and "Close" categories, respectively, who responded that they used these behaviors to indicate consent. Colored bars represent values for which the difference between percentages is greater than 5%, with darker bars indicating that a greater percentage of "Distant" hookup partners responded yes to that particular behavior, and lighter bars indicating a greater percentage for "Close" partners.

F2a: Consent Confidence by Social Distance



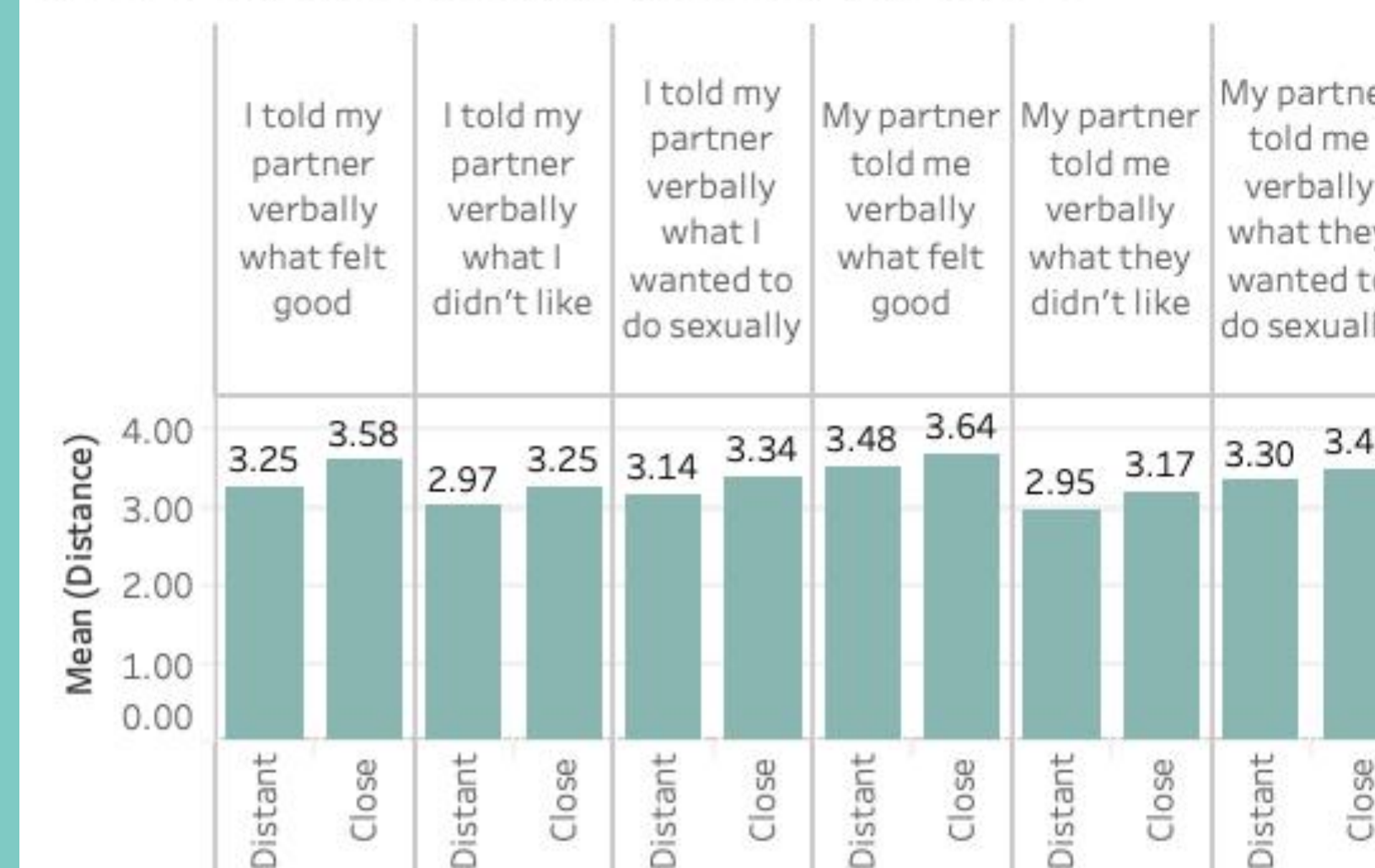
Values represent the mean response on a 1-10 scale. Responses are split by social distance and colored bars indicate significance at the 0.01 level.

F2b: Consent Confidence by Hookup History



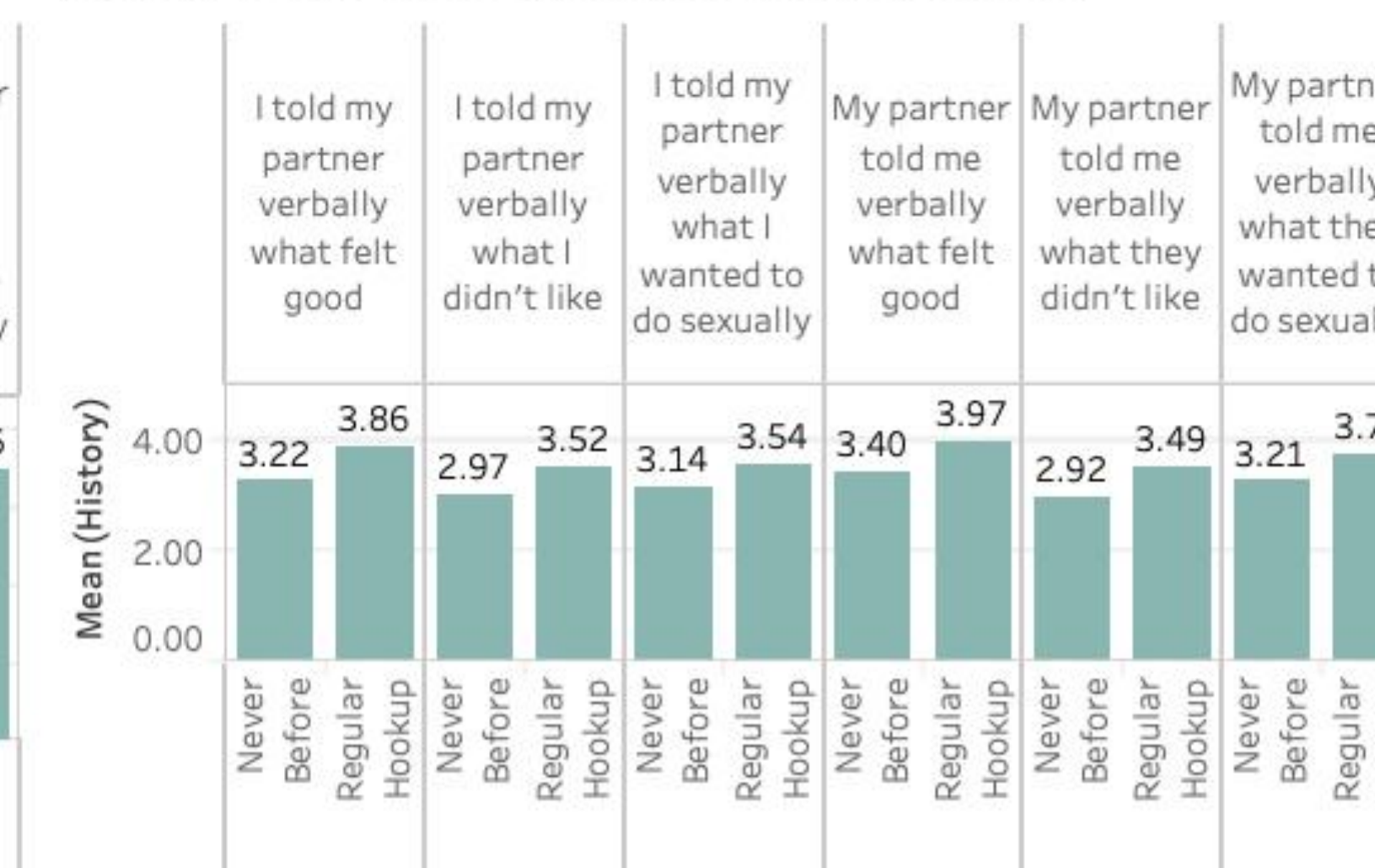
Values represent the mean response on a 1-10 scale. Responses are split by hookup history and colored bars indicate significance at the 0.01 level.

F3a: Verbal Consent by Social Distance



Values represent the mean response on a 1-10 scale. Responses are split by social distance and colored bars indicate significance at the 0.01 level.

F3b: Verbal Consent by Hookup History



Values represent the mean response on a 1-10 scale. Responses are split by hookup history and colored bars indicate significance at the 0.01 level.

## Methods

### Sample:

Participants (N=1144) were students from a midsize northeastern university who received credit for their participation. For their most recent hookup partners, social distance was taken into account:

Socially "Distant" Partners (N=603)

- 20.0% most recently hooked up with a stranger (N=228)
- 7.6% with someone recognized but didn't really know (N=87)
- 25.2% with a casual acquaintance (N=288)

Socially "Close" Partners (N=541)

- 23.8% most recently hooked up with a friend (N=272)
- 8.4% with a very close friend (N=96)
- 8.0% with a previous romantic partner (N=92)
- 7.0% with a regular 'booty call' (N=81)

Additionally, 50.5% of participants had never hooked up with their most recent hookup partner before (N=579), and 16.0% hooked up with someone who was a regular hookup partner (N=183).

### Procedure:

Participants completed an online survey through Qualtrics. Each provided basic demographic information and answered a series of questions about consent practices in their most recent hookup. Responses were split into groups described above.

## Discussion

F1 represents different behaviors used to demonstrate consent in participants' most recent hookup. Of behaviors with a 5% difference in participant responses, the two that were practiced *more* by *distant* partners were 'I did not say anything' and 'It just happened,' which are both non-communicative behaviors that may demonstrate a potential lack of consent. Socially close partners were much more likely to use implicit cues to demonstrate consent, such as 'I indirectly implied my interest' and 'I took my partner somewhere private.' However, 'I used nonverbal cues' and 'I used verbal cues' did not meet the difference threshold for either group. This seems to support H<sub>1</sub> as closer partners more often relied on implicit scripts of behavior, allowing their partner to perceive contextual variables as consent.

Both previous hookup partners and socially close partners were significantly more *comfortable* and *confident* in obtaining consent in their most recent hookup, at the 0.01 level (F2). However, they did not significantly think they *did a better job* at obtaining consent, which may display the existence of the precedence assumption from H<sub>2</sub>, where partners feel that consent was obtained, but may be unsure how it was obtained if it was presumed based on a prior relationship.

It was not found that nonverbal behaviors significantly increased with previous hookups and social proximity, as hypothesized in H<sub>3</sub>. However, F3 demonstrates that from all verbal behaviors surveyed, their usage significantly increased at the 0.01 level with pre-existing interpersonal relationships. While not expected, this finding makes sense in the context of F2, where those with pre-existing relationships are more comfortable with each other and therefore more likely to voice their desires to one another.