

## A Qualitative Enquiry into Psychological Consequences of Casual Sexual Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Casual sexual experiences are becoming common among emerging adults. With uncertainties in their career, busy work schedule, and geographic location changes, it is getting quite intense to be in a committed relationship. A lot of the existing research focuses on the negative consequences of casual sex and hardly any study has been conducted in the Indian context. This study aims to qualitatively understand the psychological consequences of casual sex and further attempts to elucidate why it happens among emerging adults in India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 individuals. Thematic analysis on the collected data uncovered four global themes to understand the psychological consequences: benefits, implications of morality and society, fear, and good feelings. The implications of the study can be used by mental health workers and educators who work closely with the young adult population.

**Keywords:** *Casual sex, emerging adults, psychological consequences, benefits, thematic analysis*

Casual sexual experiences are an evolutionary concept that is becoming more common in our society. Casual sex is the sexual encounter between partners who do not define themselves as being in a romantic relationship (Lewis et al., 2012). The emphasis here is that these experiences are outside the context of a romantic relationship. It occurs between two consenting adults, who are strangers or brief acquaintances without any commitment or emotional attachment. Casual sexual experiences can even occur as a one-night stand or in the context of friends with benefits. It can include various physical engagements ranging from non-penetrative (kissing, caressing, fondling) to penetrative (oral, anal and vaginal) acts between two consenting adults. Engaging in casual sexual behaviour is very common among college students (Correa, Castro, Barrada & Ruiz-Gómez, 2017). According to Arnett, emerging adults (ages 18-25) are characterised by exploration, instability, and self-focus in studies or work (2015). These young adults pursue casual sex as they may not feel that it is the right time to be in a romantic relationship (Rodrigue & Fernet, 2016). As emerging adults' tendency to engage in casual sex is becoming high, understanding the psychological impact of casual sexual experiences on mental and social well-being is important (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz & Maggs, 2012). A study on emerging adults

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highlighted that experimentation, sexual identity exploration, and permissive attitudes toward casual sex were all related to willingness to engage in casual non-monogamous sex (Sizemore & Olmstead, 2016).

Casual sexual encounters are replacing traditional dating (Bogle, 2008). Some of the reasons for the emergence of casual sex stated by Bogle (2008) are free-thinking styles, feminism, pre-marital sex and an increase in party culture and alcohol consumption. In the recent past, casual sexual encounters have become more of a normative behaviour among the youth and the prevalence has increased incredibly. Young adults are in the stage of life course where they are too busy for commitment, geographically mobile, and are feeling too young to be tied down (Lyons et al., 2016). Therefore, casual sex seems to be a convenient way to satisfy their needs.

There can be various motivators that lead to casual sexual encounters. Sexual behaviour is goal-directed as explained by theories of sexual motivation. It can have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation includes factors like pleasure, formation of sexual identity, insecure attachment and extrinsic motivation include factors like peer pressure, attractiveness of the partner (Kenney, Lac, Hummer, & LaBrie, 2014). Motivators of casual sexual encounters are well established through various studies. However, less is known about the psychological consequences of casual sexual encounters, which is consequently the focus of the present study.

Psychological Consequences can be defined as the mental or behavioral result or effect of the phenomenon. Research reflects that there are short-term positive and negative consequences of sex-based on daily reports among college students (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz & Maggs, 2012). Studies have reflected that the common psychological consequences of casual sexual experiences as guilt, depression, self-esteem and substance use. Some studies show that self-esteem increases while other show its decline. Casual sex has been linked to non-use of protection in party settings thereby causing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Hittner, Owens & Swickert, 2016). Due to the discrepancies in the results, it is important to study the psychological consequences of casual sexual experiences in the Indian context.

The main objective of the research is to study the psychological consequences of casual sexual experiences among emerging adults in India. The research would also further attempt to elucidate the reason for the emerging consequences. The results can also add to the literature and help mental health workers deal more effectively with clients engaging in casual sex. This study will help the mental health workers to narrow down the reasons of their client's poor mental health as they will have more knowledge about the phenomena. If the present research is able to identify positive consequences of casual sexual experiences, it can reduce the taboo and help society in accepting the casual sex culture in the Indian context.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Past research on Casual sexual experiences has been concentrated on risky behaviour, harmful side effects, the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Non-use of contraception was associated with greater odds of reporting short-term negative consequences such as greater worry about pregnancy or STIs (Oswalt, Cameron & Koob, 2005). A study on casual sexual experiences of heterosexual college students, regardless of gender, was negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing and

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positively associated with psychological distress (Bersamin et al., 2014). A positive correlation was found out between anxiety and engaging in the casual sexual experiences (Vrangalova, 2015).

Research results showed that that male students reported fewer negative consequences than female students. But then the likelihood of experiencing physical and psychological satisfaction as a result of casual intercourse was high for females (Bay-Cheng, Robinson & Zucker, 2009). Another study highlighting the gender difference stated that young women transitioning to college showed that engaging in sexual behaviour with casual partners is associated with increased negative affect (Wesche, Walsh, Shepardson, Carey & Carey, 2018).

Positive outcomes are also associated with casual sexual activity in emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who are transitioning to college, experiences a sense of freedom from parents and also get more time within peer settings getting opportunities for exploring and experimenting with their sexuality (Lefowitz, 2005). Knowing a partner well is evaluated as a positive outcome of casual sex (Lewis et al., 2012). Studies have reported a more positive body image among male college students after their first experience of casual sexual intercourse, and lower psychological distress among both male and female college students. Positive consequences more frequently reported than negative consequences by the participants (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz & Maggs, 2012). Sociosexual orientation is the willingness of the person to engage in uncommitted sexual activity. Studies on sociosexual orientation report that sociosexually oriented individuals reported higher well-being after having casual sex compared to not having casual sex (Vrangalov & Ong, 2014). Research has also shown that emotional connection with a partner during casual sex contributes to positive outcomes of the act (Strokoff, Owen, & Fincham, 2015).

Research on casual sexual relationships and experiences shows ambivalence in evaluations. Negative emotions like negative affect, regret and worry as well as positive outcomes like closeness to partner, being happy evaluations, such as being happy or feeling closer to their partners were identified (Owen & Fincham, 2011; Lewis et al., 2012; Vasilenko et al., 2012). Now we have an understanding that casual sexual experiences can have both positive and negative impacts on the well-being of an individual. While casual sexual encounter boosts positive feelings for some, it leads others to indulge in depression, guilt and all.

There has been a dearth of research done in India on casual sexual experiences. As more and more individuals are engaging in casual sexual encounters, there is a need to explore the casual sexual culture among emerging adults in India. Past researches suggest that it impacts mental well-being both positively and negatively.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Research Paradigm***

The research paradigm used in this study is Constructivism with the ontological stance that multiple realities exist and epistemological stance that knowledge needs to be interpreted to discover the underlying meaning. This study uses a qualitative research approach as this method encourages flexibility which is essential when we are studying an individual's experiences. Data was obtained through a semi-structured interview.

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### *Participants*

The sample for this research is emerging adults (18-25 years). Phase of life including late adolescence and early adulthood is referred as emerging adulthood. (Arnett, 2000). This is the period where individuals are sexually exploring and interactive. A purposive sample of 13 participants are used. The participants were not given any compensation for taking part in the study. Christ (Deemed to be University) Institutional Review Board granted approval for this study.

- **Inclusion Criteria.** The individual must be between ages 18-25 and must have engaged in at least four casual sexual encounters.
- **Exclusion Criteria.** Individuals facing severe mood, anxiety or any psychiatric disorders.

### *Data collection method*

An in-depth interview was used for data collection in this study. Qualitative interviews provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena by exploring the views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations of individual participants. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed with the review of the literature and expert opinions. Each interview lasted for 35-45 minutes.

### *Process*

The data was collected and recorded online through Zoom meetings. The first researcher herself conducted the interview sessions. The online data collection with each participant who was selected commenced with a small briefing about the study, participant's consent, followed by demographic information and then the semi-structured interview with open ended questions on the phenomenon under study. These recorded sessions were transcribed, with the participant's permission, along with notes taken by the researcher, for further data analysis.

### *Data analysis*

The collected data through the interview, researcher notes, and literature review were thematic analysed. Patterns in qualitative data is determined by thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Six steps were followed to analyse the data, beginning with familiarising oneself with the data. This took place in the form of transcribing the data and reading it multiple times. The data was then coded as the second step. General patterns and significant statements were identified to form codes. The third step was to find themes. Similar codes were incorporated to generate themes. Prevalent theme is not necessarily the theme that is seen in 50% of the transcripts, it is based on whether it captures something important for the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth and fifth steps were reviewing and naming themes respectively. A thematic framework was developed to organise the data. The emerging themes were organised into three levels – basic, organising and global. The themes that did not fit in the data set were either refined or discarded. Also excerpts from the data were selected to supplement the description of the themes. And the final step of the analysis was to produce the report.

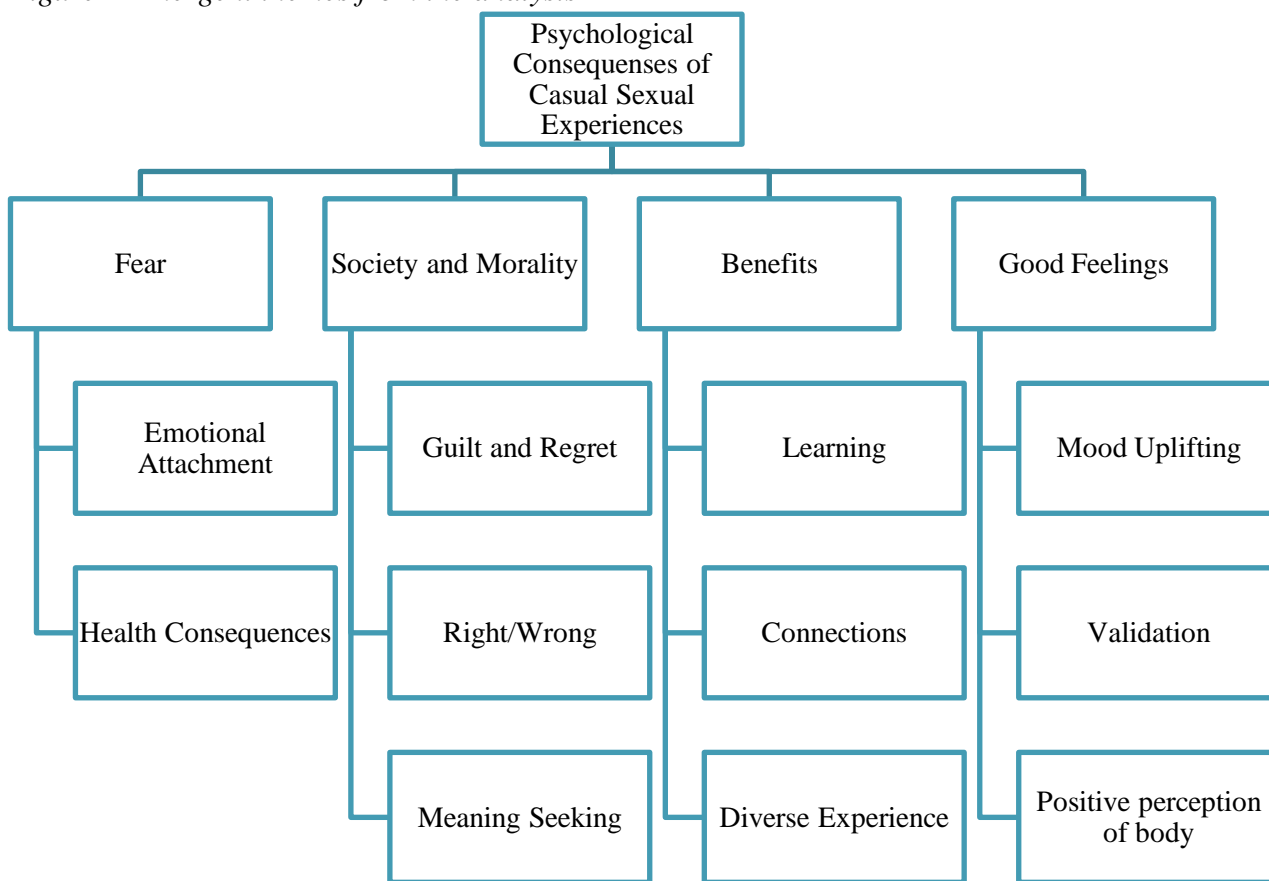
**Validity:** The collected data was validated by the member check method for descriptive and interpretive validity. Member check technique improves accuracy, validity credibility, and transferability of the collected data. The participants will critically analyse the findings and comment to ensure that the data is correctly interpreted.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Thirteen participants who met the criteria were interviewed for this study. There were five women and eight men. All of them except two identified as heterosexuals and the other two identified as bisexuals. Though the age range is 18-25, all the participants were 21 and above and all of them had finished their bachelors. None of them are married. During the time of the interview, four of the participants were in a committed relationship and they spoke retrospectively about their experiences and perspectives.

This qualitative study explores the psychological consequences of casual sexual experiences among emerging adults in India. It further looks into the cause of these psychological consequences and attempts to explain it. Thematic analysis of the data collected from the 13 participants was classified into four global themes: good feelings, implications of morality and society, benefits and fear, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Emergent themes from the analysis



**Fear**

Across participants, when enquired about the aftermath of their casual sexual experiences, fear was one of the global themes identified. Fear was seen as worries regarding pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and emotional attachment.

All the participants care about their health and were quite concerned when they engaged in casual sex without protection. The participants reported regular use of condoms or some form of protection, but with some of them, there have been at least one instance where they did not have access to protection at the time of need. During such instances, with all the excitement and impulsivity, protection was hardly a concern, but later, BB, DD, MM, GG,

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LL, and EE have feared pregnancy or the possibility of sexually transmitted infections. DD said:

When it happens at the moment with an attractive stranger, it is really exciting, but later I get scared thinking I don't even know where she is coming from or who she has been with...once I even had some itching and got multiple tests done. That was a scary incident for me.

*LL distressingly narrated her experience of fear:*

Once we didn't have condoms at that moment we wanted to do it and we couldn't stop the novel passion we had for each other. I can still remember the desire in his eyes. But the next 2 weeks, I had the biggest fear till I got my periods. Though he told me that he pulled it out at the right time, I couldn't trust the mere acquaintance. I kept thinking about the worst possible scenario and couldn't control my fear the next day. So I got the after pill, even then I couldn't be completely sure and kept waiting for my period. Never have I ever done it without protection again.

Fear of developing emotional attachment was another common response. Though everyone understands that it is a casual encounter, some of them have feared if an emotional intimacy will develop during physical intimate acts. When explored further, this fear was occurring when participants engaged with the same person multiple times or when the participant was engaging with a close friend. AA jokingly said "sex without emotional intimacy is just masturbation, it is quite natural for us feel intimate after sex, but we choose to keep our boundaries". DD said:

I love hooking up with a friend. Well, you know each other and the sense of familiarity makes me feel more comfortable. But there is always this high fear of emotional attachment and it affecting our friendship. It is quite complex, humans tend to develop close attachment when they engage sexually with someone they care like a friend.

II was finding it convenient to have sexual relation with the same partner, she said:

We were so comfortable with each other and knew what each of us wanted. It was very practical to not be in a commitment at this point when both of us are busy building our careers. Though we could have seen other people at the same time, I don't think both of us did it. When he went for a project abroad is when I realised how much I was getting attached to him. I felt like I just want to talk to him and share things. That realisation was scary...eventually I spoke to him about it and ended it. I always had clear boundaries for engagement from then.

### ***Society and Morality***

We learn most of our social behaviours through observational learning and conditioning. The idea of casual sex is also drawn from different cultures which have always existed. The organised themes that emerged in the analysis were implications of right/wrong thinking, guilt and regret and meaning-seeking.

In this era, we are exposed to things happening all around the world through social media and other digital platforms. CC said that "music and media from the pop culture actually promote and instils casual sexual experiences as a healthy form of social interaction between consenting adults" EE laughingly recalled that "book themes, music lyrics, movie plots and television shows reveal a permissive attitude to uncommitted sex. These media suggest that it is physically and emotionally enjoyable without the strings".

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In spite of the media showing a permissive attitude, a majority of the Indian society is against it. We are brought up with attitudes that suggest casual sexual experiences are wrong and considered taboo. It makes it very confusing for emerging adults as they move out of their smaller society. BB described his experience as:

Initially the society made me feel that I am doing a bad thing, something very wrong. But that couldn't stop me from engaging in it due to the other good feelings it gave me. Eventually exposure to a bigger world outside and a broader outlook normalised these for me. But I did not have to feel bad initially if the smaller community around me did not instil such negative thoughts about it.

KK expressed his thoughts as:

Society endowed me with two value systems. One focused on controlling humans and the other one was liberated counter-culture. Though the liberated life seemed easier and peaceful, everyone around me believed in the controlled system. Somehow people are enjoying the power within the community as they liked their structured life. This confused me a lot, I kept thinking about what is right and wrong. I couldn't choose what I wanted for a long time and I was under an existential dilemma for some time till I moved out of the town.

The morality that is instilled in us, viewed casual sexual experiences as negative. We have been taught that sexual intimacy happens only in marriage. Even though these views have been changing, we are always fed with the idea that sexual intimacy should always happen only after an emotional connection or intimacy. HH, EE, GG, CC and BB have all felt that guilty at some point because of they have been taught that sex outside a committed relationship is bad. GG said "it made me regret my encounter though I felt good doing it because my aunt's views on how it is meaningless affected the way I thought of myself then". GG referred her to casual sexual experiences as "bittersweet" because the bitterness comes from society making her feel "why am I doing this?" and the sweetness comes from the gratification of the act. KK said that society emphasises on 'the one', so sometimes when she engages in casual sex it makes her feel bad because she is unable to find 'the one' for her.

Few participants have also regretted engaging in casual sex because they were under the influence of alcohol. LL says "alcohol reduces one's inhibitions and it increased my receptivity towards sex. Once I had an encounter with a friend that I later regretted just because I would not otherwise sleep with him if I wasn't under the influence of alcohol". BB also mentioned that "I regretted sleeping with her because I was tipsy with my drinks. I'm sure that I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't tipsy".

### ***Benefits***

Positive consequents of engaging in casual sexual experiences are learning, experience and connections it gives. In our Indian culture, we are not explicitly taught in school or at homes about how the opposite gender is different and how we have to be sensitive to their needs. Even sex education is not common in our culture. Thus many participants have said that their casual sexual experiences have made them interact healthily with the opposite gender, understand their needs and learn about the sexual act itself. JJ said

I have never had any bad experiences from casual sex, yes there were times when I was not pleased or I did not know how to satisfy my partner, but with open communication, it was a fun learning experience always. Casual sexual experiences

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give you exposure to multiple partners and it has always been a different experience. I'm very flexible and I have learnt to easily understand what my partner needs. With few partners I was able to try things that I have never thought about, so it was all good times and fun.

BB narrated his experience emphasizing how casual sexual experiences were an opportunity for him to learn about women:

During my school days I hardly interacted with the opposite gender of my age. My school was quite conservative and I hardly had any female cousins of my age. The few women whom I have asked out during the first year of college, were also not interested in me. So when I engaged with women, it broke the barrier and I learned so much about them and how to converse. I was able to explore my sexuality, learn new things, and understand what they like. It was a great experience for me.

Making new connections was another consequence. FF said that "with many experiences of engaging in casual sex, one learns to engage in healthy casual sex, where there is open communication and both the partners are happy. When you develop such interactions, it is a way to make connections in life". Few participants mentioned positive effects on the short time result of the connections they had made. KK said that "as good as the physical act was, she was a great company. We vibed very well and I was able to open up to her, which hardly happens with me". GG recalled:

Sometimes when the sex goes well for both of us, I tend to keep in touch. Once it evolved to a great friendship. I'm so glad that I saw her at the fest and my friends dared me to hit on her. It is wonderful that we can make friends through this.

### *Feeling Good*

All the participants mentioned some kind of good feelings that kept them engaging in casual sex. Common organising themes from the analysis are mood upliftment, positive perception of body and validation.

Basic themes that lead to uplifting the mood are physical satisfaction, happiness/joy, relaxation and reduction in frustrations. All the participants mentioned physical satisfaction as a main consequence of casual sex. This physical satisfaction leads to psychological well-being by uplifting the mood. MM said "the sexual gratification instantly brightens up my mood, it should be the hormones". EE says that: "Sex makes me happy and this feeling lasts for few days, especially when this is without any constraints of a committed relationship, it makes life so much easier for me". DD narrates:

Sometimes when I am frustrated about work or family or any personal issue, sexually engaging with someone for just sex, gives me a good feeling. For some time I am able to get out of my frustrating world and feel good. And there is no commitments to this feeling good. And this break from my frustrations gives me a better mind-set to deal with the problems and frustrations in my life. It gives me such a relaxed good feeling for days.

For some participants engaging in casual sex has positively increased their perception of the body. II said "casual sex was the best remedy for reducing my insecurities about my body image after all the stupid things that peers and relatives made me believe". HH recalled

I have been rejected by few girls in college before I engaged casually. I don't know why, but then I thought it was my lean body. So, when I found women who wanted



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to engage in casual sex, my perceptions of my body became positive eventually. Engaging in casual sex made me feel attractive.

Validation is another common organising theme that led to feel good factor. AA said that “having multiple partners made me feel desired and wanted. It always boosted my self-esteem”. Few participants also mentioned that engaging in casual sex increased their confidence in the act. Compliments from partners were another source of validation for some partners. GG said “when you do it with multiple people, you gain confidence in yourself. You become good at the act and getting complimented for it definitely boosted my self-worth”.

The four global themes relating to consequences of casual sexual experiences that are identified and described here is quite contrasting to the literature review. The literature review highlighted a gender difference in the consequences, which was not clearly seen in the collected data. Also, the review had ambivalent results. This could probably be because most of the studies were done more than four years back in western countries. People’s perspectives could have evolved with time. Also, purposive sampling was used in this research which could have affected the results. The study has made it clear that in the Indian sub context, society and morality is playing a major role in shaping our experiences of engaging in casual sex. It is also seen that engaging in casual sex without protection tends to lead to immediate psychological distress due to the fear of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Sociosexually oriented people tend to benefit from casual sexual experiences by making connections, diversifying experiences and good feelings such as mood upliftment, validation and positive perception of body.

Everyone has their own sense of morality and values that are shaped by their environment and life experiences. By engaging in casual sexual activity, if it does not breach one’s sense of morality and their partner in the casual act is also on the same page and protection is used, then the chances of experiencing negative consequences are very less. But if one is brought up in a conservative system or if one tends attach emotionally during physical intimate moments, then engaging in casual sex can affect one’s psychological well-being. Shedding some moral weight, open communication, using protection and setting clear boundaries can help in building healthy casual sexual experiences.

### ***Limitations, Implications and Future Directions***

The study only focuses on perspectives of individuals who enjoy engaging in casual sex, so the results cannot be generalised. During literature review and data collection, it was noted that one’s perception of casual sexual experiences change as they grow up. Thus, adolescents would have different consequences to engaging in casual sex.

The findings of the study can be used by mental health service providers who work with young adult population. Implication of unprotected sexual activity can also be addressed in sex education classes in schools and colleges.

Future research can focus on more studies in the Indian context on casual sexual experiences among different age groups. Predictors of sociosexual orientation in India is another area that can be looked into. This same research objective can be replicated to a bigger population to gain more understanding of casual sexual experiences can also be done.

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***Conflict of Interest***

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