

Examining the Influence of Social Barriers and Sexual Scripts on Positive Casual Sexual  
Experiences in University Students

BY

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## Abstract

Casual sex is a common part of the undergraduate university experience. Past research has identified that casual sex encounters often happen in the context of hookup culture, which has many negative outcomes, particularly for heterosexual women. Literature defines the motives, outcomes, norms, and gender interactions associated with casual sex specifically for university aged individuals, but there is a lack of research on identifying barriers to positive experiences and ways to promote more positive experiences. The goal of the current study was to examine beliefs and perceptions on casual sex, whether participants acknowledged barriers associated with casual sex (and what these were), and ways in which individuals can challenge negative norms associated with casual sex. Participants were 9 men, 28 women, and 1 person who was genderqueer/fluid. All participants were from a small undergraduate university who participated in focus groups to discuss casual sex. We found that there was a common understanding that casual sex could be defined as the absence of “normal” relationship components, and that there was a heavy “pre-hookup script” involved in university hookup culture. Participants were aware of key barriers to positive experiences, such as gender double standards, emotional/physical risks, and others. We also identified four strategies to counter negative norms associated with casual sex: communication, learning to deal with rejection, establishing trust and respect, and challenging the Traditional Sexual Script. It was evident that more education around casual sex and the ways it can present itself, as well as more sex education broadly is needed.

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## **Examining the Influence of Social Barriers and Sexual Scripts on Positive Casual Sexual Experiences in University Students**

Let's talk about sex, an act that people engage in with hopes to have fun and feel intimately connected to people, among other reasons. In an ideal world, having casual sex would be pleasurable for all and would result in positive psychological outcomes. However, casual sex is an area where research has shown negative outcomes (Bersamin et al., 2014; Kenair et al., 2018). Sex educator Allison Moon explained that there is nothing wrong with engaging in casual sex and that negative outcomes are not inevitable (Moon, 2020). Amongst other major themes, Moon explained that casual sex should be pleasure-focused, equitable, collaborative and community-aware. However, this is not always the case, and a goal of the present study was to understand the factors that contribute to negative versus positive outcomes and how to encourage more positive outcomes.

Casual sex first emerged in the 1920s when relationships under parental supervision began to decline (Garcia et al., 2012). Today, specifically in university and college settings, casual sex has become normative, and there is a culture of encouraging people to explore their sexual desires (Bersamin et al., 2014). For individuals who chose to engage, Wade (2011) explained that casual sex has the potential to be very rewarding. Casual sex can be used as a means of exploring one's sexuality and satisfying one's sexual desires (Wade, 2011). However, research has exemplified the negative implications associated with casual sex, such as psychological distress and sexual regret (Bersamin et al., 2014; Kenair et al., 2018). Research has demonstrated that casual sex is very scripted and follows specific social and gender norms which often create barriers to

pleasurable and positive casual sex experiences (Farvid et al., 2016; Hill, 2006; Kenair et al., 2018; Kettrey, 2018; Klein et al., 2019). The scripted nature of casual sex in heterosexual pairings refers to the Traditional Sexual Script, which lays out the sequence of events that a typical heterosexual encounter follows (e.g., touching, kissing, oral sex, and vaginal penetration) (Pukall, 2020).

One area that has rarely been addressed in research is how we can improve casual sexual experiences. We have a good understanding of the underlying mechanisms of casual sex, yet there is limited research on how we can actually improve these mechanisms and outcomes. Specifically, there has been a lot of focus on the consequences and negative implications associated with casual sex (Garcia et al., 2012), making it seem as though casual sex should be eradicated, rather than improved.

The current study explored the influences of sexual scripts and social barriers on safe and pleasurable casual sexual experiences. Specifically, I explored ways in which people can challenge negative norms associated with casual sex in attempt to help make casual sexual experiences better for those who wish to engage in such behavior.

## **Hookup Culture**

### ***What is Hookup Culture and What is Casual Sex?***

Wade (2011) defined casual sex as any sexual relationship without any romantic or time commitment. She noted that casual sex and hookup culture are two distinct things. Hookup culture is a specific set of beliefs and structures around casual sex. Hookup culture is heteronormative and promotes specific sexual norms that are highly gendered. Wade highlighted that hookup culture often leads to negative casual sexual encounters and can limit people's ability to fully express themselves sexually. Wade

explained that casual sex should be about sexual liberation and the ability to control one's sexuality, yet hookup culture promotes the opposite of this. Hookup culture creates an environment where rigid sexual norms and scripts are reinforced (Fagen & Anderson, 2012; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Casual sex on university campuses is often situated within hookup culture, but it doesn't have to be. Wade explained that challenging hookup culture is difficult, but it can be done.

Casual sex includes a wide range of behaviours. From Wade's study, her participants noted that their experiences ranged from kissing, to oral sex, to intercourse. There are also multiple forms of casual sex relationships. Wentland and Reissing (2011) proposed that casual sexual relationships can vary in terms of frequency, type of contact (sexual or sexual and social), personal disclosure, discussion of the relationship, and friendship. Using these dimensions, Wentland and Reissing defined four types of casual sexual relationships: *One Night Stands*, *Booty Calls*, *Fuck Buddies*, and *Friends with Benefits*. *One Night Stands* were minimal on all dimensions; they were intended to happen only once (low frequency), there was no friendship present prior to the sexual contact, and the contact was only sexual. *Booty Calls* were quite similar to *One Night Stands*; however, they were intended to happen more than once, so had increased frequency. *Fuck Buddies* involved repetitive encounters of both social and sexual contact. *Fuck Buddies* often started as strangers, but the casual sexual contacts resulted in some sort of friendship. Lastly, *Friends with Benefits* was the most intimate and connected relationship of all four. Although *Friends with Benefits* did not romantically commit to each other, they engaged in both social and sexual types of contact, and they were also friends before sexual contacts began and after the sexual contacts stopped.

In their study of casual sex relationships, Wentland and Reissing (2011) found that gender differences were minimal when it came to defining these relationships, meaning that these prescribed casual relationships were relevant for men and women. However, there were some limitations to their research: it was conducted on sex educators and on individuals aged 18 to 24; they did not account for sexual orientation, nor did they consider older adults. So, there may be discrepancies between casual sexual relationships, various sexual orientations, and different age groups.

### ***Who Engages in Casual Sex?***

Casual sex is practiced by people of all genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations (Garcia et al., 2012). Specifically on North American college campuses, around 70% of college students have engaged in casual sex in college at least once (Garcia et al., 2012; Wade, 2020). Very little research has assessed casual sex behavior among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals (Watson et al., 2017). Watson et al. (2017) noted that the operationalization of casual sex for LGB relationships has not been clearly defined, which makes it difficult to assess the incidence of LGB casual sex encounters. However, because hookup culture mostly promotes heteronormative casual sex, LGB people may have difficulty finding casual sex partners and/or finding safe avenues to engage in casual sex (Watson et al., 2017).

Thorpe and Kuperberg (2020) explained that casual sex in a college setting is embedded in the culture and sexual experimentation is the normative script for students. They found that individuals with peers, older siblings and parents who attended college were more likely to be immersed in that script, which resulted in higher chances of them engaging in casual sex. Thorpe and Kuperberg also noted that individuals who grew up

in highly religious households would potentially see college as a way to escape those strict sexual boundaries and were therefore more inclined to engage in casual sex.

### ***Issues with Hookup Culture and Casual Sex***

Although literature has well defined casual sex and has helped us understand the difference between a *Booty Call* and a *Fuck Buddy*, for example (Wentland & Reissing, 2011), individuals are still having a hard time navigating casual sexual relationships. In fact, Wade (2011) noted that negative sexual encounters are on the rise. This was true for both men and women, although women reported more negative outcomes and were more often disappointed after their casual sexual encounter (Wade, 2011). Through her qualitative analysis with 44 students (75% women), Wade identified three major themes that unfolded in people's desires of casual sex: empowerment, pleasure, and meaning. First, empowerment was linked to sexual liberation, specifically for women, as they attempted to regain control of their sexuality. Second, women were seeking pleasure, but described prioritizing men's pleasure in casual sex. Specifically, women internalized that male pleasure was more important, and they tended to deprioritize their own pleasure. Thirdly, although hookup culture emphasizes meaningless encounters, individuals still wanted some sort of meaning, trust, and respect to their experiences. Essentially, people just wanted their partner(s) to be nice and respectful. In some way, these three themes demonstrated the issues related to casual sex as individuals have noted that these aspects are often missing from their experiences. Though Wade highlighted that many people still enjoyed casual sex in a hookup culture setting and had no issues with it, work still needs to be done to make it a more positive environment.

### **Outcomes and Motives**

### *Casual Sex Motives*

There are diverse motives that predict why people engage in casual sex. Cooper & Shapiro (1998) conducted a series of studies with young adults to examine general sexual motives. In response to an open-ended question, over half of participants reported that they engaged in sexual acts for the pleasure and physical feeling related to such behaviours. Other reasons included the need to solidify an emotional bond, stress relief, peer pressure, and being under the influence of alcohol. The subsequent studies used quantitative methods to create and validate a survey of sexual motives. The motives they identified were enhancement, intimacy, coping, self-affirmation, partner approval, and peer approval. They demonstrated that motivational factors were quite stable across time, but interpersonal environment and relationship context (i.e., casual sex versus sex in a committed relationship) caused variability in motives. People not in committed relationships reported lower levels of intimacy motives and higher levels of coping, self-affirmation, partner approval, and peer approval motives. Additionally, they found that men reported higher levels of enhancement, coping and affirmation motives, whereas women tended to report higher levels of intimacy motives.

With regards to casual sex specifically, Snapp et al. (2015) used Cooper & Shapiro's scale to examine the motivational factors, as well as what predictors, if any, led to what outcomes of casual sex. Pleasure was the highest endorsed motive for both men and women, and they also found that both genders highly endorsed closeness (i.e., intimacy). The researchers highlighted that these findings transgressed traditional gender norms; intimacy was not exclusive to women, and pleasure was not exclusive to men. Snapp et al. did not find any significant gender differences in motivational factors for

casual sex; all motives previously described by Cooper and Shapiro (1998) (except for partner approval which was not included in their study) were similarly endorsed by men and women.

Some individuals engage in casual sex with hopes of it potentially leading to a romantic relationship (Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2020). Thorpe and Kuperberg (2020) explained that having parents that are together could be a predictor for this motivational factor. Additionally, Snapp et al. (2015) found that the prevalence of relationship seeking as a motivational factor seems to be similar for both men and women.

Although some researchers found no gender differences (Snapp et al., 2015), other researchers found significant varying motives between men and women (Cooper & Shapiro, 1998; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2020; Weitbrecht & Whittin, 2020;). Weitbrecht and Whittin (2020) found that men reported gain in social status, gain in sexual experience and pleasure as motives for casual sex. In contrast, women tended to engage in sexual behaviours hoping to feel sexually desirable and attractive, and to increase the possibility of commencing a romantic relationship. In this study, men were motivated by pleasure, and women were motivated by validation from external factors. Weitbrecht and Whittin noted that gender roles and cultural messages probably best explained these findings. Indeed, society teaches women that they should be shamed for having sex, whereas men should be praised.

Another study found men tended to report engaging in casual sex for reasons related to gaining skills and self-confidence and in contrast, women revealed motives related to relationship seeking and pleasure (Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2020). Again, this could have been due to the strict gender roles and cultural messages that our society

promotes. Moreover, it is worth noting that many participants in these studies noted intimacy and pleasure as motives to engage in casual sexual behaviours, yet as Wade (2011) mentioned, these two components are often lacking in casual sexual relationships

### ***Casual Sex Outcomes***

Research has demonstrated that motives are closely related to outcomes. Indeed, positive and negative motives often correlate with either positive or negative outcomes, respectively (Kenair et al., 2018). And because motives are often gendered, outcomes then also become highly influenced by gender. Kenair et al. (2018) surveyed participants on feelings related to casual sex (i.e., disgust, worry, regret, pressure, gratification, confidence, and initiative). Essentially, they attempted to understand why women felt more sexual regret than men. They found that sexual regret (i.e., outcome) was associated with worry, disgust, and peer pressure (i.e., motives). In comparison, decreased sexual regret was correlated with sexual initiation, competence, and gratification. Women's higher levels of sexual regret were linked with their lower levels of sexual gratification and higher levels of feelings of worry. Casual sex, gender norms and sexual scripts teach men to be the initiators, and this role is correlated with decreased sexual regret, resulting in men reporting lower levels of sexual regret.

Snapp et al. (2015) also found a link between previously defined motives by Cooper and Shapiro (1998) and specific outcomes. They noted that that approach motives (i.e., intimacy, pleasure, and enhancement) were linked with sexual satisfaction, and self-affirmation motives were linked to positive psychological outcomes. They also found that having casual sex with a partner that one had previously engaged with was linked with higher sexual satisfaction.

On average, men and women tend to experience different emotional reactions after engaging in casual sex. Broadly, research has demonstrated that women report less positive and more negative emotional reactions to casual sex than men (Snapp et al., 2015). Though outcomes are often gendered due to society's rigid gender scripts, casual sex can have negative outcomes for people of all genders. Indeed, Bersamin et al. (2014) found a positive correlation between casual sex engagement and psychological distress in both male and female heterosexual college students. Also, engagement in casual sex was associated with lower mental well-being in general (Bersamin et al., 2014). Due to the nature of a correlational design, the authors were not able to discuss the order of this relationship; nonetheless, an association had been found. Although there were no gender differences in this study, Bersamin et al. explained that the causes of these negative psychological outcomes in both men and women most likely differed. Because men and women are facing different challenges when engaging in casual sex (Farvid & Braun, 2018), it is expected that the nature of distress after casual sex differs for men and women.

However, as mentioned, Wade (2011) described the problem to be more so associated with hookup culture itself, rather than just the act of casual sex. Dr. Zhana Vrangalova explored this idea by creating a website called *The Casual Sex Project* (The Casual Sex Project, 2014); a website where people from all around the world can share their stories about casual sex (Vrangalova, 2015a). From the individual stories on this website, she noted that the positive psychological outcomes almost always outweigh the negative psychological outcomes of casual sex. She explained that casual sex is not necessarily for everyone, and that negative psychological outcomes are more probable

for people with low hookup self-determination motives (Vrangalova, 2015b). This could explain why we see psychological distress in some individuals who engage in casual sex. Authenticity is important; individuals who engage in casual sex need to feel comfortable having sex with someone they don't have a romantic attachment to (Vrangalova, 2015a).

Negative outcomes may also be due to the high prevalence of alcohol and substances involved during casual sex encounters. Dr. Vrangalova explained that negative and regrettable casual sex is often a result of one's impaired judgement from intoxication during sex (Vrangalova, 2015a). Dr. Vrangalova's work has demonstrated that it is most likely not the nature of casual sex that leads to negative psychological outcomes, but rather having casual sex when judgement is impaired or when it goes against one's values and morals (Vrangalova, 2015a).

The current study takes a sex-positive approach to the issue. Based on the assumption that many students are going to engage in casual sex, I focused on how to make casual sex safer and more pleasurable for those who want to engage in it. I also attempted to define ways to limit negative outcomes so that students' casual sex lives can be improved.

To do so, we must understand the barriers that are limiting people's ability to have positive experiences. Researchers have defined gender norms and sexual scripts involved in casual sex and have highlighted the fact that stereotypes and beliefs about masculinity and femininity highly impact one's navigation through such experiences.

### **Sexual Scripts and Gender Norms**

#### ***What are Sexual Scripts?***

Sexual scripts can be broadly defined as the culturally appropriate course of action that is often expected during casual sex. Simon and Gagnon (1986) proposed three levels of scripts, that is, cultural scripts, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. At the cultural level, there is the Traditional Sexual Script (Pukall, 2020). This is defined as the general course of action people expect when having heterosexual casual sex. Simon and Gagnon (1986) explained that cultural scripts provide information of what is expected and direct individuals to culturally appropriate courses of action. Sexual scripts are helpful at times because they provide reassurance; sexual encounters are often scripted so people know what to expect (Pukall, 2020). In a casual sex context, Pukall (2020) explained that individuals often expect kissing, touching, oral sex, and then intercourse, regardless of whether that's what the individuals truly desire. Further, Wade (2017) demonstrated that almost all students described similar storylines when discussing heterosexual casual sex encounters. This demonstrated how entrenched the Traditional Sexual Script is in casual sexual encounters on university campuses. Moreover, the Traditional Sexual Script creates an environment where sexual stereotypes are often reinforced (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2012; Wade, 2020).

While most people initially adhere to the Traditional Sexual Script with a new partner, they can also develop their own scripts over time. At the interpersonal level, scripts become personalized to each pairing, and these scripts can be more tailored to the couple's interests. Of course, these scripts can also lead to repetitive sexual encounters. Lastly, intrapsychic scripts were defined as individuals own personal desires (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

For the purpose of this study, I focused on cultural scripts, which translates to the Traditional Heterosexual Sexual Script. This cultural script relies heavily on gender norms (Wade, 2017). Sanchez et al. (2012) explored the ways in which men were often seen as the pursuers of casual sex, whereas women were assumed to be sexual gatekeepers. Women have been socialized to be submissive, and men have been socialized to be dominant. This had led to the idea that men should always want sex, whereas women should only want sex when it is to relieve a man from his sexual desires (Fagen & Anderson, 2012; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Both men and women endorsed the idea that men are the initiators and men have noted that they consent to sex by asking while women have noted that they consent to sex by answering yes to being asked (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). In fact, when women took on the initiator role, men reported feeling threatened as they considered women to be taking on the traditional male sexual script (Fagen & Anderson, 2012). Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) also noted that part of the script is that women, but not men, are expected to perform oral sex, and men are sometimes expected to be aggressive in their pursuance of casual sex.

Gendered sexual scripts lead women to internalize the idea that men should be aggressive, which can sometimes result in coercion (Wade, 2020). Wade explained that many of her female students noted that they often felt coerced, but because society teaches women that they should please men, the female students often did not see the coercive behaviors as a problem. Also, research has found that the endorsement of masculine sexual scripts was associated with aggression, coercive behaviors, and rape

myth acceptance in men, whereas feminine sexual scripts led to lack of sexual agency in women (Sanchez et al., 2012).

### ***Script-Incongruent Behaviors***

Challenging these scripts can become taxing, as individuals can be met with repercussions if they chose to deviate from their scripts. Our society often penalizes men and women who engage in script-incongruent behaviors (Sanchez et al. 2012). Klein et al. (2019) conducted a study which examined the repercussion of sexual assertiveness in men and women. Generally, sexual assertiveness in men and women was negatively perceived by both genders, but for different reasons. The negative perception of sexually assertive men may have been due to the association between dominant men, rape myth acceptance, and coercion. And for women, because they were expected to be sexually submissive, sexual assertiveness meant deviance from their Traditional Sexual Script. Additionally, they explained that because women are deviating from their script when they are sexually assertive, they may face greater backlash, which in turn makes them more likely to conform to their submissive sexual script.

But what about script non-conformist men, particularly, heterosexual feminine men? Hill (2006) explored the ways in which feminine straight men were perceived by their female counterpart(s). Feminine straight men were sometimes perceived as gay by heterosexual women, which made it challenging for these men to attract potential sexual partners. Because of their sexual scripts, men were expected to value the physical components of sexual relationships and dismiss the emotional components. Specifically, men were expected to be emotionless when it came to casual sex. When men did not

adhere to these scripts and portrayed more feminine characteristics, they were met with judgement.

As sex educator and researcher Eva Bloom explains, sexual scripts inhibit individuals' ability to uniquely express themselves in sexual settings (Bloom, n.d.). Specifically for marginalized individuals, casual sex can leave people feeling unsatisfied due to heteronormative sexual scripts limiting people's sexual expression (Bloom n.d.). And not only to these scripts create negative outcomes, but they also create barriers to positive casual sexual encounters. Indeed, positive casual sex experiences are often impacted by numerous gendered factors, misinformation, and lack of sex talk in general.

### **Social Barriers to Positive Casual Sexual Experiences**

#### ***Gender Differences in the Barriers Associated with Casual Sex***

Much like motives, outcomes, and scripts, barriers to pleasurable and safe experiences are often dependent on gender. Farvid and Braun (2018) conducted a qualitative analysis that examined the risks men and women face when engaging in casual sex. They explained that casual sex was considered "risky" behavior, but the risks were different for both men and women and their origins were most likely due to prescribed gender norms. They argued that women were more likely to worry about physical victimization and coercive behaviors, whereas men were more so worried about their sexual performance. Specifically, men were afraid that poor performance would threaten their masculinity, and women were essentially afraid of physical violence and manipulation. This study demonstrated that men and women are facing completely different realities which can contribute to both sexes having negative experiences with casual sex.

Specifically for women, casual sex becomes a never-ending spiral. Sexual scripts have taught women to be sexually submissive, yet this has led to lack of sexual agency, and they have become at risk for physical violence and coercion (Farvid & Braun, 2018). However, when women take control, become the initiators, and prioritize their own pleasure, they are much less likely to perform undesired sexual acts (Kettrey, 2018). Indeed, Kettrey (2018) found that measures of sexual subjectivity (i.e., prioritizing one's own pleasure and having sexual agency) in women were linked with safer and better sexual encounters. As previously discussed, however, when women challenged their script and become more dominant in sexual settings, they were at greater risk of facing backlash (Klein et al., 2019). So, women's sexual engagement becomes this constant never-ending battle.

Women also face the fear of being slut-shamed. Even though sexual subjectivity can lead to more positive experiences, the internalized notion that sexually promiscuous women are "bad" is deeply rooted in the larger culture (Farvid et al., 2016). Sluts are deemed morally wrong for wanting to take initiative and engage freely in casual sex. Society has this internalized notion that "sluts" should be treated worse than a "morally correct" women, simply because of their desires to have sex. Farvid et al. explained that the *slut = bad*, and *sexually modest = good* dichotomy is rooted in people's belief about women's sexuality.

Through a qualitative analysis, Farvid et al. (2016) examined the beliefs that women had on other women engaging in casual sex. They found that women typically saw casual sex as something fun and exciting for women to participate in. However, the female participants still demonstrated conflicting views about female promiscuity,

especially in comparison to men. For example, participants explained that it was still more acceptable for men to be the initiators and have a lot of casual sex. Although almost all participants supported female empowerment through sexual liberation, researchers saw that participants would often shut down when asked to discuss their own sexual reputations. The researchers considered this to be a means of protection from the “slut” label.

Additionally, men also hold negative beliefs about women who wish to initiate casual sex. Fagen and Anderson (2012) conducted a qualitative study that demonstrated how dominant and sex-desiring women can cause men to feel threatened. Specifically, they interviewed men who reported incidences of unwanted sexual encounters and they wanted to examine how one’s masculinity constructed their perception of such behavior. From the participants’ stories, a common theme was analyzed; many women that were claimed to be manipulative and aggressive were in fact just transgressing their gender roles and taking initiative in the sexual acts. The researchers explained that men typically construct their masculinity around feminine sexual norms (i.e., women as sexually submissive), and can therefore feel threatened when women take on the traditional masculine role. Fagen and Anderson noted that men would in turn degrade these women and label them as sluts. The constant battle then continues for women; if they want a relationship through casual sex, they are seen as too needy and emotional, but if they just want to have sex for the fun of it, they are seen as sluts (Fagen & Anderson, 2012).

Society’s rigid views about men’s and women’s sexuality creates extensive barriers for those wanting to engage in casual sex. Views about women’s sexuality are at

once rooted in the Traditional Sexual Script and cultural views on women's sexuality, as well as how men perceive their own role. Whereas views about men's sexuality create an environment where men become hyper focused about their sexual performance and construct their masculinity around their ability to be the initiators during casual sex.

### ***Misinformation and Manipulation***

Another social barrier to positive casual sex is misinformation, misinterpretation, and lack of communication in general. Sexual coercion, a form of sexual violence, involves manipulative approaches in attempt to convince or "make" someone participate in sexual behaviours they do not wish to engage in (Benbouriche & Parent, 2018).

Because of the rigid traditional sexual scripts, sexual coercion can be difficult to identify and address in the moment (i.e., during the sexual act) for both men and women (Fagen & Anderson, 2012; Wade, 2020). As mentioned above, sexually assertive women can sometimes be seen as coercive because they are deviating from their sexual script, and women sometimes have difficulty identifying coercive behaviors in men because women are socialized to be sexual gatekeepers (Fagen & Anderson, 2012; Wade, 2020).

Moreover, sexual scripts inhibit people's willingness to talk about sex during their casual sexual encounters. Because people are following along the Traditional Sexual Script, and everyone expects everyone to want the same things, there is often no communication that occurs during casual sexual encounters. The Traditional Sexual Script convinces people that everyone has the same goals during casual sex, and it is assumed that little communication is needed during these encounters (Wade, 2017). However, sexual communication is an important component to positive encounters, as it has been linked to sexual satisfaction (Pukall, 2020).

### *Peer Influences*

Lastly, one's social environment can either create a sex positive environment, or an environment where people feel shamed about their sex lives. Indeed, Dr. Zhana Vrangalova explained that there is still an evident stigma that surrounds casual sex; engagement in casual sex can lead to judgement and criticism (Vrangalova, 2015a). However, surrounding oneself with people who won't judge decisions to engage in casual sex can act as a strategy to avoid shame and guilt (Vrangalova, 2015a). For example, female participation in casual sex often influences one's beliefs about peer engagement in casual sex. Kenney et al. (2013) found that if women had previously engaged in casual sex, they were more likely to endorse positive motives regarding their peers' rationales to engage in casual sex. In contrast, if participants had not previously engaged in casual sex, they assumed that their peers engaged in casual sex because of lack of self-esteem and/or as a means of social conformity (i.e., coping and conformity motives).

Peer communication about casual sex generally is also important in order to dismantle negative aspects of hookup culture. However, researchers have shown that there are many barriers to this communication. Specifically, men who endorse performance-based sexual scripts (e.g., being able to maintain an erection) were less likely to talk to their peers following distressing sexual encounters (Jampel & Addis, 2021). Distressing sexual encounters included script-incongruent behaviors such as saying no to sex when their partner clearly indicated that they wanted to (Jampel & Addis, 2021). Jampel and Addis demonstrated that men who experienced these script-incongruent encounters were hesitant to discuss these experiences with their peers

because they assumed that everyone else did not experience these transgressional behaviors. Lack of openness to communicate these issues reinforces the Traditional Sexual Script because not talking about it inhibits people's ability to understand there is something outside of the traditional script.

It is clear that individuals' social environments influence their own views about casual sex. This, in turn, can lead to barriers where people don't feel comfortable discussing their experiences, or instances where people may feel shame or guilt for engaging in casual sex (Jampell & Addis, 2021; Kenney et al., 2013).

### **The Present Study**

Past literature has provided an understanding of casual sex and hookup culture. Although we generally see more positive than negative emotional reactions following casual sex (Vrangalova, 2015a), there are still many negative experiences associated with it (Bersamin et al., 2014; Wade, 2011). Individuals seem to engage in casual sex mostly for intimacy and pleasure, but we also see gender discrepancies in motives and outcomes because of rigid gender norms and sexual scripts (Cooper & Shapiro, 1998; Snapp et al., 2015). Sexual scripts can lead to unpleasant casual sex experiences; but, challenging these scripts and script-incongruent behaviors can cause conflict and distress (Hill, 2006; Klein et al., 2019). Lastly, casual sex has clear social and gender barriers: slut-shaming, manipulation and miscommunication, and peer influences, are all social barriers that impede on people's ability to have positive casual sexual experiences (Benbouriche & Parent, 2018; Farvid et al., 2016; Jampel & Addis, 2021; Kenney et al., 2013).

Expanding on past research, the present study examined beliefs about barriers to positive casual sex experiences and how to reduce those barriers to improve casual sex experiences. Specifically, I held focus groups to discuss casual sex on a university campus. I explored what contributes to casual sex experiences being positive or negative and asked participants what would make these experiences better.

For those wanting to engage in casual sex, the experience should be safe and pleasurable. However, there is a gap in the research on defining strategies for increasing the likelihood of positive experiences. I also explored perceptions of sexual scripts and attempted to conceptualize ways to challenge unaccommodating sexual norms. I looked at the influences of peer acceptance, internalized gender norms and sexual scripts, openness to communicate and general social factors on positive versus negative casual sexual encounters. I had three overarching research questions:

1. What are university students' beliefs and perceptions about casual sex?
2. Do university students recognize the barriers to positive casual sexual experiences?
3. How do we improve casual sex so that there are more positive outcomes?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through the university participant pool and online advertisements. Those recruited through the university participant pool were allocated course credits in their introductory psychology classes. No incentive was provided to those not enrolled in introductory psychology classes (i.e., most of those recruited through online advertisement). The sample was comprised of 39 participants; however,

one participant did not provide any demographic information. The mean age of participants was 19.53 ( $SD = 1.69$ ). All other demographic variables can be found in

Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

Demographic	N (%)
Gender	
Female	28 (73.7)
Male	9 (23.7)
Genderqueer/fluid	1 (2.6)
Ethnicity/race	
White	32 (84.2)
Multi-race	2 (5.3)
Asian	2 (5.3)
Black/African	2 (5.3)
Religion	
Atheist/agnostic	20 (52.6)
Christian	17 (44.7)
Jewish	1 (2.6)
Type of high school	
Public	32 (84.2)
Private/religious	6 (15.8)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	23 (60.5)
Bisexual	7 (18.4)
Queer	3 (7.9)
Lesbian	2 (5.3)
Gay	1 (2.6)
Did not provide	2 (5.3)
Year of study	
First	20 (52.6)
Second	4 (10.5)
Third	5 (13.2)
Fourth	6 (15.8)
Fifth	2 (5.3)
Did not provide	1 (2.6)

## **Measures**

I created a short demographic survey to assess basic participant demographics (Appendix A). For the focus group discussion, I created a set of 10 questions to use as prompts during the focus groups (Appendix B). These questions were designed to get participants' perspectives on casual sex. Participants were encouraged to discuss their views and perceptions of casual sex openly. As can be seen in Appendix B, the questions assessed beliefs about casual sex, sexual scripts and gender stereotypes, communication during casual sexual encounters, and peer influences.

## **Procedure**

Participants were invited to register in one of seven focus groups. Two groups were for self-identifying women, the second two groups were for self-identifying men, and the last three groups were for people of any gender. After participants registered, consent forms were sent by email prior to the focus groups. All focus groups were planned to be in-person, but additional COVID-19 restrictions came into place that required some groups to take place online on Microsoft Teams. In the first two groups that occurred in-person, participants were asked to sign the consent forms once they arrived at the focus group. For the other five focus groups that occurred online, participants were asked to give verbal consent. All focus groups were co-moderated by a man and a woman.

Participants were asked to answer the short demographic survey before we began the discussion questions, except for one group which completed the survey after the discussion questions were completed. All focus groups lasted one hour, and because questions were used to prompt discussions, I did not have time to go through all my 10

questions in all the groups. However, all questions were asked in at least one of the groups. Once the focus groups were completed, I provided participants with a feedback form.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following guidelines laid out in Braun & Clarke (2006). We used a realist thematic approach for the analyzation of data; our key themes and data inference was done through inductive processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I used the software Otter.ai to transcribe the audio recordings of the first two (in-person) focus groups. For the other five groups, I used the transcriptions provided by Microsoft Teams. Once all recordings were automatically transcribed, I edited the transcripts manually. Once all transcriptions were organized and anonymized, my supervisor and I both read a subset to try and identify general themes independently. We then met to finalize our key themes and definitions. Based on our key themes, we independently coded the subset of transcripts. We met to compare the coding and further refined our themes until we reached consensus. This was done by laying out my three broad research questions, then assessing each question one at a time by conceptualizing the key themes in each. Once this was completed, I coded the last three transcripts by myself. Once they were all coded, my research assistant (who was the male co-moderator during all focus groups) went over the transcripts and our codes and provided his input.

## **Results**

### **What are University Students Beliefs and Perceptions on Casual Sex?**

***Theme 1: Casual Sex Defined as the Absence of “Normal” Relationship Components***

When asked to define casual sex, most participants defined it by what it did not include. Specifically, most participants described casual sex as having “no commitment”, “no strings attached”, “no feelings” and “no romance”. Only a few times, did participants include concrete elements to their definition of casual sex. Participants knew what casual sex was not, and rarely did they describe it as what it was. Participants were also quite clear that in most cases, casual sex is seen as sex that occurred outside of a designated relationship and is not classified as a relationship.

Some saw casual sex as involving no feelings broadly. Indeed, it was often highlighted that when feelings start to arise, or when a romantic connection starts to develop, it was no longer considered casual. The idea that feelings were not supposed to be involved in casual sex encounters was discussed in almost all of my focus groups.

Moreover, many discussed the concept of exclusivity, where one participant defined it as “not allowing yourself to have sex with anyone else”. Participants explained that when you are exclusive with the person you are engaging in sexual behaviours with, meaning you are not engaging in sexual behaviours/romantic commitments with other people, then things are no longer considered casual.

Although many described it as this absence of things, a few participants disagreed, and offered a definition of casual sex which included the presence of certain aspects. Some participants discussed the possibility of having feelings involved even if the relationship was defined as just casual.

“Like, I get that that’s like a common theme is that like no feeling like you need to be unattached, but I still think that casual sex can come up with feelings, again

just like outside of like a traditional relationship where you're really committed to someone else.” -Woman, group 4

The exception to defining casual sex as the absence of a relationship was also seen when participants defined the relationships using categories of relationship type. Terms like “booty calls” and “friends with benefits” were used to help with their definition of casual sex. The exception to casual sex not being a relationship or not involving commitment was the category of friends with benefits. This is one of the few descriptions where something was added (sex) to an existing friendship relationship.

### ***Theme 2: Understanding Hookup Culture***

Hookup culture was amongst the most prevalent themes that emerged when discussing understandings of casual sex. Within this broader theme, I identified four subthemes. Participants noted a scripted nature of hookup culture, gender differences in the way individuals perceive hookup culture, and the normalization of hookup culture. Additionally, their definitions differed substantially from their definitions of casual sex. Many people seemed to associate hookup culture with the idea of a one-night stand, rather than a friends with benefits relationship.

“I feel like for a difference between like hookup culture and casual sex I think hookup culture more as like most people just looking to hookup. Whereas casual sex is maybe one person you're seeing constantly or something like that. Whereas hookup culture like to me just sounds like looking for people for the sole purpose of having sex. I see casual sex as like a subcategory of hookup culture.” -Woman, group 6

**Subtheme 2.1: Scripted Nature of Hookup Culture.** Participants described a clear social script that defined hookup culture. This included discussions of the limitations and expectations the script places on behaviour, or the set of events that usually happen when people chose to participate in hookup culture. One participant made reference to the specific limitations it places on her behaviour, and that there are unspoken rules that seem to shift her behaviour. She explained that hookup culture makes her feel like she's always "not doing the right thing".

When asked about hookups, specifically, participants described a relatively consistent social script that was specifically associated with drinking, partying, and being under the influence. Indeed, partying, drugs, and alcohol were mentioned in almost all focus groups when discussing hookup culture. One participant gave a detailed description of their perception of it, which resembled the course of events that many other participants described:

"Ok first of all you gotta figure out if someone you're interested in is even there, right? You see them, you go up, you chat. To me it's definitely not like a go up to this person at the start of a party, cling on to them, and say alright let's go. It's more of a like, hey how are you, catch up, joke around. Honestly, I like to go actually party for a bit with my friends. I don't, again just because I'm not super goal oriented when it comes to casual sex, I'm not just like, yeah like let's just take this person to the bone zone, that's just not my deal. Uhm, but to me it's definitely more of just like go and talk to them, see what their vibe is basically. Are they like you know having a good time? Did they seem interested in you? And if they do or don't that kind of dictates whether or not I shoot them a text

later, you know, later in the night. Normally you know, not COVID times, you'd see someone at a house party and then be like "hey see you at [local bar]" and then you see them at [local bar] at the end of the night and then you go home with them." -Woman, group 4

Almost every story included the idea of initial signal of interest, and then reconnection later in the night. Other participants mentioned that you may flirt with this person during the night, you may have had been talking to them before the party, and/or you may buy them a drink, but it is rare that you would be actively spending time with them until the end of the night.

Another part of the script for women was the preparation when hooking up is anticipated. The theme of advanced planning and preparing one's body for sex was common for women:

"I was gonna say like for me hookup culture is like the way that you wouldn't like normally or like have been socialized to think about like how you're going to have sex or like how you're gonna come to the opportunity to have sex perhaps. So, like, you know, if we're running with this like non-exclusive kind of piece like you know you're thinking about I'm I'm getting ready with my friends to go to the bar. You know we're drinking we're like talking about like I you know "I think so and so is really cute like I hope they're out tonight" or like you know or like, you know, as someone who like presents as like a feminine person like I hear a lot of other folks like that who are like you know, "I just shaved my whole body like I'm feeling fresh. I'm feeling clean like I am hairless and I'm going to have sex" you know? Or like "I wanna have sex". So you're drinking, you're like

chatting with your gal pals like and you know, it's fun. It's fun and it's like fun to talk about and like laugh about and then you know you get to like the bar you go to [local bar] and you're like oh, you know so and so's here or like you know I was talking to so and so early before we came and it was super flirty, you know, so it's like that progression of like trying to leave with someone.” -

Genderqueer/fluid, group 1

While most participants described hookup culture as happening in a party/bar context, the other option was the use of dating and hookup apps, as many described their popularization and usefulness in hookup culture because people could clearly convey what they were interested in. Hookup apps were particularly useful for queer students who were not as easily able to hookup at parties when sexual orientation of the person of interest was not known.

**Subtheme 2.2: Perceptions of Hookup Culture Based on Gender.** When discussing hookup culture, there were evident gender stereotypes and gender double standards, which I will be discussing in Theme 1 of the second research question. It was evident that these gender stereotypes and gender double standards caused differences in the way people perceive hookup culture. Many explained that these stereotypes influenced the way individuals navigate through hookup culture and can be harmful for everyone in their own ways.

For many male participants, they explained that as a man, they were taught that sex was one of the most important aspects in their life. Some even discussed how their peers changed the way they perceive the culture. One discussed this type of socialization and noted that it often begins at an early age:

“I can only speak from one experience, but my perspective has been that growing up for guys, it’s so much more of a thing where it’s like sex is the most important thing in the world like this is sort of like the idea that’s given to you by your peers when you’re growing up. It’s like sex is like this huge thing and it seems like everyone’s just trying to have sex and then when you actually do have sex, it’s like oh, like that was fun, but it’s not like the most amazing earth shattering thing in the world. But like everyone should kill each other to do it, you know? I notice gender norms around sex for guys when I was growing up left me surprised uh, at like like it’s great, but it’s not that great, you know.” - Man, group 4

Another male participant seemed to have embodied this stereotype, describing casual sex within hookup culture as a sort of accomplishment. He explained that hooking up with a girl gave him a sense of satisfaction and gratification; like winning a “chase”.

The heterosexual script of man chasing women, and women as a gatekeeper was present in the male participants, but not in the female participants. As noted above, many women planned and prepared for hookups in advance. However, while some women did describe initiating contact, there was a general sense for most women interested in men that the men should be initiating.

There was also an evident difference in the way women perceived hookup culture. Although I discussed this more in Theme 1 of the second research question, these components seemed to impact the way women perceived and navigated through

hookup culture. Many women discussed how they had to worry about potential backlash after choosing to have casual sex.

Altogether, perceptions of casual sex in hookup culture seemed to significantly differ whether the participant was a man or a woman. Most men perceived it as an important thing that they should be participating in, and a lot of women discussed how they believe that compared to men, they must think about a lot more factors when choosing to participate in hookup culture (e.g., reputation, pregnancy, shame, walking home alone after the fact).

Although this seemed to be the general consensus amongst my mostly heterosexual sample, sexual orientation also factors into the way perceptions of hookup culture differ. One participant discussed perceptions of hookup culture for the gay community, which seemed to counter perceptions based on gender. She made it seem as though it is the heteronormativity of hookup culture that may lead men and women to view hookup culture differently.

“Like I know a lot of the times in the gay community like I have some gay friends that are like promiscuity is like awesome. It’s like for both parties always looked like very happily upon and sometimes it’s not, so I think that’s something really interesting to delve into too. I don’t know how much we can really delve into it, but it’s definitely like again, flipping things on its head.” -Woman, group

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**Subtheme 2.3: Normalization of Hookup Culture.** There was a common understanding amongst participants that hookup culture was normalized at university and that as students, some felt compelled to participate. Many described hookup culture

to be part of the university experience and that it was almost assumed that students would be engaging in hookup culture when they got to university.

Moreover, from my focus groups that were comprised of mostly first year students, some claimed that hookup culture was more embedded in university than in high school, and that they had noticed a difference when they got to university. Although they explained that the negative aspects and barriers (as discussed in my second research questions) are still present at university, the normalization of hookup culture created a somewhat more accepting environment:

“I do feel like it’s a lot more sex positive than my high school experience. And a lot of people are like more accustomed to the idea of casual sex.” -Woman, group 6

However, this normalization seemed to create expectations for certain individuals. One participant explained how hooking up becomes a goal, and that people rely on it to feel like they’ve succeeded. Especially if they are going out to parties, the participant explained that the outcome of their night becomes dependent on whether or not they have sex.

### ***Theme 3: Purpose of Casual Sex***

Casual sex is often framed negatively in the research literature, but participants who actively sought out casual sex did not feel their reasons were negative. The most common reason to engage in casual sex was sexual experience. Many participants explained that casual sex was a good way to learn more about their sexuality, discover what they like and are into in a sexual encounter, and gain sexual experience broadly. A few compared casual sex to sex in a committed romantic relationship; participants

seemed to think that compared to a committed romantic relationship, casual sex allows you to discover your likes and interests, without having to settle down and commit romantically to someone else.

Following this, some even tied this idea of discovering one's sexuality to bodily autonomy, sexual confidence, and sex positivity, explaining that engaging in casual sex might make you a more sex positive individual who feels confident in their sexuality.

Other reasons for engaging in casual sex included that it is a way to gain validation and feel connected to someone when one is feeling lonely. Some explained that casual sex was all they needed sometimes to feel good about themselves, especially if they were feeling insecure. Matching and flirting on dating apps was also validating and compliments from their matches can satisfy that need for validation that one might not get if they are not in a committed romantic relationship. They did note that the need for external validation was not always a healthy thing.

Casual sex can be a stress reliever, especially at university (considering the many stressors that university students face) and the current state of the world. Some saw it as *a break from reality*, where all one has to do is focus on the encounter and the pleasure that they're experiencing.

"[...] like it's just so kind of like a breath of fresh air in a sense, like you're not thinking about anything else besides that, and the pleasure that you're having with that. So I just think that that's like a definitely a big thing that comes out of it. It's just they can kind of like stop for a second and just enjoy yourself for the moment." -Woman, group 3

Surprisingly, not many people of any gender mentioned pleasure as a reason for engaging in casual sex. Some of the answers were pleasure-adjacent, but it was rare for people to explicitly say they engaged in casual sex because it felt good.

***Theme 4: Individual Differences Regarding Casual Sex and Hookup Culture.***

Participants were clear that although casual sex and hooking up are common parts of the university experience, they were quite aware of and accepting of the fact that casual sex and hookup culture is not necessarily for everyone.

“And for some people, casual sex is just not for them. Like I have a couple of friends and they’ve like hooked up with people and they’re like, you know what, like I just felt really sick afterwards and it just wasn’t something I’d do again. And like other people they just really like love love casual sex and enjoy like a culture and stuff like that. So I think it’s it’s kind of good to maybe want to, like, explore and see what you’re into.” -Woman, group 6

Many participants discussed their own personal views; some explained that they were not ready for commitment and casual sex was great for them, whereas others explained that they were more so interested in committed relationships. However, as mentioned, everyone seemed to be aware of these differences, and accepting of these differing views.

Additionally, not only were there individual differences in whether to engage in casual sex or not, but also in reasons to engage in casual sex as one participant described.

“I was gonna say I think that’s just very person dependent on why they’re engaging in casual sex in the sense like you could just be lonely and you like

want someone in the sense to like make you happy for that like moment of time. But then other people might be doing it for different reasons, so I think it's very like person based what someone would kind of classify that as." -Woman, group 3

Despite this acceptance of differing opinions in my sample, because of the normalization and pressures associated with hookup culture, some participants highlighted that individuals may feel shamed regardless of whether they chose to engage in casual sex or refrain from doing so. One participant referred to it as "two sides pushing against each other"; where one side is people who can do casual sex, and the other side is people who prefer not to have casual sex. And the participant explained that both sides try to make each other look bad by having both claim that they are better than the other one (i.e., those who have a lot of casual sex may claim that not having any casual sex is bad, and vice versa).

Indeed, some participants explained that the pressures involved in hookup culture create an environment where individuals may link their self-worth with the frequency in which they engage in casual sex. This also tied into the notion that many participants felt as though external factors (e.g., the media, peers) subtly encouraged casual sex from early on.

"But I feel like hookup culture specifically has this big kind of idea in a sense about like equating self-worth to a certain degree about like how many people you can sleep with. Um, which is fine, like if you want to sleep with as many people as possible, and that's what you like, go for it like that's the whole thing of being sex positive. But I think the one little issue with hookup culture is that

it's kind of like if you don't fit within that population that can do hookup culture, can sleep with someone and just like not really care, if you don't fit within that percentage, then it's kind of like abnormal or like you're a prude for like "Oh well, I'd rather talk to someone for a little bit before being in a relationship before", it's kind of like thought of as abnormal, which also isn't bad. So I just feel like hookup culture kind of focuses on that aspect of self-worth being equated to like how many kills you can get and it's really big on like binge drinking and university." -Woman, group 1

### **Do University Students Recognize the Barriers to Positive Casual Sexual Experiences?**

During the focus groups, it was evident that students were aware of the barriers to positive casual sex encounters that have previously been identified in the literature. Barriers that participants discussed in this study were categorized into the following themes: double standards and gender norms, sex negative cultural messages, peer influences, perceived risks, communication issues, sexual scripts, and lack of sex education.

#### ***Theme 1: Double Standards and Gender Norms***

One of the most common themes that was discussed with regards to barriers to positive experiences was sexist double standards and gender norms. These had many repercussions such as slut-shaming and the dehumanization of women, and sex that was focused solely on male-pleasure. Broadly, the double standards between men and women were showed up as how men and women who engaged in casual sex were

labelled, when one should make their sexual debut, how often one should engage in sexual activity, and whether or not one desires sex for pleasure.

Participants echoed the common double-standard that men who have a lot of casual sex may get labelled a “stud” or a “champ”, whereas women who engage in a lot of casual sex were labelled “whores” or “sluts”. Some explained that when it is known that a particular woman has a lot of casual sex, people may refer to this idea that she has been “run through”, and that she has “slept around”.

With regards to how often people engage in casual sex, many explained that essentially, it was ok for men to have a lot of casual sex, but not ok for women to have a lot of casual sex. A female participant mentioned; “casual sex is definitely built on the idea that men are allowed to”, and then continued by explaining that society has this idea that women should not be engaging in casual sex. Women particularly seemed quite frustrated with this double standard. One mentioned that if she was a man; she would love having casual sex and she would “fuck” anyone she wanted without having to worry about the repercussions.

This double standard was also extended to when the “appropriate time” for men versus women is to make their sexual debut. Many referred to the concept of virginity and the purity myth, explaining that there is still an apparent internalized notion that discourages women from “losing their virginity”. Whereas for men, it was encouraged to “lose their virginity” sooner rather than later.

Additionally, some of the focus groups discussed gendered beliefs about why men and women engage in casual sex. There is an underlying stereotype that women do

it to find a relationship, and men can do it just because it's fun and because of the pleasure it brings.

With these double standards, female participants explained that they feel like they can never win and that women “get shit on no matter what”. One female participant explained that she had never had sex before coming to university and shared that she got shamed and made fun of for it. Also, participants generally felt that women faced harsher repercussions from prescribed gender norms and sexist double standards.

**Subtheme 1.1: Slut-Shaming and Dehumanization of Women.** Slut-shaming and the guilt placed on women who chose to engage in casual sex was a recurring topic in practically all focus groups. It was clear that hookup culture at university promoted a sexist double standard, which then led to slut-shaming. This labeling seemed to lead to the dehumanization of women, as some participants explained that “sluts” are perceived as less-than and deserve less respect. It was also mentioned that women who have casual sex may be seen as “trophies” and “products”. For men, hooking up with a girl was described as like an accomplishment; as though women should be chased, and that a man wins the “chase” if he gets to hookup with the woman. Some also explained that women who engage in a lot of casual sex may be seen as “easy targets”, and that “easy targets” become more at risk of being slut-shamed if they reject someone. One participant explained that it is perhaps men’s “fragile egos” causing them to engage in this process of dehumanization.

**Subtheme 1.2: Casual Sex Revolves Around Men, and They Should Always Want It.** Participants noted that the norm for men was to be very sexual and always seek sexual activity. One participant shared a personal experience of his peers

encouraging him to initiate sexual activity with a girl that was evidently not into him and too intoxicated. As the participant noted, “these guys were all about sex and they didn't care what state the women were in, they don't care what the women thought about it”. In one of my men only groups, most of the men claimed that they would prefer to engage in a committed romantic relationship rather than a casual relationship, but that they faced conflicts with themselves and their environments since they had been socialized to believe that sex alone was more important.

### ***Theme 2: Sex Negative Cultural Messages***

**Subtheme 2.1: Media Influences.** When discussing media, participants seemed to recognize its negative effects on the way society views casual sex and the way gender factors into it. One male participant highlighted the fact that movies and TV shows rarely depict a healthy hookup, which negatively influences our perceptions of it. He noted:

“ [...] like you see it all the time on TV shows, two people had a one night stand and now one person's crazy in love with the other, the other one's trying to avoid the other one or the pregnancy involved, or there's questions about the consent or one person with cheating.” -Man, group 4

Pornography was also discussed as a negative cultural message. There was a common understanding in my focus groups, particularly among women, that porn highly influenced the way people are socialized to view sex. Participants explained that individuals are bombarded with porn that focuses only on men's wants and needs, which leads to a disparity between male pleasure and female pleasure in a real-life setting. Additionally, many identified the broad negative effects of porn, such as over

exaggerated positive responses, and the unrealistic expectations it places on sexual behaviours.

**Subtheme 2.2: Parents and Family.** Messages from family about sex influenced how participants felt about sex generally, and casual sex specifically. While some parents were sex-positive influences, participants mostly discussed negative messaging received from their families. Participants described parents who explicitly discouraged them from having casual sex, who instilled shame about sex broadly, and reinforced sexual double standards.

“I had a long-term boyfriend for three years from grade 9 to grade 12 and we were never allowed to sleep in the same bed together at like ever and as soon as I got to university my boyfriend now is allowed to sleep in my bed. But when he [her dad] talks about my little brothers, he kind of talks about them being players and that they'll bring girls home all the time. And he has this like great double standard of that's my little girl and she is my little girl and then my sons who I want to be like me and have women hanging all over them.” -Woman, group 4

**Subtheme 2.3: Influences from the Church.** In almost every focus group, church and religion came up as a negative influence on individuals' perceptions on sex. Some explained that conformity to the church promoted the idea of one “preserving their virginity” and waiting for marriage, causing some to feel guilty after choosing to have sex. One female participant explained that she would often feel shame when engaging in casual sex specifically, as she was taught growing up that her body was sacred and that sex before marriage was bad.

Most agreed with this notion that the church and highly religious environments discouraged sexual activity. At multiple occasions did participants discuss how they had to work through this internalized shame and guilt surrounding sex that church and religion had imposed on them. Some explained that opening up to a partner and being comfortable with their sexuality became even more difficult when they had been taught for years to suppress these thoughts and feelings.

“I was also raised in a sort of religious like family and um trigger warning I'm gonna use the R-A-P word, I was taught that blowjobs are rape and I don't know why that was taught to me, but to this day I still can't actually, I don't know if part of me wants to ever have a blowjob because it's all I think about, and that's probably not healthy.” -Man, Group 2

One participant explained that the church negatively impacted her understanding of casual sex in a very particular way, especially regarding engaging in non-heterosexual hookups. This participant would often refer to “catholic guilt”, which was something that she had internalized after attending a catholic school:

“And now I'm in my fifth-year university and I'm dating a girl and I'm like, I never even got to learn about what casual sex could be, let alone like what it looks like in different ways it could look. So like having to kind of navigate on your own, uhm, it got negative at some points because they're just kind of like well, you know... I don't even want to think about it because not only is like the guilt of like this is wrong, you know wait, but like it's a girl! And like there's a whole other side of it too. So like, uh, yeah, casual sex was always always kind of went back to that like catholic like the the Catholic guilt.” -Woman, group 3

### *Theme 3: Peer Influences*

During the focus groups, I asked participants to discuss their friends' perceptions of casual sex and how that influenced their own perceptions. Although some mentioned that they would feel confident in their decisions to have casual sex or not regardless of what their friends thought, many agreed that peers can highly influence one's own perceptions and decisions. Participants seemed worried about judgemental friends and the idea of friends being unsupportive of their decisions to have casual sex. Others expressed how sex positive their friend group was and how that positively impacted their own relationship with casual sex. It is not to say that sex positive friends encourage casual sex always, but rather they support any decision that one chooses to make.

“Um, I feel like I've had friends kind of both ways. Like most of my friends are very like, go for it, like, encourage it, whatever like, and like no judgement at all. And like they do it too, or even if they don't do it, like they encourage it, which would make you feel better about your decision. But I've also, like the odd time, had a friend like you almost feel judged by them for doing it. And that definitely makes you regret it more. Like I feel like, I feel like I'm impressionable by what my friends think because I care about their opinions. So that kind of makes it different how I think about it after.” -Woman, group 7

Peer pressure was also frequently mentioned in the group discussions. Some explained that people might engage in casual sex just to feel accepted by their friend group. Participants who discussed this seemed distressed and quite preoccupied by this concept, and explained that, for some of them, it very negatively impacted some of their experiences with casual sex.

Interestingly, the types of peer influences seemed to be highly gendered. For women, they seemed more worried about whether or not their peers would shame and judge them for their decisions, and men seemed to be a lot more worried about their peers pressuring them to engage in casual sex.

#### ***Theme 4: Perceived Risks***

Participants identified multiple risks associated with casual sex, which they perceived as barriers to positive encounters. These fell into the categories of emotional risks (regret, shame, judgement, rejection, hurt feelings), physical risks, and the social risks unique to attending a small university.

**Subtheme 4.1: Emotional Risks.** Many emotional risks of casual sex were identified by participants. These included the risk of “catching feelings”, being rejected, rejecting someone else, and reputational repercussions. Navigating the emotional aspects seemed particularly fraught for participants. Shame and regret were also identified as emotional risks, particularly for women. It was mentioned that in hookup culture, individuals are practically socialized to feel as though they should regret their sexual encounter. One female participant noted; “And I think that the regret comes along with like the kind of like it being taboo, like we feel like we should feel regret when maybe we really don't like, I don't I don't care, but maybe other people will”. There was a sort of understanding that although one may be confident in their decision and not regret it, there is always that worry of being judged and shamed for it.

A few female participants talked about the emotional reactions of the casual sex partner after the fact, and how they could highly influence your own emotional reactions. Specifically, if the person they had had casual sex with was being weird and

awkward the next day (e.g., ignoring them, whispering behind their back), they were more likely to feel regret or embarrassment about the situation.

**Subtheme 4.2: Physical Risks and Intoxication.** Risks regarding pregnancy, STIs, sexual violence, and intoxication were all mentioned during this study. Participants were aware of these risks, and many discussed how these often need to be thought through before engaging in casual sex. Participants also mentioned that consent can become tricky when alcohol and other substances are involved, which creates this added on barrier, especially when most hookups at university happen in a party setting, under the influence.

Interestingly, there seemed to be gender differences in these perceived risks. Both women and men mentioned that women probably have to think about a lot more before they chose to have casual sex. Some noted that only women need to worry about birth control, pregnancy, and Plan B. One participant mentioned that it would probably be a lot more difficult for a woman to refuse sexual advances or for a woman to ask to stop.

“I would say that if a woman realized like during sex that they didn't want to continue, it would probably be scarier for them to have to tell the man, like, “hey, I don't want to keep doing this” because like that could be very dangerous for them. The man might say “well, I don't care what you want”. Too like, it's it has to do with rape culture I guess, and it would probably be extra scary, so a woman would probably have to consider all those things more beforehand when engaging in casual sex.” -Man, group 2

**Subtheme 4.3: Small Universities, Low Student Population.** Our sample comprised of students attending a small undergraduate university. For some, this seemed to be a major barrier to positive casual sex encounters. According to participants, because “everyone knows everyone” at a smaller school, it was identified as a barrier for three main reasons; individuals are more likely to see their casual sex partner on campus; information about who is having sex with who spreads faster; and individuals are more likely to have a casual sex relationship with someone they know. This preoccupation of being at a small university was only discussed in groups comprising of mostly first year students.

***Theme 5: Communication Problems***

A major barrier that came up in my focus groups was the lack of communication between the people having casual sex together, whether that be about the relationship or about sexual desires. One participant summed up how many of the previously noted components (no feelings, fear of emotional risks) led to reduced communication. And this lack of communication is clearly part of hookup culture:

“I think with hookup culture to a certain extent there's kind of like this thing of like no feelings and it's like you don't really want to express how you feel, whether it's emotional or like physical. Like saying I like this, I don't like that or being like “hey, I really like you can we like maybe take this from like casual to like seeing each other”. Like I feel like you know, and even with social media like “oh I don't want to answer his snap just yet”, or like you know, “I'm gonna wait a little longer to answer his message”. You know, like I feel like there's this

big thing about kind of suppressing or hiding our emotions and not communicating them clearly.” -Woman, group 1

**Subtheme 5.1: Lack of Communication About the Relationship.** Many participants discussed the problematic outcomes that lack of communication can lead to. Many participants seemed frustrated with this and explained that miscommunication often happens where one person has a clear idea of what the casual relationship should look like, and the other has a completely different view on it (and are not communicating about it).

Interestingly, some participants seemed reluctant about this type of communication. There was a sense among some participants that casual meant not communicating at all, or that communicating with a casual partner was weird and awkward.

“But I don't even know if there's an easy way to talk about it like whatsoever. And it's like it's funny because all of us we're like saying, “ok let's set boundaries, let's like talk about this before”, but it's such a hard conversation to have. It's not something that's like, can be easily done, and so I think it's just really hard for individuals to kind of say that stuff.” -Woman, group 3

One male participant in particular seemed to be in disbelief that individuals should be communicating about just wanting something casual. He said: “Sorry, I have a question, but can we expect like something being casual like to be discussed?”. Thus, these conversations were perceived as being difficult to have by many.

**Subtheme 5.2: Lack of Communication About Sexual Desires.** Another barrier to positive casual sex experiences was the lack of communication about one's

sexual desires. Many participants explained that expressing what you desire in a sexual encounter is especially difficult in a casual setting.

“I think that's a key piece in a lot of this. It's like not wanting to be vulnerable, feeling insecure about not knowing what to do or about asking what you want people to do. I think that plays a big role in all of that.” -Woman, group 1

Additionally, a lot of female participants explained that discussions around pleasure was almost never present in a heterosexual casual sex encounter and seemed taboo. For men, having a female partner tell them what they wanted to do during the sexual encounter (rather than conforming to the traditional script) could lead their partner to believe that they were bad at sex, which went against the idea that men should just know what they are doing.

Some participants also discussed casual sex in the context of hookup culture, where alcohol and other substances become involved, and consent becomes less clear. One queer participant noted that when they engaged in heterosexual hookups, consent was often just assumed, whereas in non-heterosexual hookups, a lot more conversation about sexual desires would occur.

“[...] before [in heterosexual encounters] I'd be like let's have sex, let's do it now and like no conversation of consent and like no conversation of like “is this good for you? Like do you want this?” Like you know that kind of thing. It was just almost like assumed which is a huge issue.” -Genderqueer/fluid group 1

### ***Theme 6: Sexual Scripts***

Responses to a direct question about sexual scripts resulted in a diversity of responses. For some, sexual scripts seemed to limit pleasure in a casual encounter, and

some explained that sexual scripts were seen as a “safe” option since individuals did not want to be as vulnerable with someone they did not really know.

“I'm a relatively like kinky guy I'd say, but if I were to have a casual hookup, I probably wouldn't get into any of that. I'd probably be too embarrassed 'cause it's just a one time thing, that person might think it's weird and like instantly walk out so I feel like the script like the social script in that regard, would kind of like lessen the experience for someone like me because you're not able to get as much pleasure out of it as you could have.” -Man, group 2

Women were very aware that the Traditional Heterosexual Sexual Script prioritized male pleasure, leaving them feeling unsatisfied. Indeed, a lot of the male participants seemed to be surprised by the concept of a sexual script and many expressed that the typical sequence of events during a hookup would “depend on the person”. This distinction between male and female participants was evident; many male participants seemed unbothered by the concept, whereas many female participants seemed frustrated with sexual scripts as they inhibited their ability to have pleasurable experiences.

“Sometimes, a lot of the times, I've found that men really expect you know, like oral sex from women like prior to sex. And as someone who identifies as a woman, men rarely reciprocate [oral sex] before sex. Particularly, I find unless you're in some kind of longer term arrangements, so if it's like friends with benefits I've like notice there's a bit of a difference in that attitude, but like for a one night stand, oh my god hell no, I've never had a man just be like “yeah I'm gonna look out for your pleasure first”, it's always like you know, “you figure out my stuff first”.” -Woman, Group 4

Participants mentioned that non-hetero hookups often prioritized the pleasure of all parties involved. However, there still seemed to be some sort of script involved. One male participant claimed that gay sex is also highly influenced by porn and follows a script to some extent. Also, some non-heterosexual relationships seemed to have had adopted heteronormative sexual behaviours. It was mentioned that in lesbian casual sex, the person that gets assigned the strap-on is usually the person who presents themselves as more masculine, and people can get caught off guard when an individual transgresses these norms.

### ***Theme 7: Lack of Sex Education***

Lack of knowledge and poor sex education was another theme that emerged. Firstly, many discussed the heteronormativity of current sex education, leaving many individuals lost and confused when it came to exploring their sexual desires beyond what was taught in the classroom.

“I didn't know that bisexuality existed, so I remember when I was like thinking about like oh, you know, like maybe like, 'cause I remember I used to have like all these dreams about like like other girls and I was like, no but I like boys so like it's not possible, like I'm not gay. And like if they would teach you things like that at school, you would feel a lot less alone and like probably like not want to like hide I guess.” -Woman, group 1

Others discussed how traditional sex education neglected female anatomy and pleasure, creating an even bigger disparity between male and female pleasure, leading to negative outcomes for casual sex encounters. Some also explained that this added on the taboo of women being “horny” and having sexual desires. Masturbation was also tied

into this discussion; it seems acceptable for men to do, whereas it is still seen as something taboo for women to engage in (also adding on to the disparity between male and female pleasure).

Participants also explained that this lack of sex education led them to rely on pornography and other Internet sources to gain knowledge around sex, which often created harmful understandings of what sex should look like and how it should be.

One female participant discussed the challenges she faced with being diagnosed with endometriosis due to this lack of sex education.

“[...] but also just like the fact that it's not normal for you to be in pain during sex, and that that's like a sign that something isn't necessarily right, like maybe endometriosis, which is like, I'm I'm in the process of getting diagnosed with that. And we never learned that that was not normal to have like pain during sex.” -Woman, group 1

Lack of sex education has implications for casual sex specifically as most students will engage in casual sex at university. That is, this lack of sex education (which led to poor understandings of sex broadly) evidently negatively influenced some of the participants' casual sex experiences.

### **How Do we Improve Casual Sex So That There are More Positive Outcomes?**

When attempting to identify ways in which we can challenge negative norms associated with casual sex, there were four main themes that arose: improved communication, learning how to deal with rejection, the need for respect and trust, and challenging the Traditional Sexual Script. These four themes were highly linked to the barriers highlighted in the second research question.

### ***Theme 1: Communication***

Along with the complaints about lack of communication and challenges to communication, participants clearly felt that learning how to better communicate about casual sex would improve casual sex outcomes. Most felt that being upfront was the best way to go about it; one noted: “[...] the easiest way is to just talk about it. I think it can sometimes be uncomfortable, but like it's the easiest thing to do.”. That is, if you are going to have casual sex with someone, it is important to disclose your intentions with the person before the person is left to interpret the situation themselves.

The concept of being upfront, to limit miscommunication and hurt feelings, was a very common theme. It was evident that incorporating meaningful communication about each individuals' intentions going into the relationship would help limit negative encounters. However, participants seemed more wary of this communication in a one-night stand type setting. But when the frequency of contact between two people increased, participants were very keen on holding space for this communication as early as possible.

“Talk about like, what maybe it's going to entail; I'm only going to stick with you for one night, or like I'm only going to call you like once a week, like I don't want to see you outside of this. Like I definitely mentioned it before, like engaging in like sexual activity with somebody, I think that would be pretty important. Unless like, they're both like out like a one-night stand. Anything above a one a one-night stand like, I think you have to talk about it so that one party doesn't get like confused” -Woman, group 7

Participants also stressed the importance of normalizing conversations about pleasure and one's sexual desires. Although this seemed very challenging for some to do, one participant gave strategies such as sexting; because it is not face to face, it is less vulnerable in a sense and may help people feel more comfortable. Another strategy proposed by this participant was to praise and comment positively on the things that your partner does well.

“So then, like maybe when they're doing it, you can be like, “Oh like I really like this like great job” you know or like talk about it after be like “I really liked it when you did that”.” -Genderqueer/fluid, group 1

### ***Theme 2: Learning How to Deal with Rejection***

This theme was chosen after explicit mentions from some participants, but also by interpretation that many participants feared emotional distress associated with rejection. There was a substantial amount of discussion surrounding the fear of one getting their feelings hurt, indicating an even bigger need for rejection resiliency. And although people claimed that this was a risk, participants still highlighted the need to be upfront about your feelings.

“I feel like you should be able to like, uh, it shouldn't necessarily be a bad thing to not like someone back. Like that's a weird socialization.” -Man, group 2

### ***Theme 3: Respect and Trust***

Mutual trust and respect were often highlighted during the focus groups as attributes that would lead to more positive encounters. Increasing trust and respect would increase conversations surrounding STIs and the use of protection. It would also

help people feel ok having an intimate moment and being a bit vulnerable with the other person.

Lack of trust was linked to sticking to the Traditional Sexual Script, which as discussed, can be a barrier to positive experiences, highlighting the need for established trust. Moreover, respecting a casual sex partner would inhibit the process of dehumanization, and would also help challenge the notion that individuals are not allowed to have feelings in a casual sex relationship. Some noted that it may be difficult to establish trust in a one-night stand, but participants seemed to agree that respect should be the bare minimum.

“So I think like the respect, and like trust a little bit like, I mean, you're not going to trust someone that you know, for like a one night stand. But like, just that, like having somebody that's like, respectful enough to like, consider your wishes as well.” -Woman, group 7

#### ***Theme 4: Challenging the Traditional Sexual Script***

I prompted discussion surrounding this theme by asking participants what would happen if the Traditional Sexual Script did not exist. One group in particular, comprised of mostly women, seemed very enticed by the idea of forgetting the script. Participants explained that forgetting the script would most likely lead to more discussions of pleasure and sexual desires, more and better sex, more communication, and less focus on penile-vaginal intercourse.

“I think people, frankly, I mean like speaking from a person who has like only had sexual encounters with straight cis man, I just think if that sexual script was like thrown out the window, I think people would have way better sex quite

frankly. 'Cause there's no discussion about pleasure and I feel like, you know, so much of what we're kind of like, not taught to believe, but in a sense what we see on like from hearing it from other people or like seeing it in movies or whatever it's like, it feels like there's something wrong with you almost if you as a woman you can't like come from just penis in vagina sex, you know? So I think that if there was like actual discussion about pleasure and there wasn't such, you know, uh, such a heavy sexual script, I think just everyone would be having better sex quite frankly.” -Woman, group 1

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of university students’ perceptions on casual sex and hookup culture, examine whether students were aware of barriers to positive encounters, and gain insight on how we can challenge negative norms associated with casual sex to help people have more positive experiences. These three research questions went hand in hand; gaining understanding on different perceptions allowed us to acknowledge why certain barriers are in place, and then recognizing those barriers helped us identify ways that students can challenge them.

An interesting aspect of the focus groups was that participants primarily described casual sex by the aspects it does not have: no feelings, no romance, no commitment, and it would be purely for the sex. Although participants noted that communication was important in these types of relationship, the notion that casual sex has “no feelings” involved may inhibit people’s ability to communicate what they’re feeling and what they want out of the relationship. Education about casual sex and the definitions of what it can be may be a way to challenge the idea that casual sex is not a

relationship, and by association, does not require the care or respect you might give someone in a relationship

The *Understanding Hookup Culture* theme highlighted an interesting finding; the “pre-hookup script”. There was a distinct sequence of events that participants described when anticipating a hookup. In contrast to the Traditional Sexual Script, aspects from this script did not necessarily rely on gender norms, but rather on party atmospheres at university. Some even described hookups at university as being “planned”. This script may challenge the stereotype that women are sexually submissive and do not seek sexual activity. That is, anticipating a hookup seems to be a common experience regardless of gender. However, more research should be conducted to examine this “pre-hookup script”.

As demonstrated by Wade (2020), it was apparent that hookup culture was very normative on university campus. While some participants in my sample noted they felt compelled to engage in it, there was widespread acknowledgement that it was not for everyone. This indicated dissonance between the internalized pressure that students feel to participate in hookup culture, versus the actual openness in different perspectives. It is not to say that pressures felt by students are invalid, but it rather highlights the negative norms associated with hookup culture. This message about openness to different perspectives also seems to be more common than in Wade’s (2011) earlier work and is more reflective of advice given by Vrangalova about the importance of knowing whether casual sex is for you or not (Vrangalova, 2015a).

In the *Purpose of Casual Sex* theme, sexual experience was the most common positive reason for engaging in casual sex. In fact, many explained that casual sex was a

good way of exploring one's sexuality and gaining insight on their own sexual preferences. Sexual experience has been thought to be endorsed by men more so than women (Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2020; Weitbrecht and Whitton, 2020), yet the current study challenges this notion since most of our female participants noted sexual experience to be a common motive to engage in casual sex. Another common reason was validation. And although most men and women endorsed similar reasons, seeking validation through casual sex seemed to be mostly endorsed by women, which aligns with Weitbrecht and Whitton's (2020) findings.

A particular focus of this study was the barriers to positive casual sex experiences. Students identified that *Double Standards and Gender Norms* was amongst the most influential barriers to positive casual sex encounters. The negative norms associated with hookup culture thrive, in part, on the notion that women should not want to engage in a lot of casual sex, whereas men should always want to do it. The *slut = bad* and *sexually modest = good* dichotomy is evidently still present in individuals' perceptions of women sexuality (Farvid et al., 2016). Little progress has been made in dismantling the sexual double standards, even in 2022. This points towards the need for more work towards challenging societal gender norms in order to create a safe environment for women to engage in casual sex.

Additionally, the stereotype that men should always be willing to engage in casual sex needs to be dismantled, as this affects both men and women. From a heterosexual perspective, male participants expressed their discomfort with this stereotype, since it pressured them to engage in casual sex and to disregard the opinion and comfort of women. As for women, this stereotype can be dangerous and harmful

since it may lead to physical victimization (Wade, 2020). These stereotypes also have negative implications for pleasure focus encounters; if individuals rely on the notion that women don't seek casual sex, then conversations about their pleasure will surely be inhibited. Some men also seem to view women who engage in a lot of casual sex as "easy", rather than perceiving them as individuals who freely chose to have casual sex. This is particularly interesting; although casual sex is normalized, people still seem to view women as sexually submissive, and not the pursuers (Fagen & Anderson, 2012). Moreover, although all participants expressed their discomfort with double standards and norms/stereotypes, female participants seemed a lot more frustrated by them. Indeed, based on tones of voice and nods/signs of agreement, there was some sort of anger present within the female participants, which seemed to indicate more of an acknowledgement of this barrier.

Some participants also expressed that slut-shaming is often done when a man gets rejected by a woman. This supports Fagen and Anderson's (2012) work, where they highlighted that men construct their masculinity around stereotypical female sexual roles. This process may occur because women are seen as typically submissive, and men may feel as though their masculinity is being threatened when they get rejected (Fagen and Anderson, 2012). Toxic masculinity has evident implications for women's safety and should be addressed in future research.

Sex negative cultural messages was another very common barrier to positive encounters. It was evident that porn reinforced certain negative gender stereotypes and limited sexual expression and desires by focusing on male-pleasure only. Families, church, and religion were also the source of negative messaging around sex. Religion

may negatively portray sex broadly, discouraging individuals to engage in it before marriage altogether. Since the church promotes procreation as the center for sexual activity, if we are talking about casual sex specifically, there is even more shame and guilt that is imposed. Many participants shared their personal experiences with this guilt/trauma and discussed how they had to work through this added on barrier in order to have positive casual sex experiences. For those engaging in non-heterosexual encounters, there was even more shame and guilt that was felt. Conversations about sex within certain religions has evidently been harmful for some, and these individuals must often unlearn these harmful internalized ideologies surrounding sex to be able to have more positive experiences.

The role of peers seemed to mitigate, to a certain extent, an individual's relationship with casual sex. Many agreed that a friend's opinion could influence one's own opinion about whether or not to have casual sex. Vrangalova (2015a) discussed this and explained that surrounding oneself with people who do not judge their decision could decrease the chances of feelings of guilt and shame. Interestingly, different ways that peers could influence one's behaviour was very evidently gendered. In fact, when asked the question "What are your friends' perceptions on casual sex? And how does this influence your own?", most male participants immediately interpreted it as though I was asking whether peer pressure was present, and for most female participants, they immediately answered as though I was asking them whether or not their friends would judge them for choosing to engage in casual sex. This echoes Sanchez et al.'s (2012) work which demonstrated the idea that men should always want to have casual sex,

whereas women should resist it. This should be considered in future research assessing the social reinforcement of sexual norms.

Another barrier to positive casual sex experiences are the risks associated with casual sex, both physical and emotional. Many expressed that getting their feelings hurt was a risk involved when choosing to have casual sex. This, again, was somewhat contradicting; participants claimed that no feelings should be involved in a casual sex relationship, yet they mentioned that feelings very often do become involved. I suspect that this discrepancy has to do with lack of communication that surrounds casual sex relationships, which was another major barrier that was identified. Bersamin et al.'s (2014) work demonstrated an association between casual sex engagement and psychological distress; continuous lack of communication within casual sex relationships may lead to general psychological distress and could be an explanation for this relationship. However, this type of communication was seen as taboo and difficult to do. I assume that this is due to the larger taboo surrounding casual sex. Casual sex is normalized, and hookup culture is dominant at university, yet no one seems to feel comfortable talking about it.

There was also a taboo surrounding discussing sexual desires specifically. From a heterosexual standpoint, in part because of the Traditional Sexual Script, no one wants to share what they like, everyone assumes that everyone wants the same things, and no one wants to talk about it. Wade (2017) also highlighted the role of the Traditional Sexual Script in limiting casual sex communication. It may also be due to the rigid norms and social rules associated with hookup culture (Fagen & Anderson, 2012; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Communication was reportedly more prevalent in non-heterosexual casual relationships. Because of the heteronormative nature of the Traditional Sexual Script, this was to be expected (Bloom, n.d.). Although the barrier of the Traditional Sexual Script was more so defined implicitly, some participants (especially women) were quite frustrated with this set sequence of events, since it prioritizes specific sexual behaviours. Past literature claims that the Traditional Sexual Script can be helpful at times because it helps individuals know what to expect. Interestingly, in this study, those who discussed the Traditional Sexual Script had very little positive things to say about it. The barrier and limitations created by the Traditional Sexual Script only seem noticeable by those most negatively impacted by it, women having sex with men. Interestingly, the majority of participants did not know what sexual scripts were before I introduced the concept to them. Education around scripts and the benefits and barriers associated with them may help individuals challenge them by promoting more communication (rather than assuming that everyone wants the same things).

The heteronormativity embedded in hookup culture norms should be dismantled, which would allow for better communication within individuals. We should address individuals' ability to communicate their boundaries, wants, and needs, but we should also address individuals' ability to be receptive of other people's desires. The barrier is not only the inability to communicate, but also the stigmatization generally around this type of communication. Interestingly, one of the male participants linked this lack of communication to men's egos, explaining that men don't want to seem like they don't know what they're doing, so instead, they just neglect asking their partner what they

want out of the encounter. This also aligns with Farvid and Brauns (2018) data, that demonstrated that men are often more worried about their performance.

There was also a perception associated with hookup culture that individuals should feel ashamed of their acts, and should regret the encounter, which evidently, limits people's ability to feel good and positive about the encounter. In agreement with Wade (2011), this supports the idea that negative outcomes may be more so associated with hookup culture, rather than casual sex itself. Worries about one's reputation being affected after having a lot of casual sex seemed to worry female participants much more than male participants. Amongst participants, there was a lot more focus and discussion on the above-mentioned emotional risks.

Perceived physical risks were mentioned and included STIs, pregnancy, and physical/sexual harassment and assault. STIs and pregnancy were discussed close to equally amongst men and women, although in the women only groups, they seemed to think that men did not worry about these things. As for physical/sexual harassment and assault, female participants were much more wary about this, and male participants agreed that it seemed to be more of a concern for women. This finding also aligns with Farvid and Brauns (2018) findings, demonstrated that women worry about physical victimization. This type of violence can happen to any gender and be done by any gender, but I suspect that this gendered worry relies on the notion that women are socialized to be more submissive, and it might be more difficult for them to say no (Sanchez et al. 2012).

Another interesting finding that arose from the focus groups was the risk associated with attending a small university. This risk seemed to be perceived very

subjectively. Indeed, this only came up in the groups comprising mostly of first year students and also mostly female participants. I suspect that this finding can be explained by many reasons; upper year students may not be fazed by this potential risk anymore; maturity may lead to being more sex confident which may help gain sureness in one's decisions to have casual sex; or perhaps slut-shaming is more common at later high school ages leading women to worry more about this label in their first years of university. The other aspect could be that lower year students live in residence where many of their peers are aware of their sexual encounters. I am not concluding that any of these reasons are the correct explanation, as my study did not assess this. However, I encourage future research to examine this relationship to better understand the functioning of slut-shaming.

Lastly, the lack of sex education provided to students prior to university created an overarching barrier to general understanding of sex. Without proper sex education, individuals lack understanding about sex broadly, but also about things like sexual identity, sexual orientation, and pleasure-based anatomy. Lack of sex education can also lead individuals to rely on myths and stereotypes, which was shown to have very harmful implications, specifically for casual settings where people are less likely to communicate and more likely rely heavily on scripts (Wade, 2017). For example, many participants mentioned that masturbation was never talked about and was only seen as a thing that guys did. This then reinforces the notion that female pleasure should be disregarded, and male pleasure should take priority.

The final goal of this study was to identify ways in which university students can have more positive casual sex encounters. Improved communication skills and norms

seemed to be the most useful solution to help deal with negative norms associated with casual sex. In addition, previous research has shown that communication is linked to sexual satisfaction (Pukall, 2020). Improving sexual communication could be done through pleasure-inclusive sex education. If there was less taboo surrounding pleasure broadly, individuals would potentially feel more comfortable expressing their sexual desires in a casual setting. As for communication about casual relationships, there needs to be a more general understanding about the different ways casual sex can look like; this would allow for more communication, rather than assuming that casual sex relationships look the same for everyone. That is, the assumption that intentions and boundaries do not need to be communicated within casual sex relationships needs to be dismantled.

The concept of learning how to deal with rejection would challenge negative norms associated with casual sex for multiple reasons. One of the main risks associated with casual sex was the potential development for romantic and commitment related feelings. Some participants even claimed that they could not bear the idea of being rejected if feelings were not reciprocated. Developing skills to help deal with rejection well should be encouraged. The other side of this is increasing comfort with rejecting someone, since so many people find it hard to say no to someone who is interested in them. This would help individuals have more positive encounters and would also normalize respect for one another's feelings. And as Wade (2011) noted, most individuals look for respect in casual sex encounters.

Challenging the Traditional Sexual Script sparked hopeful reactions in many participants. That is, it was evident that people were bothered by the script, especially

those who's pleasure is not prioritized by it. However, there was also lack of understanding of what this script was, and many participants seemed surprised by the concept. Conversations about the sexual script should be promoted; when individuals realize it's highly influential nature, they may be more willing to challenge it if it does not suit their needs and desires.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Considering that our study comprised mostly white, heterosexual, cis-gender women, the results comparing the male and female respondents should be understood as limited. Although the comparisons made were based on apparent differences, future research should recruit a more diverse sample, to get a better and more broad understanding of the topic. Moreover, I suspect that certain perceptions and barriers may differ for people at a large university, since the participants in this study were from a specific population of university students at a small, undergraduate university. However, while they are a niche population, the results from this study echoed much of the research from other universities. Also, it would be useful to include non-university samples in future research since almost all casual sex research has been done on university samples. Furthermore, because of the nature of focus groups, the social desirability effect may have influenced certain respondents. Especially for a conversation surrounding a topic seemingly taboo, perhaps answers would have differed in one-on-one interviews. Nonetheless, I support the strength of focus groups as a research method, especially for this topic, as it allowed participants to find commonalities and validate certain personal perceptions, worries, and beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this study provided valuable insight on casual sex and hookup culture in a university context. Although students engaged in casual sex and hookups, they clearly identified the barriers and limitations to positive experiences. Many of the issues found related to positive casual sex experiences had to do with hookup culture, harmful gender stereotypes, and lack of openness to communicate. I suspect that the solution to many of these issues is more thorough education, including pleasure-inclusive sex education, education on communication skills, and education on dismantling gender stereotypes. This study provides valuable information towards creating pleasurable, equitable, and safe casual sex experiences.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Survey**

As participants arrived for the focus group, I asked them to complete the consent form and this brief demographic survey.

##### Demographic Information

- Age:
- Year of study at Mount Allison:
- Ethnicity:
- Type of high school (public, private, religious?):
- Religion:
- Gender:
- Pronouns:
- Sexual Orientation:

## **Appendix B**

### **Beliefs and Perceptions on Casual Sex Focus Group Study – Verbatim Instructions**

Sophie Landry, Supervisor: Dr. Lisa Dawn Hamilton  
Department of Psychology, Mount Allison University

Hello everyone!

My name is Sophie Landry, my pronouns are she/her and I'm a fourth-year psychology honours student here at MTA.

Lucas: "Hi! My name is Lucas Cormier, I am a third-year student here at Mount Allison studying psychology and english. I am Sophie's research assistant for her honours thesis, and I will help moderate the discussion for today's focus group."

For my honours project, I decided to conduct focus groups to learn more about students' beliefs and perceptions on casual sex. Specifically, I want to examine the influence of certain social barriers on safe and pleasurable casual sexual encounters. I am 21 years old. I am a student athlete, and I am also a sex positive sex researcher who believes that casual sex is good and okay to engage in. Of course, I also support people's right to choose not to engage in casual sex if they don't want to. In an ideal world, I believe that everyone who wishes to engage in casual sex should be able to do so in a safe environment free of guilt and shame and that casual sexual encounters should be pleasurable for all parties involved!

I am saying this because I want you all to feel comfortable to say whatever comes to mind today, because the purpose of this study is to:

- Understand what contributes to casual sex experiences being positive or negative
- Try to find strategies to help people have better experiences

Although complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because of the nature of focus groups, we ask you to not repeat any of the information discussed during the focus groups. What is said here stays here. Additionally, all comments and discussion will be kept anonymous in my written thesis report.

During this focus groups, we will be asking you a set of open-ended questions that will be used to prompt discussion. The session will be recorded and is meant to last an hour. As participation to this study is completely voluntary, you can remove yourself from the discussion at any point (e.g., leave), and you can also get up for water, bathroom... etc.

Also, certain topics that are discussed today may be overwhelming for some, so I encourage you all to check-in with yourselves and your bodies during today's focus

group. You can do so by taking deep breaths or using your senses to ground yourself. Again, as mentioned, you can also leave at any point if you wish to do so.

Before we start, here a few discussion guidelines:

1. I ask that one person speaks at a time, but I do encourage that people bounce ideas off of each other. I have questions ready, but they are really just intended to prompt discussion
2. If I feel like the conversation is going too off topic, I will ask that we move on to the next question
3. Speak in first draft. This means I encourage you to say whatever comes to mind and not worry about making it sound “right” or “smart.”

Let’s get started!

### **1. How do you define casual sex?**

*Background:* The various types of casual sexual relationships have been previously defined in literature. Wentland and Reissing (2012) categorized them in; *One Night Stands, Booty Calls, Fuck Buddies, and Friends with Benefits*

- *One night stands usually only happen one (minimal contact, no friendship)*
- *Booty calls are meant to happen more frequently, but there is still not friendship involved or personal disclosure and the contacts are usually only sexual*
- *Fuck buddies are repetitive sexual contact between people who started as acquaintances, but then turned into some sort of friendship. And the contact between them can be sexual or casual*

*Friends with benefits and people who were friends before they started engaging in sexual contacts and their type of contact is also both sexual and casual*

### **2. What does the term “hookup culture” mean to you?**

#### **a. Follow up:**

- i. Often there is a negative connotation related to hookup culture. Why do you think that is?

*Background:* Lisa Wade notes that the negative effects that come from hooking up is probably hookup culture itself, rather than just the casual sex that occurs

### **3. What would be the ideal casual sex relationship?**

#### **a. Follow up:**

- i. What type of relationship would the people have? (During the sexual encounter and/or outside the sexual encounter)

**4. What's the typical sequence of events when people hookup with one another?**

*Background: Simon and Gagnon (1986) defined what we call social scripts. He divides social scripts in three categories: intrapsychic, interpersonal and cultural... for the purpose of this study we're focusing on culture scripts. Cultural scripts apply to any type of social setting, and they are defined as the culturally appropriate course of action that people adhere to (e.g., saying hello how are you, you expect good how are you). Literature then defines sexual scripts as being a type of cultural script... so, in a hookup setting, you expect the guy to initiate, you go home, touching, kissing, clothes off, intercourse (Wade, 2017). They're helpful in a sense because they give people reassurance as to what is expected to come next... but they can also limit people's behaviors.*

**a. Follow up**

- i. We often call this typical sequence the "sexual script". What would hookup culture look like if there were no sexual scripts?

**5. How do gender stereotypes factor into casual sex?**

**a. Follow up**

- i. What are the links between gender and hookup?

**6. What are some positive outcomes of casual sex?**

**a. What do you think leads to these outcomes?**

**7. What are some negative outcomes of casual sex?**

**a. What do you think leads to these outcomes?**

**b. If not mentioned, how does gender factor into these outcomes?**

**8. Do you think people feel comfortable talking about sex with their partner(s) in a hookup setting?**

**a. If yes, how do they do it/what's the best way to go about it?**

**b. If no, why don't they?**

**9. What are your peers' perceptions on casual sex?**

**a. How do their beliefs affect your views and behaviors?**

**10. How can people communicate about just wanting casual sex without being mean? (i.e., how does someone let the person they hooking up with that they don't want a relationship, in a way that's not rude?)**

*Background: Wade (2011) talks about how even though sex is happening in a casual setting, people are still looking for trust, respect, and intimacy. Being mean to your partner shouldn't be an indicator that you're not looking for an emotional connection... nor should being nice to your partner mean that you're looking for a relationship*

That concludes all of the questions we had for today. We would like to thank you all for participating in our study and for being so willing to participate. As mentioned, I'm interested in understanding how to create a world where everyone who chooses to participate in casual sex can do so safely and pleasurably. Through Lisa Wade's research (who is a famous sex researcher), she identified three main components that individuals were seeking while engaging in casual sex: empowerment, pleasure and meaning. She found that most people were not getting any of those things!

Allison Moon, who is a sex educator, published a book titled "Getting it on: A Guide to hot, Healthy Hookups and Shame-Free Sex" which discusses strategies to help make hooking up a more positive experience. Allison Moon believes that in an ideal world, sexual sex would mean:

- Sex for sex's sake
- Pleasure-focused
- Collaborative
- In the moment
- Equitable
- Community-aware
- Exploratory

I encourage you all to read this book as it provides great insight on positive casual sex experiences.

If you have any further questions about the study, do not hesitate to email me at [srlandry@mta.ca](mailto:srlandry@mta.ca)