



Why do women regret casual sex more than men do?

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ABSTRACT

Sex differences in sexual regret are found to be robust across nations. Participants in Norway (N = 547) and the United States (N = 216) reported their level of regret for their most recent casual sexual experience. Participants also reported on proximate factors hypothesized to predict casual sex regret: negative emotions (worry), feeling pressured to have sex, low sexual gratification, partner's sexual competence, and to what extent they initiated the sexual encounter.

Results suggest that greater feelings of worry, experiencing disgust, and feeling pressured to have sex predicted more regret for casual sex. In contrast, experiencing higher levels of sexual gratification, finding the partner to be sexually competent, and being the one taking the initiative predicted less sexual regret. Predictors of casual sex regret were not moderated by nation. However, relative to men, most of these predictors had a stronger impact on women's likelihood of regretting their most recent casual sex encounter. Discussion focuses on disgust, the key predictor of sexual regret, addresses limitations of the current study, and suggests future lines of research.

1. Introduction

Regret, an emotional response to counter-factual cognitive processing, may be an evolved adaptation designed to reduce the likelihood of repeating past errors (Galperin et al., 2013). Although there do not appear to be sex differences in regret in general (Roese et al., 2006), consistent sex differences emerge in the domain of sexual regret (Galperin et al., 2013; Kennair, Bendixen, & Buss, 2016). These findings suggest that regret regarding sexual behavior may be a specific domain in which men and women have faced somewhat different adaptive problems. Regret may be uniquely important in regulating sexual behavior (Kennair et al., 2016), as sexual regret can have substantial psychological and emotional consequences (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012).

Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), building on (Trivers, 1972) seminal insights on how differences between the sexes in minimum obligatory parental investment influence behavior, provides the basis for the hypotheses about the psychology of sexual regret. Specifically, it predicts that women are more likely to regret decisions to engage in casual sex whereas men are more likely to regret decisions *not* to engage in casual sex. Women bear greater costs of poor choices of sexual partners, since their minimal investment in offspring is greater

than men's minimal obligatory investment. In contrast, men's reproductive success has, through the history of human evolution, primarily been limited heavily by sexual access to fertile women. Therefore, while women are predicted to regret a poor choice of sexual partner or casual sex with a partner who is uninterested in committing to a long-term relationship, men tend to regret passing up sexual opportunities, especially those that require little investment (Bendixen, Asao, Wyckoff, Buss, & Kennair, 2017; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012; Galperin et al., 2013; Kennair et al., 2016). These predicted sex differences have been robustly confirmed. Sex differences in sexual regret have been documented even in highly gender egalitarian nations and the level of sexual regret is not influenced by religiosity (Bendixen et al., 2017).

Galperin et al. (2013) suggested that men regret casual sex less than women because men experience greater sexual *gratification*. Kennair et al. (2016) investigated the effect of three domains of gratification: physical pleasure, orgasm and orgasm importance on casual sex regret in a Norwegian, sexually liberal sample. They found that more physical gratification was associated with less sexual regret of the most recent casual sex encounter. Report of higher sexual pleasure for last actual casual sex experience was associated with more regret having passed up an opportunity for casual sex. While men reported significantly more physical gratification than women, individual differences in

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experiencing physical gratification affected both sexes' sexual regret, and did not account for the sex difference.

Galperin et al. (2013) also hypothesized that worry about pregnancy may account for the sex difference in casual sex regret. Kennair et al. (2016) expanded upon this worry hypothesis by considering the effect of three domains of worry: pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual reputation. They found that worry about pregnancy or STIs did not predict sexual regret. Interestingly, worry about reputation was positively associated with regret of having had casual sex. However, none of the three worry domains accounted for the sex difference in casual sex regret.

Another source of negative affect in sexual relations may be the experience of *disgust*. Tybur, Lieberman, and Griskevicius (2009) proposed three domains of disgust: sexual, pathogen and moral. Women have greater disgust responses, and this sex difference is especially strong in the domain of sexual disgust (see Al-Shawaf, Lewis, & Buss, 2017, for a review). Short-term sexual encounters may encompass all three forms of disgust, as one may contract an STI, find the sex itself disgusting, or believe the one-night-stand immoral. Individual differences and sex differences in sexual regret may be affected by disgust following casual sex (Kennair et al., 2016).

One factor that has been suggested to predict especially women's likelihood to engage in casual sex is their perception of a hypothetical partner's *sexual skill* or *competence* (Conley, 2011). Although this is expected to correlate largely with sexual gratification (Galperin et al., 2013; Kennair et al., 2016), perhaps having had casual sex with a sexually skilled partner reduces sexual regret, particularly in women, as there might be greater variance in gratification among women due to partner's competence than among men. Corroborating evidence comes from Fisher et al. (2012), who found that women who reported having had high quality sex experienced less negative emotions following a casual sex experience.

Negative emotions also may be experienced if one has been *coerced*, *coaxed* or *pressured* into having sex. Being pressured is one of the many sources people report for engaging in sex, albeit a less frequent one than sexual desire and sexual gratification (Meston & Buss, 2007). Engaging in sex resulting from feeling pressured or obligated has been linked to a short-term mating orientation (Kennair, Grøntvedt, Mehmetoglu, Perilloux, & Buss, 2015), as are many forms of sexual harassment (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017; Kennair & Bendixen, 2012). Even though being subject to pressure might reduce personal responsibility, being pressured might still predict counterfactual mental processing and wishes that the sexual encounter had not taken place (Kennair et al., 2016).

Finally, relative to women, men take the *initiative* in having sex approximately twice as often, both in couples and in casual sex encounters (Grøntvedt, Kennair, & Mehmetoglu, 2015; Impett & Peplau, 2003). It is unclear whether taking the initiative would reduce or increase regret. If one has taken the initiative and the choice is bad then regret might be higher. Conversely, perhaps people will report reduced retrospective levels of initiative if they regret the sexual encounter in hindsight.

1.1. The current study: aims and predictions

We seek to answer the following two questions: (1) What individual differences predict increased or decreased casual sex regret, and (2) Do these predictors differ in their effect for women and men? More women than men regret casual sex, and some predictors of casual sexual regret identified in recent studies shed light upon why women regret more. However, our knowledge of proximal psychological factors that may affect feelings of regret following casual sex is still relatively scarce, and a more comprehensive examination of these is warranted.

First, we aim to replicate findings from Kennair et al. (2016) considering the effects of worry and sexual gratification on casual sex regret in two samples from different nations. Further, the current research

tested several novel predictors previously unexamined. We predicted that two factors would increase casual sexual regret: (1) disgust and (2) being pressured into having sexual relations; whereas two other factors would decrease casual sexual regret: (3) taking the initiative in having casual sex and (4) partner's sexual competence will decrease sexual regret. While in anthropological terms the differences between Norwegian and US culture may be small, the differences that do exist between the two cultures in sexual liberalism, secularism, and gender equality may be especially relevant for studies of casual sexual regret (Bendixen et al., 2017).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

2.1.1. Norwegian sample

Nine hundred and twenty-nine students (560 women, 369 men) were recruited from a university in Norway. Students were recruited during a 15-minute lecture break at multiple different lectures. After being informed of the purpose of the study and assured that the survey was voluntary and anonymous, participants were asked to complete a four-page questionnaire on sexual regret. Included in the analyses were participants who were 30 years old or younger,¹ who self-reported heterosexual orientation, and who reported on their most recent casual sex incident were included for analyses. The final sample included 547 heterosexual students. Mean ages for women ($N = 329$) and men ($N = 218$) were 21.5 ($SD = 2.1$) and 22.1 ($SD = 2.4$) respectively. Fifty-seven percent of the women and 64% of the men reported their relationship status as "single." Participants did not receive course credit or any form of compensation.

2.1.2. United States sample

Five hundred and twenty-four students (321 women, 203 men) were recruited from a large public university in the Southwestern United States to complete the English version of the above questionnaire on sexual regret. Participants were recruited from the undergraduate research subject pool in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. After being informed of the purpose of the study and assured that the survey was voluntary and anonymous, participants were asked to complete a four-page questionnaire on sexual regret. Inclusion criteria for analyses were as for the Norwegian sample. The final sample consisted of 216 heterosexual students. Mean ages for women ($N = 131$) and men ($N = 85$) were 19.2 ($SD = 1.2$) and 19.6 ($SD = 1.6$) respectively. Sixty percent of the women and 65% of the men reported their relationship status as "single."

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Casual sex regret

Participants were instructed to report regrets relating to their *most recent* casual sexual incidence. This measure was based on Galperin et al. (2013) measure and was applied by (Bendixen et al., 2017; Kennair et al., 2016). Participants were given the following options: *I didn't have the chance for casual sex (not coded)*, *I had the chance, but did not have casual sex (not coded)*; *I'm glad I did it (coded 0)*; *Neutral – neither glad nor have regrets (1)*; *I regret it somewhat (2)*; and *I regret it very much (3)*.

2.2.2. Predictors

For all measures below, we applied a 5-point Likert scale. For each item (statement), participants rated their response from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

¹ Less than 2% of the participants were older than 30 years. To keep comparability with the US sample, only those aged 30 years and younger were included. The exclusion did, however, not affect the reported results.

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