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Panteá Farvid, Virginia Braun & Casey Rowney

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‘No girl wants to be called a slut!’: women, heterosexual casual sex and the sexual double standard

Panteá Farvid, Virginia Braun and Casey Rowney

ABSTRACT
Recent shifts in the western cultural landscape mean that practices such as casual sex are contradictory terrains for women. Although permissive and liberal discourses construct women’s casual sex as acceptable, and even desirable, traditional discourses and a sexual double standard, do not. This article examines 15 young women’s negotiation of the sexual double standard in their talk of heterosexual casual sex. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, with borrowed insights from discourse analysis, within a constructionist framework. All 15 women in this study gave accounts of an agentic and desiring sexuality, yet talked about casual sex and a sexual reputation in contradictory and contested ways. Three main themes were identified: the (un)acceptability of casual sex, a sexual reputation is what other girls have, and the making of a slut. Although an enduring sexual double standard was identified, all participants challenged its relevance and appropriateness. However, a sexual double standard also seeped into women’s accounts when talking about other women and the threat of garnering a negative sexual reputation was linked to women’s silencing of their own casual sex experiences. This work supports the continued need to dismantle un/changing codes of gendered heterosexuality.

Introduction

Slut: ‘An immoral or dissolute woman; prostitute; a slovenly woman; a woman of loose morals’ (dictionary.com).

The term slut is currently widely used within the West, to describe girls/women whose behaviour falls outside of what is considered morally acceptable or respectable sexual or social conduct. There is no equivalent term available in the English language to describe a man who is behaving in a similar fashion. Indeed, the axiom ‘male-slut’ (or man-whore) culturally defines ‘slut’ automatically as a feminised term, in the same way that ‘male nurse’ denotes nursing as a feminised profession. Although widely used, the term slut is positioned as a terrible insult. Its use signifies a continued policing of women’s sexual and social behaviours that must now traverse the fine line between sexually desiring and oversexed ‘slut’. Such terminology is based on a sexual double standard that seems to persist even after decades of feminist and other critique (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). A sexual double standard positions men who have many sexual partners (positively) as a ‘stud’ or ‘player’ and women (negatively) as a ‘slut’, ‘skank’...
or ‘whore’ (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Jackson, Cram, 2003; Lai & Hynie, 2010; Lees, 1993; Ronen, 2010). Amidst current discourses of supposed sexual equality between men and women, it is still more socially acceptable for men to have greater numbers of sexual partners than women (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Milhausen & Herold, 1999; Muehlenhard, 1988; Ronen, 2010). Recent cultural shifts have meant a reworking of female sexuality from passive and responsive to more desirous and pleasure-focused; a context in which casual sex is a possibility for women (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Farvid, 2010, 2012, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2014). However, traditional discourses of heterosexuality remain, making casual sex a fraught and contradictory site of negotiation for women.

In this paper, we examine young heterosexual women’s experiences of casual sex, in relation to the sexual double standard. We demonstrate that although there have been some positive shifts in women’s articulation of desire for (casual) sex, the sexual double standard is implicated in, and profoundly shapes, women’s experience and accounts of casual sex.

**Contemporary female sexuality**

Representations and expressions of female heterosexuality currently occupy a contradictory domain. Unlike previous decades, women are no longer represented as chaste and passive sexual objects, with female sexuality and sexual desire fiercely promoted via multiple mediums in popular media. Women are increasingly invited to pursue uninhibited sex in a cultural landscape that is deemed ‘sexualised’ (Attwood, 2009; Gill, 2009b). Depictions of heterosexual women’s casual sex, for example, have become prevalent (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2014), with programmes such as *Sex and the City, Girls,* and *Broad City* openly depicting ‘active’ female sexuality and women’s casual sex. Attwood (2005) argues that through such depictions, views on women’s sex/casual sex have shifted from being seen as ‘dirty’ and ‘slutty’, to ‘glamorous’ and ‘chic’. Within advertising we see more ‘hyper sexualised’ images of women (Gill, 2009b), pornography has become more visible and pervasive, including an increase in its marketing to straight women (Gill, 2009a), and formerly marginal ‘erotic’ pursuits like pole-dancing have entered the mainstream as a contradictory form of exercise, entertainment and empowerment for women (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). Contemporary western culture invites young heterosexual women to embody a type of feminine identity that is sexual, sassy, and ‘up for it’ and having casual sex is part of this package (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2014).

Such representations of casual sex are heavily situated within and invoke a ‘permissive discourse’ (Hollway, 1989), and can be seen as part of current (re)constructions around female heterosexuality which position women as sexually desiring agents (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010). Although women are less likely to be portrayed as demure and passive sexual objects, and more likely to be depicted as active, independent and sexually authoritative sexual subjects, there are new pressures on women to not only be heterosexually attractive but ‘sexy’ (Evans et al., 2010), sexually knowledgeable, sexually experienced (Farvid & Braun, 2014), and available to heterosexual men for sex (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2008). In the face of these cultural shifts in rhetoric, discourse and practice, women who do not embody these identities and practices increasingly risk being classified as sexually uptight or prudish (Gavey, 2005; Walter, 2010). Conversely, those who display an openly desirous and active sexuality run the risk of being labelled promiscuous or slutty (Beres & Farvid, 2010).

**The sexual double standard**

The prevalence of a sexual double standard has been well documented, both in qualitative (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Kitzinger, 1995; Lees, 1993; Marks & Farley, 2007; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011; Stewart, 1999), and quantitative research (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Marks & Fraley, 2005; Milhausen & Herold, 1999), and is still very much implicated in wider cultural discourse of heterosexuality (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2003). The sexual double standard invokes traditional discourses of heterosexuality, such as the Madonna/whore binary (virtuous versus promiscuous), to negatively construct women’s desire for, and participation in what is socially, culturally or morally defined as ‘too much’ sex (Ussher,
The sexual double standard is perpetuated by socially constructed gender ideals or scripts that determine the ‘norm’ concerning how men and women ought to behave (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Lai & Hynie, 2010; Reid et al., 2011). Women have traditionally been caught in a quandary, where they are seen as either ‘pure and virginal or promiscuous and easy’ (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 13), based on their (perceived) sexual conduct. This binary has clearly not disappeared (Gavey, 2005). Indeed, discourses of sexual morality in what is considered liberal western cultures (such as Australia, New Zealand, UK, US and Nordic countries) continue to govern the symbolic boundaries of respectability (Fjær, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2015).

Labels such as ‘slut’, ‘slag’ and ‘skank’ are also used to refer to girls/women who dress in a particular way, wear heavy make-up, or act sexually confident (Eder, Evans, & Stephen, 1995). These terms also relate to, or draw on, class stereotypes about what constitutes a ‘trashy girl’ (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Skeggs, 2005). Such labelling fits within a social and cultural context where female sexuality is monitored and scrutinised in a way that male sexuality is not (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Lees, 1993; Reid et al., 2011). Female sexuality (sexual desire and agency) are regulated through the tool of sexual reputation (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Stewart, 1999), in ways that do not apply to men. Men are usually evaluated positively for having many sexual encounters, and are judged harshly if they fail to express overt sexual prowess and success (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). For example, among teenagers, the popularity of girls decreases with the number of sexual partners (regardless whether this occurs within the context of a relationship or not), while the popularity of boys increases with the more sexual partners they have (Kreager & Staff, 2009). Even if men are negatively labelled (e.g. man-whore or male-slut) the connotations of such comments do not carry the same cultural sting and are not always negative.

The negative judgment and labelling of women is not always based on the ‘act’ of ‘having sex’ but displaying apparent, aggressive or desiring female sexuality (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Kitzinger, 1995; Tolman, 2002, 2005). The overt expression of sexual desire continues to be constructed as a perilous domain for women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Hollway, 1995; Lai & Hynie, 2010; Ronen, 2010) and, at times, requires women to provide an ‘excuse’ to display a desirous sexuality (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Reid et al., 2011). For example, alcohol consumption has been cited as one of the primary reasons women give for engaging in casual sex (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). By citing alcohol as the reason for their ‘lowered inhibitions’, women seek to make their casual sex more socially acceptable, eschew a desirous or ‘oversexed’ sexuality, and protect themselves from the threat of negative labelling posed by the gendered sexual system they traverse (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011).

Research has indicated a juxtaposition between women’s talk of being strong and independent, with the freedom to be active participants in all areas of daily life; and yet when it comes to talk of sexuality and sexual practice, this ‘freedom’ is muted and regulated by the sexual double standard (Jackson & Cram, 2003). A sexual double standard not only shapes women’s sexuality (or expression of sexual desire) but also restricts sexual communication and safer sexual practices (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Kelly, 2001). Women refrain from initiating condom use, for example, to avoid being perceived negatively, as too sexually assertive by a male partner (Kelly, 2001; Rosenthal, Gifford, & Moore, 1998; Young, Penhollow, & Bailey, 2010). In these instances, the ‘performance of gender’ (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2013; p. 393), as mediated by the sexual double standard, becomes evident and creates the possibility for serious negative health outcomes. Although the shifting constructions of female sexuality mean that the double standard has become less stringent over the years, it still plays a significant part in the gendered expression and display of sexuality and sexual activity (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Reid et al., 2011).

**Heteronormativity, heterogender and mononormativity**

The continued expressions of gendered heterosexuality outlined above are also heavily tied to notions of heteronormativity, heterogender and mononormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the ‘normative function of heterosexuality within daily life’ (Farvid, 2015, p. 98), where a range of institutionalised social, cultural and legal practices maintain the normative assumptions that there
are only two genders and that only sexual attraction among these two genders (culminating in marriage-type relations) are natural or acceptable (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Ward & Schneider, 2009). Similarly, heterogender refers to the heterosexual norms and assumptions that delineate gender, gender roles, and specific gendered bodies (Pringle, 2008) as well as shaping everyday ideals and expressions of heterosexual and non-heterosexual relating (Farvid, 2015). Within such a context, monogamy is idealised as the best way to have a sexual relationship (Jackson & Scott, 2004; Robinson, 1997), with committed heterosexual coupledom heavily tied to notions of happiness and containment within the private sphere (Finn, 2012). This ‘mononormativity’ (Pieper and Bauer, 2005, cited in Barker & Langdridge, 2010) works to privilege life-long (romantic) ‘love’ relationships over other types of relationships (e.g. friendships or casual sex) (Jackson & Scott, 2004; Robinson, 1997), by positioning the monogamous dyad as the natural and morally correct way of sexual relating (Finn, 2012). Indeed, research has recently identified a new hierarchy of respectability (Warner, 1999) within heterosexuality, where the higher the level of emotional connection or commitment, the higher the status socially ascribed to any form of sexual relating (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Hence, sexual contact that is focused on the physical aspects of sex (e.g. one-night stands or booty calls) hold the lowest cultural status.

**Heterosexual casual sex**

‘Casual sex’ can take on many meanings and is defined in various ways within research literature (Wentland & Reissing, 2011, 2014). The term usually refers to brief or one-off sexual encounters or ongoing sexual arrangements, among individuals who are not in a ‘committed’, romantic and/or longer-term relationship with each other (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010; Bersamin, Paschall, Saltz, & Zamboanga, 2012; Eisenberg, Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, & Resnick, 2008; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Heldman & Wade, 2010; Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003; Townsend & Wasserman, 2011). Such individuals may be friends or acquaintances, or may have met on the same day as the sexual exchange (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Wentland & Reissing, 2011). Casual sexual practices can include anything from kissing, fondling, oral sex to coitus (Farvid, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2014; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), and is predicated on three common discourses and also inhabits a contradictory terrain (Beres & Farvid, 2010). A permissive discourse (Hollway, 1989) maintains that both men and women have a desire for, and a right to, engage in casual sex (Farvid, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2014), a neoliberal discourse maintains that individuals who engage in casual sex are rational beings ‘choosing’ to do so and not constrained by social conventions, structures or hierarchies (Farvid, 2010), and a moralistic discourse where casual sex is aligned with promiscuity, risky sex, and disease (Farvid & Braun, 2013). In the current ‘pro-sex’ cultural climate there is not only a cultural enticement to casual sexual pursuits (Farvid & Braun, 2013), but women who do not engage in casual sex encounters may be deemed ‘prudish’ or sexually uptight. However, as we will demonstrate, women’s casual sex is portrayed as fraught and complicated, with clear cultural limits on its acceptability as shaped by one’s reputation and social standing. Based on a permissive discourse, casual sex or ‘hook-ups’ may be considered a ‘game’ in which both men and women are active and willing participants, however as Kalish and Kimmel (2011) note: ‘[they] are playing by a different set of rules’ (p. 141).

Previous research has separately examined the sexual double standard and casual sex, and at times casual sex in relation to sexual double standard (Unger & Crawford, 1992), but has rarely looked at in-depth, contextualised accounts of women who engage in casual sex and how the sexual double standard is implicated or shapes their accounts. One Nordic study that has done so concluded that even in a liberalised social context, where casual sex was deemed acceptable, women who were perceived as failing to value their sexual safety, as well as lacking self-control or autonomy, were foisted into the category of slut (Fjær et al., 2015). Given the recent cultural shifts in female heterosexuality and greater depictions of women’s casual sex in popular media,
this paper seeks to examine how the sexual double standard, sexual reputation, and permissive discourse of (hetero)sexuality were implicated in young women's accounts of heterosexual casual sex. The themes and discourses identified in the narratives were inextricably linked in various ways and shaped contradictory account of women's experiences and impression of casual sex. As we will demonstrate, the sexual double standard worked to produce a context where silence, stigma and the threat of procuring a negative sexual reputation became associated with women's casual sex; and produced fraught accounts of femininity, acceptability and sexuality.

Method

Recruitment, participants and data collection

The data analysed here draws on interviews with 15 heterosexual women in Auckland, New Zealand. The women were aged between 19 and 25 years, and invited to talk in-depth about their experiences of heterosexual casual sex. Most identified as Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders of European decent), were university students with a variety of casual sexual experiences (see Table 1). Ethics approval was granted by the host institution and participants were recruited through advertisements and word of mouth. The advertisements asked for women 'who had previous experience(s) of casual sex', and recruited a pool of individuals that explicitly identified as someone who engaged in casual sex (Farvid, 2010). Despite concerns in recruiting women to participate in sex research (Boynton, 2003), recruitment was relatively easy. All participants were recruited within four weeks and interviews were conducted within another six week period. Participants were interviewed by the first author using a semi-structured style of interviewing. The interview questions were generally open-ended and asked about (a) what constituted casual sex (e.g. what do you define or consider as ‘casual sex’? What makes it ‘casual’? Has this always been your idea about casual sex? Where do you think you got your ideas from?), (b) the women’s first-hand experiences of engaging in casual sex (e.g. can you please tell me about a salient experience of casual sex you have had? In this instance, how did casual sex come about? Did you instigate casual sex? Why/not? What did it mean to you? Was there anything positive/negative about it? What?), and (c) the women’s perceptions of the practice (e.g. in general, do you personally think it is acceptable for women/men to have casual sex? Is there a limit to how much is acceptable? Are there differences in wanting/having casual sex between women/men? What about how society perceives casual sex – is it acceptable?). Interviews ranged from 45 min to 2 h, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim in an orthographic style (producing 869 pages of data). Transcripts were anonymised

Table 1. Participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of casual sex experiences*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jana</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pākehā/Māori</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicky</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Pākehā/Samoan</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelly</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>15 (one long-term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dani</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mel</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>5–9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Categories offered: 1, 2–4, 5–9, 9–15, 15+.
before analysis and all identifying information removed or changed. The names used below are pseudonyms chosen by the first author.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using an inductive style of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012), an analytic process driven by the data content versus researcher imposed categories. Coding involved repeated reading of the transcripts, looking for similarities, contradictions and contestations across the data-set by the first author. We focused on latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), rather than simply reporting a surface reading of the data, and were interested in the ideas, assumptions or discourses that informed the semantic content of the talk. Themes were mapped out, revised and reworked in consultation with the second author, as was the final analysis. Final analysis involved defining and naming themes, and choosing data excerpts that best represented each theme for a more in-depth analysis. In our analysis, we also occasionally borrow insights from discourse analysis when it comes to the action-orientation of the text and how the women use language to achieve particular identity representations in the interview context (Potter & Edwards, 2001).

The analysis was conducted from a social constructionist epistemological position. Reality from this perspective is seen as socially and culturally produced through language and discourses (Burr, 2003). Discourses are seen as broad sets of meaning (Sunderland, 2004) that are associated with any aspect of life and (re)produce forms of knowledge that shape people’s experiences and sense-making. Discourses that are readily available and used very often are referred to as dominant discourses. Dominant discourses tend to maintain specific power relations within society (Singer & Hunter, 1999), typically serving the interests of the already powerful. Within a social constructionist paradigm, discourses are theorised as constitutive of subjectivity, or as making available particular subject positions, that may allow for and/or constrain particular experiences, ways of being, or social practices (Willig, 1999). However, people are not merely passive recipients of discourses, but actively engage in them, simultaneously (re)shaping them as well as being (re)shaped by them (Allen, 2003a). People are also active users of discourse, and stories about particular experiences can be told in multiple ways, in different contexts.

Within a constructionist framework, interviews are approached as a context in which stories are told, in a particular way, for a particular purpose. Taking this position means that the women’s stories were read as a socially constructed exchange within the interview setting rather than an indicator of what really happened at some point in time. This approach does not focus on the material aspects of such experiences, as we are not interested in presenting these stories as the reality of casual sex for these women. Instead, the focus is on how the women talked about their ideas and experiences related to casual sex, and the sexual double standard, to access the discourses and meanings that currently circulate about women’s casual sex. We see these as forming the social realities in relation to, and through, which women’s telling of their casual sex are filtered.

Results and discussion

The overall narratives were of casual sex as something good, fun, and enjoyable for women to engage in. The women described the desire for, and the shape of casual sex as quite different to committed relationships. For example:

Becca: You have no expectations … other than just having fun for the moment … like you know that the other person isn’t gonna want a relationship out of it … you’re just doing it purely for kind of recreational sex fun kind of reasons, rather than for any kind of um stable relationship [reasons]. You can have a bit of like fun with the person but without all the strings attached.

Mel: He was extremely hot an’ a rugby player … he had the nicest hair, an’ um he was really tall an’ really muscly … it wasn’t love or anything it was lust y’know I just really wanted to sleep with him!
The women also had no trouble articulating a physical desire for sex and positioned themselves as knowledgeable about what casual sex entailed:

**Kat:** It was just one of those like, I wasn't really thinking about anything else it was just purely just for that … that fulfilment (laughs) … of that desire! (laughs).

**Rachel:** I've also heard it being said that it's just a sort of like something like you're doing to fill in time until you find a boyfriend or it's a sad way of tryna find a boyfriend … I mean ah you don't have misconceptions (Int: mnhmn), you know exactly what it is. It's just sex. A lot of people think for some reason that women just can't view sex as just purely physical sex … I mean it's not like my whole life is geared towards finding a man! (Laughing).

The women spoke of casual sex as ‘sex for sex’s sake’ and as quite separate from romance or relational desires. Despite these counter-narratives of women's sexuality (see Farvid, 2014), women's casual sex accounts were laden with contradictions, where an unfettered and desirous sexuality was not an easy position for them to occupy. We discuss these below.

### The (un)acceptability of casual sex

Drawing on a permissive discourse, casual sex was framed as acceptable for women to engage in. This was evident in non-hesitant responses by almost all 15 women when asked about their view of women and casual sex:

**Int:** In general do you personally think it's acceptable for women to have casual sex?

**Tania:** Yes, yup definitely.

**Int:** do you personally think it's acceptable for women to have casual sex?

**Laura:** Yeah definitely. I think that um just as it is for a man, it’s like there shouldn’t be any sort of difference in that whatsoever. (Int: mnhmn) but I think um, I mean each to their own, as long as you're a bit responsible and you're not affecting anyone else … [like] hurting other people maybe (Int: mnhmn) … but yeah in terms of a woman specifically I think that’s fine.

The women's initial reaction to direct questions on the acceptability of casual sex produced unequivocal responses (Farvid, 2014). While the permissive discourses constructed casual sex as acceptable for women to engage in (as long as no one was to get hurt and the sex was freely chosen), when questioned further, there was still an undercurrent of ‘unacceptability’ in the women's accounts, informed by a sexual double standard. For example, as the following extract illustrates, when questioned in relation to men's casual sex and supposed societal views around casual sex and women, the responses were more ambivalent:

**Int:** So in general, do you personally think it’s acceptable for women to have casual sex?

**Kat:** Yeah.

**Int:** And how about for men? Do you personally think in general it's acceptable for men to have casual sex?

**Kat:** Yeah I think it’s more acceptable for men to have casual sex than it is for females. So females carry that stigma … whereas guys it's you know, they have that stereotype, guys are the studs and the females are regarded as whores or sluts or whatever … I'd say it’s more acceptable for guys to have casual sex than it is for females yeah (coughs).

**Int:** And … you think that's still prevalent now?

**Kat:** (Overlapping) yeah definitely. Yeah that still exists (Int: hmm). But I dunno, in the next probably ten years it'd be more acceptable (laughs).

The women's personal views were depicted as more egalitarian and liberalised than broader societal ideals. Kat's initial assured and minimal response about her personal views is followed by a more societal-level evaluation. By invoking a stereotype of men as studs and women as whores or sluts in relation to casual sex, Kat articulates this as common cultural knowledge – a double standard where
women, and not men, may be labelled negatively for engaging in casual sex. The use of the word stigma, a societal-level evaluation, contrasted strongly with the accounts of personal views on casual sex. A societal sexual double standard was identified by all 15 participants in their accounts of casual sex. As in Kat's extract, a sexual double standard was often implicated when the women were asked if it was acceptable for men to have casual sex in comparison to women:

**Int:** Is there a difference between guys' and girls' experiences like when it comes to casual sex?

**Jana:** I think there is yeah. Like I think that, of course there's that whole thing like when a guy has casual sex it's like, oh y'know he can talk about it and stuff, but when a girl does it, if a girls like says oh y'know I just had sex with this guy whatever, everyone's sort of like either errr y'know like that's just wrong sorta thing, or it's y'know like the girls and boys get treated a lot different when they say they've had casual sex experiences, y'know?

**Int:** And um how would you how would you explain the difference like in peoples' responses do you think?

**Jana:** I think it's just like yeah (pause) just sort of a sexist double standards! (Both laugh). Y'know guys are like oh … I like had sex with like twenty girls like last week or something … it's like 'yeah I'll buy you a beer!' Y'know? But like even girls will be like oh that guy's really cool because he scores heaps of chicks and stuff. (Int: really? hmm) … To another girl they'll be all like, y'know that's just you're just a slut y'know? … There's that whole thing that you say, like when you ask someone how many people you've had sex with like a girl like halves it but a guy doubles it (both laugh).

The women problematised the validity of the sexual double standard, constructing it as a sexual injustice. In this extract, Jana does this by calling the double standard ‘sexist.’ The dismissive way in which Jana addresses the use of labels such as ‘slut’, work to undermine this construction as a valid worldview and approach to life. In addition, Jana also mentions talk in relation to casual sex. The notion of the difference in how much men and women talk about casual sex also conjures up a particular gendered aspect of casual sex based on the sexual double standard. While the permissive discourse ostensibly works to ‘equalise’ casual sex, the sexual double standard and gendered expectations around how men and women should behave sexually were implicated in relation to talk around, and display of, women's casual sex. Within this and other accounts, individualised and permissive ideals about the ‘individual’ were clashing with supposed (gendered) social ideals around (casual) sex. For example, as illustrated in the response below, casual sex was often framed as an individual choice – everyone should have the right to (appropriate amounts) of casual sex, based on their individualised sexual desire (or biological sexual drive) for casual sex:

**Int:** Do you think there's a difference in how much casual sex, men and women want?

**Mel:** I mean people would tend to argue that men are hornier and want sex more than women, but it just depends on their hor-hormones I guess. So it could be either way, like y'know um, what's the word, libido? … Like I for instance have quite a high sexual libido for a woman I think, so I've been told … I'd say generally men would want more casual sex but again it just depends on the sexual libido of the person.

While the desire for casual sex was often portrayed as an individual's prerogative – there were subtle gendered confines applied to women's talk around (and display of) casual sex:

**Int:** How about in terms of the differences in sexes, would you say ah men and women there's a difference in how much they want casual sex?

**Dani:** Um, women want it just as much as men do, they just don't talk to their mates about it so much, and the women seem to keep it a lot quieter (Int: mn) so you don't know about it as much. (Int: hmm) Um whereas with men, get them in a pub and they'll say oh you know, I did this last night or whatever. (Int: mn) Um just all the boasting bullshit to up themselves in their mates' eyes. Whereas woma-women just kinda keep it a lot quieter.

Dani argues that women desire casual sex to the same degree as men (who, presumably want casual sex a lot), but that they do not boast about their casual sex ‘conquests’ like men supposedly do. Dominant manhood is bound up with a certain kind of highly active and successful heterosexuality.
Dani describes men working to bolster this image to friends in moments of male bonding (Flood, 2008). But according to her, women’s identity is enacted differently – there is no demand to talk about personal sexual experiences in the same way as men (particularly casual sex). Traditional gender(ed) ideals demand silence in relation to women’s casual sex experiences. This silence was indicative of subtle but present codes of what constitutes appropriate femininity, (sexual) behaviour and talk. Based on a sexual double standard, it was directly linked to garnering a negative or tarnished sexual reputation:

- **Int:** Why do you think women would sort of maybe refrain from talking about their casual sex experiences or casual sex in general?
- **Alex:** Um because of the whole thing with well what a slut you know! (laughs)
- **Int:** Why do you think there’s that difference between talking about it?
- **Dani:** Because the girls don’t want the rep. (Int: hmm) It’s always been if a guy is getting a lot he’s considered a stud if a woman’s getting a lot she’s a slut, (Int: hmm) and that’s slowly changing like we in [her place of work] a lot of the guys we just straight out called them sluts (Int: laughs) they weren’t studs they were sluts (Int: hmm mn) but it was still kinda a badge of pride, (Int: mn) it was a badge of honour, that ‘oh yeah the girls are calling me slut man woo hoo’ (Int: mn) ‘I’ve had a lota women’ (Int: mn) um but yeah it comes back to their reputation a stud or a slut (Int: hmm) um and no girl wants to be called a slut!

In problematizing the sexual double standard in relation to casual sex, labels such as ‘slut’ were constructed as negative and powerful. While casual sex was deemed acceptable by the women, the silence around their casual sex demonstrated the gendered confines of a sexual reputation for them (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Women were at risk of being judged negatively for displaying or freely talking about (casual) sex (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Stewart, 1999; Tolman, 2002) in a manner that, according to them, did not apply to men. The use of labels such as ‘slut’ when referring to men had a positive connotation, while this was definitely not the case for women (‘no girl wants to be called a slut’).

The fear of garnering a negative sexual reputation also policed who the women talked to about casual sex:

- **Kat:** Usually I really only talk about it with like some of my close friends, like I wouldn’t just go and talk like if I’ve if I’ve hung out with whoever for a couple of times I wouldn’t sort of not brag but I wouldn’t talk to them about what I do. (laughing) (Int: hmm) I would just talk to just my closest friends about it purely probably only because I trust them and we’ve just because our relation- it’s quite a strong relationship, and that’s probably the only reason why I’d probably talk to them about it and not somebody else.

Due to an enduring sexual double standard, talking about casual sex (and things like pleasure and desire) may only occur in a context where women will not be negatively labelled as a result of such disclosures (Allen, 2003b). Talking about (casual) sex is portrayed by Kat as a private affair, only to be shared with those well-known to her. The information is something that could be damaging if made public. So while it is acceptable to be open about casual sex encounters with some people, the disclosure of such information needs to be carefully managed as to avoid a sexual reputation.

**A reputation is what other girls have**

The way in which the women talked about a sexual reputation was multi-faceted and contradictory. All women reported they had considered their own sexual reputation (in relation to casual sex) at some point. But when asked if they worried about their sexual reputation, women often gave ambivalent responses:

- **Int:** Have you ever thought about your sexual reputation with regards to having casual sex?
- **Shelly:** Yeah definitely.
Hmm and has that ever concerned you at all?

Oh yeah it has but it hasn't at the same time so it depends on (clears throat) it's just ... sometimes I'm you know it depends on who the person is that I think knows ... like whether and what I think they think so and then again what I think of them (laughs) so like (Int: yeah) you know if I care or not so yeah ... it doesn't it does I dunno yeah it varies yeah there might be (Int: hmn) some points but then it just proves you wrong as well so

So if it does worry you why would it worry you in a certain instance?

Ah oh it just (pause) did I wanna sleep with him really (laughs) you know (laughs) oh did I really need to do that?

Yeah but is it more of like what other people think or what you think?

Um it's what I think other people think and what I think of that (Int: hmn) it's yeah it is what it is what people think and it isn't what people think.

This extract demonstrates the tension and unease, discussions of sexual reputation provoked. A tension was often evident between what the women desired and how this could reflect on them as a person and impact their sexual reputation. While many reported the sexual double standard was unfair, and that it should not worry them what others think, having a sexual reputation was subtly, and sometimes overtly, a reported concern for most. In her account, Shelly oscillates between feeling at ease and being concerned about what other people might think of her sexual conduct. Her concern is dependent on who might know this information; indicating that in specific situations (or with certain people) she did consider having a sexual reputation as important. This highlights an extremely fraught sexual landscape for women to negotiate – between views of casual sex as acceptable for women, their understanding of social codes of how much casual sex is acceptable and managing perceptions of others, in relation to displaying one's sexuality.

The way in which the women in this study negotiated sexual reputation was one of the most interesting and complex aspects of the data. A sexual reputation was reported as a 'concern' to all participants (the women did not want a reputation as a slut or easy):

Is sexual reputation a concern for you?

Yup definitely. umm yeah I think it's just I think it's something that's definitely around for women that just isn't there for men. This idea of, umm yes, being easy or having slept round with a lot of people. I mean I've thought about it, I don't think I would have that because I haven't ... had sex with many people.

Being seen as easy, having slept around and getting a reputation is portrayed as an undesirable subject position for a woman. Tania distances herself from such an identity position by saying that she has not had sex with many people (however that is quantified). It is clear that a present risk for Tania, in the interview context, was being deemed as someone who has a sexual reputation.

Some women initially constructed a sexual reputation as not a concern and as not applying to them. However, as the interview progressed, their accounts became more contradictory:

Have you ever thought of this idea of sexual reputation in relation to having casual sex?

Um not really 'cos like I guess (laughing) um, sort of because you know, some girls at like the club that I go to, like they have sexual reputations purely because um they put it on. A lot of people at the same time and generally everybody talks about it and knows about it whereas (inbreath) um, with the people that I've been with like, I'm I'm, I get picky and I kinda make it known that it's not to be talked about if you know what I mean? (Int: hmm) Like don't talk to everyone about it sort of thing so (hmm) yeah I guess in that way like a reputation would be ... because I wouldn't wanna be talked about like (Int: mm) they talk about the girls (Int: hmm) yeah like the girls talking about (laughing) girls which is really funny 'cos they're doing the same thing (Int: hmm) um but I guess I'm a bit more discreet about it and not so much talked about.

Okay so (pause) have you ever specifically thought about your sexual reputation for yourself?
Kat: (Overlapping) Oh it does worry, it does worry me. Like with people like talking about it like I would hate to be talked about (Int: hmm), um in the same context as how the other girls are talked about. I'd hate for somebody to say oh you know she's real easy and she'll just sort of go with anything whatever sort of thing. (Int: hmm) Because I'm so not going for everything (laughs). (Int: hmm) I'm very fussy! (Laughing) (Int: hmm hmm) Um so yeah I guess that would concern me but um I haven't really thought about it I mean I think it's healthy (laughs)

Int: Um what sorry?

Kat: (Overlapping) Sexu- like my sexualness is (Int: hmm hmm) pretty healthy like um but yeah I'm not like a nymphomaniac or anything like that (laughs).

While initially portraying a sexual reputation as something she has given little thought to, Kat later notes that having a sexual reputation would be a concern. Kat describes certain things that differentiate her from the type of person who would have a sexual reputation (e.g. being picky versus easy, and being discreet versus ‘putting it on’). In contrasting these behaviours, Kat touches on two dimensions or types of female sexuality – victim versus agent. The girl who chooses her casual sex partner carefully (i.e. picky) versus the girl who goes along with anyone (i.e. easy). Easy girls are subtly depicted as victims who go along with sex and have no agency, whereas Kat positions herself as the agent in choosing the men she desires for casual sex. The women distanced themselves from having a sexual reputation by using a number of subtle discursive strategies. Other women also noted behaviours that would supposedly, legitimately, render someone a ‘slut’. These were: sleeping with ‘random’ or just-met partners, sleeping with a different person each night or every weekend, having casual sex to boost one’s self-esteem, and having casual sex to garner affection. These were relayed as the wrong way to do casual sex and were very much linked to broader constructions of what constitutes good casual sex versus bad casual sex (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Bad casual sex is unhealthy and damaging and Kat constructs her level of sexualness as healthy, versus diseased (nymphomaniac). Nymphomania ‘resonates with a sense of the insatiable sexuality of women, devouring, depraved, and diseased. It conjures up an aggressively sexual female who both terrifies and titillates men’ (Groneman, 1994, p. 337) and is used here by Kat to position her sexuality as normal. Additionally, linking back to the notion of silencing, Kat argues that it is not engaging in casual sex that can give someone a reputation, but rather ‘talking’ about having casual sex, or displaying a visible sexuality leads to a negative reputation. While the women problematized the existence of a sexual double standard and disputed the validity of labels such as ‘slut’, they often referred to other women, who engaged in certain types of casual sex as rightly procuring such negative labels:

Int: Have you ever thought about your sexual reputation in relation to having sex?

Nicky: (Overlapping) yeah at thirteen (laughs)

Int: Thirteen oh okay (laughing)

Nicky: That's the number (laughs)

Int: So um is it a concern for you at all?

Nicky: Yeah.

Int: Yeah.

Nicky: Just yeah just in my own head (mn) and yeah.

Int: Why do you think it's a concern?

Nicky: Um I guess it's that whole kind of skanky-ho sort of aspect. But I don't think I'm a skanky-ho, (Int: laughs) um so yeah, it's more just being aware (Int: hmm) of that whole thing and um like one of my girlfriends that I was hanging out with last year, through that whole phase (Int: mn), she I'd probably actually term her as a skanky-ho … just her actions towards guys and her flirting, but she doesn't sleep with them.
Nicky’s account demonstrates the clear and present ‘danger’ women face when engaging in casual sex. The possibility of gaining a sexual reputation is very real and Nicky sets her limits at 13 casual encounters. The notion that a sexual reputation is what other girls have has been noted by others; young women often use these labels when referring to ‘other’ women, who display particular behaviour, even in the absence of ‘sex’ (Lees, 1993; Tanenbaum, 2004). This labelling has also been identified as encompassing a class factor, particularly in the UK context where stereotypes regarding the ‘trashy girl’ abound (Ringrose et al., 2013; Skeggs, 2005). The New Zealand sexual landscape tends to be less class stratified and the categorising discussed in the interviews was less about class and more about the ostensibly unacceptable behaviour of individual women of any class. This ‘othering’ of sexual reputation draws on the traditional notions of two types/groups of women – a modern rendering of Madonna/whore complex (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Ussher, 1989). The women used it to make a (negative) evaluation of other women’s sexuality, while maintaining a respectable one themselves:

Anna: Yeah I don’t like I’d ever consider myself as loose. I wouldn’t say that I was you know out there and banging each weekend and things like that. You know, ‘cos I haven’t slept with shitloads of people
Int: Is it a concern for you like you the idea of your sexual reputation and what other people might say?
Anna: To some extent I suppose yes, ‘cos um like I say I don’t want people thinking … I’m like a slapper or a Shank or um little hoebag, (laughs) like I’m definitely not for sure. Um just like the whole idea of with some a different person each week and things like that (Int: hmm) but I mean that’s the extreme.

‘Too’ much casual sex (framed here as ‘banging each weekend’) was often portrayed negatively, and as deserving of derogatory labels such as loose, shank, or little hoebag. So while the woman generally framed casual sex as acceptable, good and fun, their accounts implied that there are limits to how much casual sex is deemed appropriate to engage in, even by their own standards. We are not suggesting that women need to or should engage in unlimited casual sex; simply that the framing of women’s casual sex here was bound up in the sexual double standard, sexual reputation and negative labelling and worked to produce a very clear line between women who do casual sex ‘right’ and those who do it wrong. Such a discourse works as a modern version of the Madonna/whore binary and demarcates those who are ‘liberated’ (rightly sexed) and those who are ‘depraved’ (wrongly sexed).

The making of a slut

Closely connected to the notion of a sexual reputation and the modern rendering of the Madonna/whore binary, was the issue of ‘how much’ casual sex is acceptable:

Tania: I think there’s definitely umm an attitude amongst guys and girls, I mean girls look at other girls and consider them as ‘sluts’ or whatever, (Int: hmm) but guys as well, where they definitely seem to have two categories of girls and they have girls that are either their friends or their girlfriends, or whatever they think of as not like that, and then there’s girls that like once they’ve slept with too many people or whatever, they just get resigned to this group of ‘sluts’. And it’s really bad, cause I’ve even caught myself thinking about people in that way myself and I go ooh that’s really bad … that’s really bad that we still consider it y’know still that different level for y’know double standard for women and men when it comes to how many people you’ve slept with.

The women were quick to point out that the negative labelling of women who engage in what is considered ‘too much’ casual sex continues to be an issue. Tania spoke about a threshold (of sexual partners) beyond which women fall into ‘sluthood’. Although judging others was constructed as less than ideal (based on liberal and permissive discourses), it was reportedly hard to escape (an act that many women talked of catching themselves doing).

In a few accounts, women who engage in ‘too much’ sex were constructed negatively as being abnormal or even damaged:

Lara: I have been umm around some women that kind of have to [have] casual sex for like their, they kind of bring home like a different stranger every night kind of. In some ways I do feel, and I think other people share that opinion, that their kind of trying to umm umm like they have very low self-esteem
and they need to be paid reassurance form men to feel good about themselves. (Int: hmm) I think that it probably has a negative, more of a negative outcome in those in those situations.

**Int:** Do you think that they themselves have stuff going on or do you think they’re happy about the situation, y’know they feel this is good for me?

**Lara:** No I don’t think that they’re happy about the situation. I don’t think they’re completely honest to themselves about the situation and in the situation I find they quite often lie about who they’re sleeping with and who they’re not sleeping with.

**Int:** Well why would you say they’d want to hide it?

**Lara:** I’d say it was the reputation thing but I’d also say it’s because inside they know it’s something that’s wrong with them as well.

Lara notes that women who sleep with different strangers every night have underlying emotional issues with self-esteem and look to use sex as a means to make themselves feel worthy or desired. She argues that too much casual sex is associated with emotional problems, not being honest with oneself and pathologises this as ‘abnormal’. Pathology and casual sex are often coupled in scientific (Farvid, 2011) and media accounts (Farvid & Braun, 2013). In particular, women who engage in too much casual sex are painted as ‘unhappy souls’ who (unsuccessfully) use casual sex to find happiness. In this account, dialogue around bad casual sex likened it to sexual addiction – a pathological pursuit of sex which is compulsive, not pleasurable, and a form of emotional or psychological damage (Reay, Attwood, & Gooder, 2013). In this way, other women’s bad casual sex was individualised, pathologised and psychologised; reflecting the neoliberal and medicalised cultural context within which individual action in relation to sex is evaluated (Tiefer, 2004).

**Conclusion**

The accounts analysed here speak to a very contradictory and contested terrain when it comes to women’s talk of heterosexual casual sex. At the outset, casual sex was framed as being pleasurable and acceptable for women to engage in and a sexual double standard in relation to casual sex was directly challenged by all the women. The notion that society judges women harshly, holding them up to a different standard of sexual behaviour to men, was seen as an incorrect sexist injustice. The threat of garnering a negative sexual reputation however, was linked to the women’s silence around their casual sex experiences and overt displays of sexuality. It was evident that the sexual double standard was at work through the tool of the sexual reputation to produce particular forms of reported (casual) sexual behaviour. The women worked hard to convince the interviewer they themselves did not have a sexual reputation – indicating that such a reputation had negative identity implications and was not desirable, even in the interview setting. Whilst judging women for their sexual conduct was depicted as problematic – further probing, lead to accounts of how the interviewees judged the casual sex behaviour of other women. Certain types of casual sex display were talked about as not acceptable and rightly procuring someone (although, never them) a negative sexual reputation; including labels such as slut, whore, and skank.

So whilst women critiqued the sexual double standard, the double standard also seeped into their accounts and in the way they talked about other women. A sexual double standard, as a discourse, and a form of judging women for displaying certain forms of sexual behaviour was hard to escape – even by women who were aware and critical of it. Silencing one’s casual sex experiences, although deemed sexist, based on the sexual double standard, was one of the ways the women differentiated themselves from women who had negative sexual reputations. In the fraught terrain of women’s heterosexual casual sex, this was one strategy used to maintain a respectable sexual image. A sexual reputation was constructed as something that ‘other’ girls had based on a modern rendering of the Madonna/whore binary – for women there were appropriate (occasional, chosen, being picky, safe/responsible, not hurting others) and inappropriate (frequent, with strangers, being easy, doing it for reasons other than...
sexual fulfilment) ways of doing casual sex. Such reports work to demarcate the changing but clear boundaries around respectable contemporary femininity, when it comes to (casual) sex, one where the sexual double standard still works to police women’s sexual behaviour, talk, dress and conduct. This discourse of a sexual double standard has prevailed through years of feminist and other critique and continues to shape women’s experiences and accounts of (casual) sex – even when women positions themselves as aware and highly critical of the discourse.

In order to alter the sexism at the heart of the sexual double standard some radical reimaginings of heterosexuality, female sexuality and women’s casual sex are (still) needed. As it stands, the heteronormative cultural backdrop and gendered scripts of sexuality continue to produce a context where casual sex is a fraught, contradictory, uncomfortable and contested terrain for heterosexual women, even amidst discourses of desirous female sexuality. We suggest some possible solutions here. Firstly, although engaging in, representing or discussing non-monogamous sex has become more acceptable in the contemporary context (Farvid, 2012), the evident societal discomfort with (women’s) casual sex should be put under greater scrutiny (Farvid & Braun, 2013). There also needs to be a critique of the modern modes of pathologising and psychologising behaviours that do not fit gendered or relational norms. Additionally, an understanding of sex/sexuality as more fluid, contextual and not bound up with permanent identity implications should be bolstered. This would aid the dismantling of binary gender identities and sexualities; thereby promoting diversity in when, how, why, and with whom, people have sex. Lastly, individuals also need to reflect on their own self-regulation and regulation of others’ behaviours, based on social and cultural codes of respectability (which are highly gendered). These suggestions reflect rhetoric that has been typical of feminist and queer discourse for years, but it seems they are still relevant and necessary, in the face of relentlessly rigid and un/changing gendered heterosexuality.

Note

1. A booty call is typically defined as a call or text late in the evening or in the early hours of the morning, purely for the purpose of meeting for sex.

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Notes on contributors

Panteá Farvid is a senior lecturer in Psychology at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. Her work includes examining the intersection of gender, sexuality, power, culture and identity. She has worked on projects examining the social construction of heterosexual casual sex, contemporary heterosexualities, the New Zealand sex industry (e.g. media representations of prostitution, men who buy sex) and ‘cyber intimacies’ (e.g. online dating, mobile dating, ‘sugar dating’). She is also working in collaboration with Auckland City Public Libraries to develop a ‘Teen Empowerment Programme’ for New Zealand youth and has an interest in Middle-Eastern and Iranian sexualities.

Virginia Braun is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, at The University of Auckland. Her work spans the areas of gender/critical, social and health psychology and current research project include The Social Contexts of STI Transmission and Discourses of (Hetero)sexual Health and Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery.

Casey Rowney completed her Bachelor of Health Sciences Honours degree in psychology at Auckland University of Technology in 2012.

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